



KAT BLACKTHORNE

*hotwife*

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I'm a very romantic person. I don't mean romantic in a flowers and chocolate kind of way. It's more like if it's raining, I'll go up to the window and press my nose against the glass and sigh at how beautiful it all looks.

AMY WINEHOUSE

# *contents*

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

15. [Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also by Kat Blackthorne](#)

One of my flaws was that I had a morbid desire to quiz every man about his sex life, but only right after I had sex with him.

Before we hooked up, I couldn't care less. But after? The curiosity took over. I didn't care if he thought I was crazy. I'd already gotten laid after all, so I didn't care if I got a call or text back.

I don't want to pillow talk about that weird dream you had last night or how watered down the drinks were at the bar. I wanted to know how many women you'd slept with. How many men you'd slept with. Sex in public? What number lay was I that year? It's like after we'd gotten naked and fucked, the floodgates opened. The barrier of propriety crashed and you let me in, to some extent, to your sexual experience. So now I wanted to ask all the things you're not "allowed" to ask people.

"Am I the fattest woman you've ever been with?"

Maybe it was a defense mechanism. If I scared them off by being an intrusive weirdo and they didn't call; I could blame it on my antics and move on. That sure beat feeling used or tossed aside when they didn't call. No, I wasn't down to analyze what went wrong. I wanted sex and only sex. That was the rule. No feelings, check your emotions at homeboy's front door, get yours, then leave before he can toss his rubber.

The next part was always the same. A nervous, throaty chuckle as he pulled the sheets up. A sign of insecurity or wanting to hide, my old therapist would say. A weak attempt

at an answer like, “You’re hot, that was fun.” Then, before he could make up an excuse about an early morning, I was up and shimmying into my curvy stretch jeans.

This guy was nice. He fished my silk camisole out from the tangle of sheets and handed it to me tentatively. What was his name, Kirk? Kevin?

“I’ll text you-”

“No, you won’t-” I paused, not confident enough I knew his name. “And that’s alright.” After clipping my bra, I began buttoning my cami. This was my first time with this particular guy. His profile said he was 6’0 so naturally, as any woman knows, you deduct three inches from that for his real height. 5’9 was still a few inches taller than me, though, and he was hefty with a muscular build. Shorter guys always made up for their height with muscle and sheer determination. I didn’t mind. Beggars, or in my very specific instance, horny hotwives, can’t exactly be choosers and he was a decent enough lay.

“No, really, let’s do this again.” Slight panic laced his tone and caused me to side eye as I pulled the elastic off my wrist to gather my red post-sex curls into a lumpy ponytail.

“My job takes me all over the country, but when I’m in town, I’d love to hit you up again, Ruby.” He remembered my name, well, my fake name. At least one of us was paying attention over drinks earlier. After yanking up his briefs, he stood, following me to the door. My mind shuffled through a quick checklist. High-rise apartment overlooking Seattle, actual furniture, and I almost had an orgasm. I guess I could try adding this fellow to my roster.

Fishing my phone out of my purse, I handed it over. “Alright, let’s exchange digits. I’ve got to get going though, early dance recital.” I’d never danced a day in my life.

“Oh yeah, of course,” he replied mindlessly as he typed in his contact information. “I’m scheduled to fly out tomorrow if the weather’s good. Might be back in town the week after next if you want to get drinks again.” Not meeting my eyes, he handed me his phone, and I did the same, only entering the



number on my burner cell phone. Ruby, my alter-ho-ego's phone.

"Cool, well, fly safe-" I quickly glanced down at my phone, "Kenneth," and smiled like I'd known the dude's name the entire time. With a returning grin, he leaned in before my firm palm pressed against his bare chest.

"Sorry, cold sore." Turning the door handle behind me, I gave a half wave and darted down the hall. Rules or not, I had no desire to kiss that guy. He smelled like stale coffee and cheap cologne. Pilot or not, the guy had no game.

But these were the majority of my suitors.

It was a far cry from the steamy and erotic trysts I had in mind when I first began hotwifing two years ago. I imagined suave men whisking me away on helicopters to rooftop dining and sex against a skyscraper window. I imagined rock-and-roll bad-boys pulling me backstage and fucking me over their drum kits.

Instead, I got short awkward guys on apps that smell like gas station beverages and think once they come, sex is over. *Fun.*

I'd considered stopping several times. And there were weeks nestled into the past year where I did stop. I decided celibacy was easier. My husband wasn't interested, able, or willing to make love, and was more than happy to outsource my pleasure to other men- provided I abide by his rules.

But eventually, the lonely nights, the mounting tension between my thighs, and the smutty novels I read before bed would catch up with me, and I'd find myself pulling my burner phone out of the shoebox in my closet and plugging it into the wall charger to swipe right all night.

I left Kenneth's building and slid into my pink Porsche. Yes, pink. And purred onto the highway. Cedric surprised me with her, Pinkie, as I so lovingly named her, for my twenty-fifth birthday this year. It was gaudy, expensive, lavish, and demanded attention. Much like myself. At least, that's how I imagined my husband saw me.

The car's stereo paused and began playing the song of the wicked witch of the east from *The Wizard of Oz*. A deep inhale racked through me as I tapped the green button.

“Hi Mom-”

“Dorthea Ruth Queen-Winslow, it's your father's birthday and you haven't even bothered to call. My oldest daughter marries rich, moves across the country and forgets about her family. It breaks a mother's heart,” she said with a sniffle. There was a shuffling on the phone and before I could respond, another voice cut in.

“Dolly, don't listen to Mom. Dad didn't even remember his own birthday this year. I doubt he cares you haven't called yet.”

“Odette Naomi!” my mother screeched, and the sound of my sister's cackling inched up the curve of my lips. My mother always called us by our full names. She also always had a knack for phoning me after I'd done something dirty. Her religious sensibilities stretched from Georgia to Seattle, apparently. Even though I was married and grown, I still felt a lightning bolt of shame, like I was hiding something naughty from my family. *I was, but still.*

“I texted him this morning and planned to call soon. I've been busy, um volunteering.”

My mother hummed to herself. “I'm sure the hospital appreciates that, Dorthea. And what a sweet way to be close to your husband during the day too.”

My sister's snicker buzzed through the car speakers, and I wished I could virtually elbow her. As if I'd ever volunteer to be a candy striper, but Mom didn't need to know that. “Yeah, Mom, can I talk to Odette?”

After mother sent her love dripping in southern drawl, my sister's voice chimed clearly, indicating she'd turned speaker phone off.

“So, Dolly, who'd you fuck tonight?”

“Odie!”

“What!? On Reverend Theodore’s birthday too...” She tsked, but I could hear the smile in her voice. “You sound guilty as hell.”

“Yeah well, don’t tell Mom but I’m definitely *not* calling Dad.” I gripped the steering wheel. “I doubt he’d answer, anyway.”

“It’s been years, Doll. You have to have a one-on-one talk with him at some point.”

“I think the past five years prove how untrue that is,” I smirked. My avoidant tendencies had dodged every attempt at a solo conversation with my father. My father, the pastor. My father, the man I’d let down more than any other.

“I’m sure he’s forgiven you by now. He was... nice... at Thanksgiving,” my sister couldn’t even muster up the right energy to pretend sincerity on that line. The whole conversation was depressing, and I was pulling into my driveway.

“I’ve got to go, Odie, I’ve got a roast in the slow cooker,” I said, shutting the ignition.

My younger sister giggled. “You just had a roast in *your* slow cooker, didn’t you?”

“Oh, my god!” I laughed, ending the call without a goodbye.

Odette and I had mastered our masks. Ankle length prairie dresses and hymn books on Sunday mornings, making out with boys and smoking weed in the youth-group bus on Sunday nights... We played our parts well and Mom and Dad never caught on. It’s no wonder being a hotwife came so naturally to me. I’d never learned how to take the mask off. I wasn’t even sure what would be under it if I did. Some sort of monster from one of my father’s sermon’s, no doubt.

The bitter, earthy smell of meat and vegetables enveloped me like a fog when my key turned the lock to our three story suburban home. Trading my coat for an apron and my heels for bare feet, I removed the lid from the slow-cooker and rosemary scented steam pillowed the white marble kitchen.

Glancing at the clock on the stove, I noted it was half-past five, though I didn't need to check the time. Like when you work the same shift for so long and your eyes open right at six in the morning without an alarm, my body knew the dance by heart. I pulled out a champagne flute and a whisky glass before removing the roast beef and slicing. Off-call nights only came twice a month, and it was the only time my husband allowed himself a drink. It was the only night I could plan, really. We made plans throughout the month, of course, but they stood dimmed and haunted by the possibility that he could be called away at any moment. For that reason, I never let my hopes get too high. Too many birthdays cut short and holidays alone had taught me that.

No, Valentine's Day was just another day, along with Christmas and our anniversary. But every other Wednesday? I could pretend we were normal. We could act like any other couple.

The front door knocked shut, and I scanned my reflection in the microwave's reflection. Macy, our housekeeper, had stopped by earlier and everything was sparkling clean.

My husband idly walked into the kitchen, looking down through his glasses perched on the end of his nose at an open manila folder. "Smells good in here," he remarked, not looking up.

"Thanks, I've been slaving away all day," I quipped, and he looked up, taking me in briefly before raising an eyebrow at the crock-pot. I'd made this meal enough times in the past five years that he knew all I did was dump meat and seasoning in the thing morning and let it do all the work.

"I ate at work. I assumed you were out," he said, looking back down at his folder. My heart dropped onto the waxed, cool tile floor and I crossed my arms to keep the hole it left behind warm. Noticing my silence, he glanced up and closed the folder, tossing it onto the counter. "Oh Dot, I didn't mean it like that... I only meant I assumed, since you went into the city for lunch, that you'd stay out. You know I don't expect you to put your life on pause just because I happen to be off call?" Lunch, dinner, volunteering, fucking some rando, they

were all the same to my husband. By his own choice, he never knew which was which. Sometimes I wondered if he looked at me for clues. If maybe the quick scans of my wardrobe were in curiosity of where I'd been or who I'd been with. But then again, he never really seemed to care. At least not enough to ever ask.

“You know I always want to be home when you are. It's rare and I don't want to miss it,” I replied with a pout.

He walked towards me, kind and soft blue eyes cool over his white smile and dark grey five o'clock shadow. I resisted the urge to reach out and touch his jaw, knowing he'd flinch and not wanting to press my luck. He picked at a piece of roast and popped it into his mouth. “You know, that sandwich wasn't enough. I'm still starving.”

“Liar,” I teased, hitting him with a kitchen towel.

He grabbed a plate and piled on several pieces of meat, along with potatoes and carrots. “Try me, woman,” he smiled, and I rolled my eyes while a smile tugged at my lips.

I reached into the cabinet for his scotch and filled his glass halfway. “Let's sit, I bet you're tired,” I motioned for the dining room and Cedric nodded with a mouthful of potato. After filling my own bowl, I joined him at the table, seeing he'd grabbed his folder on the way in and was peering at it with furrowed brows. Clearing my throat, I took a sip of my Prosecco. My blood always boiled when he brought work home.

“Sorry,” he blinked his eyes a few times before setting the paperwork down and sitting his glasses on top of it like a weight. “How are you, dear? Are the fish still swimming?” He asked, taking a bite of roast.

I rolled my eyes playfully. “We're getting two new hammerheads this week. I'm excited to see them.”

“They let you near sharks? I don't think I like that. I thought you were just volunteering.” He raised an eyebrow and took a drink.

“They don’t let me, exactly...” I trailed off, downing my sparkling wine.

My husband sighed. “Dot, please don’t get bitten by a shark. I’ve operated on shark bites, you know that, right? I did my residency in Florida before moving to Colorado. They’re not pretty. Fun, though, complicated, but interesting. Sharks have serrated teeth that tear through the muscle in such a way it makes the operation a challenge-”

“Ced! Seriously, we’re eating. Can we not? I’m not going to get a shark bite, Jesus Christ.” He seriously talked to me like I was the biggest dumbass on earth sometimes.

Sitting back in his seat, he picked his folder back up, running a hand through his tousled grey and white hair. My eyes paused on his biceps through his white t-shirt. I could smell his body wash even across the table. It was the kind he only used at the hospital and it smelled smart and sexy, just like him. Gritting my teeth, I tried to shake off the allure. What was the point? He hardly ever touched me.

“Do you not even notice my tits up to my chin, Cedric?” I crossed my arms and pushed my bowl forward, no longer hungry.

His eyes glanced up and then back down to the page. “You look nice, Dot, you always look nice.”

An exhale filled the space while my husband poured through his most current case to obsess over. I stood, clearing the dishes and heading to the sink without any further acknowledgement. He wasn’t even fun to fight with anymore. I’d bait him and he’d be nice. I’d throw some sort of dramatic fit and he’d smile and call me Dot, only he called me that, and I’d wonder how I could even be mad at him.

He’d given me everything. I had a huge, model home that had been featured in *Seattle Homes Magazine*. A pink Porsche that people took selfies with in parking lots. Any material thing I wanted was mine. Most of all, though, he was so freaking kind. Cedric made me a latte and breakfast in bed every morning he was home. My car always had gas, so I didn’t have to stop. He sent goodnight texts every night he

wasn't home, which was most of them. My husband cared for me and I cared for him too, deeply.

That was the problem. Our problem wasn't a lack of love, or friendship, or even attraction in my case. The problem was that even though I had everything any woman could ever want. A handsome, successful man, money, fine things, and genuine love ... I wanted more. I wanted sex. No, I wanted him to fuck me. Fuck me hard.

But he wouldn't give me that.

The one thing I didn't have from him. The one thing he didn't want to give, or give enough of, kept me fixated. It kept me in the beds of strangers with my husband's consent. I should have been fine with our arrangement. I was getting off. All marriages have to make compromises, right? No one is perfect. No relationship is as good as it looks on the outside. But I couldn't help it. I wanted him. I wanted my husband, and he didn't want me back. Not in the same way, at least.

And because I'm a selfish bitch, it's all I could think about.

Thank God my car's windows were tinted to the maximum legal limit. Sucking the sugary chocolate off my thumb, I pressed the pink lid onto the glass container, tossing the plastic packaging into the backseat.

Chocolate frosted brownies courtesy of Mam's Bakery on fifth street.

Today's meeting was at Eva's house. Well, house was putting it mildly. I had a house. A big house. Eva had a mansion. Eva Gregory was the Chief of Surgery's wife. A position my husband was gunning for, provided Henry Gregory retired on time next year. I'm sure my husband was telling the truth when he said he wanted me to make friends here in Washington. When we moved here, I hadn't known a soul or ever set foot outside Georgia. Joining the Doctor's Wives Club seemed like a natural, albeit pretentious, place to make friends. But I wondered if somehow my pure-hearted man had an ulterior motive in sending me to cozy up with Eva and gain intel on Dr. Gregory. Cedric did seem particularly interested in any mention of him or his career plans. On the seldom occasion Eva even mentioned it.

No, usually these meetings were just giant brag-and-bitch fests.

My curly red hair instantly soaked in the humidity and frizzed the moment I stepped out of the car. At least the rain let up long enough for me to click my pumps down Eva's winding brick walkway. In Georgia, after a thunderstorm, the air smelt like bitter soil and fresh cut grass. In Seattle, though, the only aroma was concrete and mold. My chest tightened



remembering home. If only we could have stayed. If only the incident never happened, we might still be there.

Pausing with a jump, I almost ran smack into a woman standing at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the grand house.

“Oh, hi, sorry,” she apologized, holding her handbag to her ribs like a kid with their stuffed animal.

I’d never seen her before, but her *Birkin* bag told me she must be in the Doctor’s Wives Club. “No worries. You coming in?” I asked, gesturing towards the ominous navy blue set of double doors.

“Do I have to?” she replied with a nervous sort of giggle that made me instantly like her.

“Yes, I hate to tell you, but it’s a requirement. If you want to be a snooty bitch, you have to attend our meetings,” I replied, quirking a sarcastic eyebrow. “The snacks are horrible, but the gossip is pretty juicy. I heard Meredith’s got a new nose and I’m dying to check it out.”

Her answering giggle shook her prim blonde bob as her shoulders loosened and she dropped her bag to her side. “I’m Cora Sanderson,” she extended a hand. “Just moved here. My husband took a job at Evergreen Hospital and is insistent I make friends. Oh, please say you’ll be my friend. You seem somewhat normal.”

A short laugh escaped my throat. “Hey, I’m Dorthea Winslow, but everyone calls me Dolly. Somewhat normal is probably a compliment,” I grinned. “My husband’s at Evergreen too. Neurosurgeon.” Suddenly, water began tapping the lid of the brownie tray.

“Shit, this goddamn rain again,” Cora cursed as we hiked up the stairs to the porch. “How am I supposed to survive this constant bad weather?”

“The same way we survive everything, darling, we pretend,” I smirked, pressing the doorbell. Cora’s frustrated candor revived a part of me, all while the tang of longing reminded me of how much I missed my sister. I hadn’t seen

Odette in four months. Despite texting nearly every day, it didn't feel like enough.

The door opened with a flourish as Eva's sing-song voice welcomed us in. "Ladies, so glad you're here. Come in, come in!"

"Dolly, you're looking marvelous, as always. We missed you at the last meeting," she said with her usual pop of her red lips as each cheek touched mine briefly.

"Hello, Eva. Yes, I was feeling under the weather." More like being felt up *under* Travis, my date two weeks ago. Which reminded me I hadn't heard from him. Then again, my burner phone was tucked in my nightstand. I'd let it die after my lunch-romp with Kenneth and hadn't bothered to recharge it. Not having my sex-cell on me was a way I found I could distance myself from my lovers. I was never available, physically or otherwise. I pulled out the phone, and the men, when I needed them and never more.

"And you must be Dr. Sanderson's wife. Welcome to Seattle!" Eva kissed each of Cora's cheeks, much to my new friend's stiff blushing.

"Yes, but I go by Cora," my new friend muttered under her breath, and I hid a grin.

Today Eva Gregory's accent was a mixture of French and British. The fact that I'd made it through these twice-monthly gatherings for six months without someone catching me rolling my eyes was a miracle.

"Oh darling, I forget not everyone in America is accustomed to the *faire la bise*. In France, it's just second nature. Come, come, the ladies are waiting in the tearoom."

Eva's heels echoed as she trotted across the marbled floors.

"She's French?" Cora asked in a hushed whisper as we followed behind.

"Hell no," I replied softly. "She was a model in France for a semester before Henry snatched her up. Eva is wife number four and likes to cosplay as an interesting European," I snickered. "Bitch is from Ohio."

Cora snorted an undignified laugh, and I stifled my own chuckle as Eva's head whipped around, fanning her chestnut brown hair like a vampire's cape.

"Well, aren't you two becoming fast friends? That's good, I always worry Dolly feels left out," Eva said, turning back on her beige heels and opening the French doors to the tearoom.

"Rude," Cora murmured under her breath.

I shrugged, taking my seat on a soft purple fainting couch. A round table of refreshments and pink roses centered the room of chattering women. They all chimed friendly hello's, and I spaced out as everyone made their rounds introducing themselves to the new attendee. She may have been a little rough around the edges, but Cora carried herself with more poise than I could ever seem to muster.

No, these women deserved to be here. They'd worked for it. Eva found her Chief of Surgery husband, who happened to be forty years her senior, and nabbed him. She went from a struggling model living in a two-bedroom apartment with six other girls to a sprawling estate. Bianca, who was sipping champagne while scrolling her phone in the corner, was a pediatric nurse. She'd been through a decade of school, met her cardiologist husband Patrick on the job, and together they work at the same hospital like some picture-perfect power couple.

Then there was Meredith, every so often fiddling with her new nose, touching it as if to make sure it was still there. She was a former cheerleader for some football team I didn't care to remember the name of. She and her husband, celebrity plastic surgeon Jeff Holbrook, had been married three years, and she'd been under the knife for at least two and half of those years. Meredith was gorgeous without surgical altering. With it, she looked like a porcelain work of art. Too flawless to even be real.

The women here relished their titles, their relationships. They bragged about their husband's jobs and flaunted their wealth. Each one was in a marriage that suited them, however unorthodox some of them may have been. What I wouldn't

have killed to see all of their prenuptial agreements. But my judgmental ass aside, they all seemed, if not happy, at home in their lives. Content.

What Eva meant as a backhanded slice about me being different, or feeling left out, couldn't even hurt my feelings because I knew it was true. It was glaringly obvious I didn't belong. My thighs alone were the size of Meredith's waist. My frizzy red hair was unkempt. Even with my bra digging into my shoulders, it wasn't enough to fully lift the girls and what did it matter? I didn't even care about that as much. I'd been blessed with the rare ability to be proud of my appearance. In Georgia, I loved that my fiery locks drew attention. My hips rounder than my sister's and my breasts developing before my friends' did. When men hung around me, I knew why, because I was confident, charming, sexy. And I really felt that way back then, too. I knew it to be true.

Now though? I felt as dull and grey as the Seattle sky outside Eva's massive mansion. I had no accolades. I'd never even went to college. Cedric didn't go in search of a model or a cheerleader. Despite our age-gap, I was his first wife. Though I couldn't say our love story was traditional. It was, and still is, a scandal. But the fact remains, I never planned for or sought after this life. Wealth wasn't something I was accustomed to enough to even chase, though if I were being honest, I didn't mind it. The life of a doctor's wife was not a life I was prepared for when I said "I do" as a young twenty-year-old. No one told me I'd marry an invisible man. One that was never home and when he was, his heart was still at the hospital. If not his heart, then his mind certainly was, especially after what a couple of years ago.

Envy sat on my shoulders like a weight, observing the ease with which everyone else fluttered about. Why couldn't it be that easy for me, too? What was wrong with me?

The women danced around the table like sprinkles on a doughnut. Sipping teas, nibbling cucumber sandwiches, asking about the others' husbands and how the foyer remodel, or whatever, was going.

“Dolly? You alright, hun? Here’s a napkin.” Meredith lowered herself slowly to sit beside me.

Accepting her offering, I wiped my fingers and closed the lid. “Thanks, I didn’t even realize I was digging into my own brownies,” I chuckled before setting the container on the edge of the table. The navy blue plastic lid stood out amongst the perfectly aesthetic pale pinks. And it wasn’t exactly an occasion for brownies no one but me would eat, but I always brought a different dessert, transferred it into my own hideous containers, and sat it on the table. It made me feel less naked. In the south, you never show up to a function empty handed. Added bonus, the look on Eva’s face each time was too priceless to pass up. We were playing a game of chicken over who would irritate the other into an outburst first and the drama of it all was getting me through these stuffy ass get togethers.

“I’m going to the ladies room. I’ll be right back,” I said, rubbing Meredith’s arm lightly. She smiled up at me with a nod as I ducked out into the hallway. Leaning against the wall, I took my first breath since walking in.

The thump of a bass and the clinking of metal in the distance caught my attention. Doing a quick check to make sure no one was around, I tiptoed down the hall in search of the music.

The thuds and huffs grew louder, along with the gangster rap. The melodic swearing, laced with promises of fucking and wet pussy, chimed in sharp, indecent contrast to the posh and prim interior. Pausing outside the door, I peeked in. Biceps glittered with sweat under each push of the weights. His abs rippled with effort and each breath blown out might as well have been blown straight to my core. With a bang that made me jump, the weight dropped into its caddy and the man sat up, running a towel over his face.

“If you’re going to gawk, it’s only fair you come in and let me admire you shirtless too,” he said, standing. My eyes stalled on his black and red tattoos curving down his shoulders.

Hesitating, I inched a step forward. I'd been caught staring at some beef-cake in Eva's house. Great. Heat flooded my cheeks, and I knew my skin color now matched my hair. "Sorry, I just got lost on the way to the bathroom-"

Before I could turn on my heel to power walk-it-out of there, a low chuckle sounded behind me. "You know where the bathroom is, Dolly."

My inner bitch popped awake at that, and I paused mid-scurry. "Excuse me? Have we met?"

A hint of a smirk flashed across the man's dark stubble. Only wearing low cut track pants accentuating that tantalizing V men have. His tanned and toned body glistened as he draped his towel around his neck, holding onto the edges in a way that pulled my attention from his abs to his thick, inked forearms. "You know, I don't think you look like a Dolly. It doesn't suit you."

Frozen in the doorway like a mouse in a trap, a foreign but familiar thrill coursed through me, elevating my heart-rate as he lazily strode closer. I racked my suddenly dizzy brain for any hint of recognition. But there was none. I would have remembered this man and the sort of mischievous darkness he so evidently embodied. "I'm sorry, but you must have me confused with someone else. I'm not sure how you know my name but-"

"Dorthea," he purred, coming to a stop inches in front of me. The warmth of his heated skin met mine with a tingle and a gasp. The awareness of my thighs becoming slicker under my knee-length dress flushed my cheeks a brighter shade of red. What the hell was happening? It was an effort to control my breathing and not reveal that somehow this stranger had me panting in desire.

He leaned forward, lips inches from my ear, as his balmy breath sent a chill from my spine to my beating core. "Dorthea who swims with the sharks but never gets bitten..." he whispered and I gasped at the sudden pointed and wet touch of his teeth on my neck. My hands instinctively met his rock-hard

chest with a too-weak shove. Pulling back, his lips met my ear. “Now you have.”

Pulling back with a dark smirk, he was in the center of the room, picking up a dumbbell before I could even register what had just happened. My mouth dropped. Falling backwards, I blinked twice before turning on my heel and hurrying down the hall. Yeah, the weight wasn't the only dumbbell in this stranger's hold right now. I may have imagined it, but I swore I heard his faint, dark chuckle mixing with the gangster rap as I retreated. *What the actual fuck? He bit me?* My palm met the side of my neck. It was still throbbing lightly from the unexpected nip. It didn't hurt, but it was a reminder that what just happened wasn't a hallucination.

Startled, a small yelp escaped my throat as a firm hand landed on my shoulder. “Oh, shit. Sorry, Dolly, I didn't mean to scare you. Eva sent me after you. She thought you may have gotten lost, but honestly, I wouldn't have blamed you if you'd dashed early. It's a little stale in there, I have to admit.” Bianca's long dark braids cascaded down her bare shoulders above her strapless top.

“Oh, yeah,” I laughed nervously, hoping the red was fading from my face. My chest swirled with some new emotion. Did I feel *guilty*? That's absurd. Why would I feel guilty, I didn't do anything. “I must have taken a wrong turn on the way to the restroom. Hey, Bianca, do you know of anyone else living here?”

“There you two are!” Eva's muddled accent sang through the hall. “We're all waiting for you two before we do our roses and thorns before dismissing.” Eva shoved between Bianca and me and looped her elbows with ours, walking us back to the tearoom like we were all grade school children. I casted a quick and curious glance over my shoulder down the dark walkway. The thumping bass had evaporated.

Eva must have noticed my glance with a huff. “I apologize in advance if you had the displeasure of meeting our... guest.”

“Guest? Oh, Eva, how economical of you to rent out a room. I think that's a great idea,” I chimed just as we stepped

into the tea-room, unable to help myself. Bianca looked over at me with wide-eyed amusement, and the chatter in the room hushed.

Dropping our elbows and recoiling like a snake, Eva's head did a slight twitch that would have been disconcerting if she wasn't a tiny five feet tall in heels. I noticed Cora in the corner pause mid-bite of a cucumber sandwich and I repressed a snort.

"Though a small-town southern girl like you may mistake our home for a grand hotel, Dolly, no, we are not renting our rooms." I crossed my arms and raised my eyebrows as the room fell silent. The ladies' eyes bugged out and a few subtle gasps emanated across the space. Okay, that was a burn but surely didn't warrant shock and awe...

Suddenly, I felt a warm, hard body brush past me ever so slightly. It was the workout man, dripping wet, onyx hair slicked back, still shirtless, with bright black and crimson tattoos on full display. Now, he'd changed from his black workout pants to sporting those indecent as-fuck grey sweatpants. Okay, yeah, this warranted some gasps.

"Desmond!" Eva shrieked, clutching her fists at her side, her face maroon with annoyance.

An image of a cartoon steam train flashed through my mind before my thoughts were lassoed by the man, Desmond, meeting my eyes. "Pardon me if I steal another bite." My breath caught in my throat and my knees wobbled remembering his nibble on my neck just ten minutes prior. The bite that sent shock waves to my panties. Surely he wasn't going to do that again *here*... Elsewhere, though, I may have liked.

"I love sweets," he said, smirking as he popped the lid off my container and grabbed the biggest square, straightening, as he took a bite and smudged frosting off his bottom lip with his thumb.

I orgasmed.



I think we all did, judging by the bulging eyes. Cora picked up a napkin and began fanning herself. Bitch, I needed a fan, too. No, I needed an entire ice-bath.

“See you soon, Dortha,” Desmond whispered ever so slightly as I gaped up at him. He was tall. Really freaking tall. He moved out of my way, brownie in hand.

“Goodbye, Desmond,” Eva squawked as he shot us all a devious smirk, giving Eva a mock salute on his way out.

When I tell you, the flurry of questions and excitement that erupted when he was out of earshot was delirium inducing. It was the most action that stuffy little tearoom had ever seen.

It probably wasn't the only time Eva had used her fainting couch, however. She dropped with a flourish, dramatically placing an arm on her forehead as the ladies swarmed. “Who was that?” “What the heck Eva, spill!” “Was that your secret boyfriend?”

“I simply *cannot* speak of this, ladies. I'm sorry, it's too hard on my nerves and I have a breast augmentation coming up. I have to be in tiptop health and stress free or I fear for my recovery.” Eva exhaled dramatically.

The questions took a life of their own, like a rubber ball bouncing around the room. My chest squeezed at that last question, though. Surely, judging by her reaction, that wasn't her lover, right?

Pouring a glass of ice water, I knelt by Eva's side, deciding to take the southern woman approach of catching more flies with honey than with vinegar.

“Here sweetie, hydrate. It's not worth the frown lines,” I cooed, sounding disconcertingly like my mother.

That seemed to be a language she understood. Sitting up and smoothing her white skirt, she accepted the water and took a small sip. “Thank you, Dolly. I apologize if you've felt that I've been short. My stress levels have just been through the roof with Desmond being here.”

“I can imagine,” I play-sympathized. The woman had a home spa and a personal chef. She was the least-stressed

person in Washington. Cora and Meredith gave me a reassuring and eager nod. “Who is he and why’s he here? Do you want me to get Cedric to talk to Henry?”

Eva inhaled a raucous laugh. “If only, sweet girl, if only. Desmond is Henry’s son from his first marriage.” She spat as if admitting her husband’s former nuptials was a disgusting faux pas. “He’s moving to Seattle and staying here until he finds a place. Which should be perfectly simple being that we’ve offered to buy him any home he wants.” She took another sip of water and sniffled, though there were no tears in sight. “He’s an ungrateful, thirty-year-old caveman who refuses Henry’s generous offers, saying he wants to find and buy a place on his own. God knows how long that’s going to take.” Eva huffed. “He travels across the country grifting or whatever the hell he does. He’s dreadful, ladies. I made Henry make the oath promise not to be seen by anyone here, much less interrupt my gatherings. I am simply mortified. I know you all noticed how utterly rude and boarish he is.”

“Oh yes, we noticed,” Bianca wiggled her eyebrows, causing Meredith to elbow her in the ribs. I pursed my lips to resist grinning like a cheshire cat.

So the hunky biter was Eva’s stepson.

How did he know my name? My full name at that. My brain spun with questions. How did he know about my connection to sharks and what did he mean by, “See you later”?

My palms ached, remembering the hot, hard feeling of his bare chest so close to me. Neck still tingling, I bit my lip to remember the feel of his teeth.

The urge to race home, pull open my laptop, and cyber stalk this man was strong. The equal urge to crawl into bed and pull a vibrator from my nightstand warmed between my thoughts and thighs.

And I would do both.

But I had to cook dinner for my husband first.

## *three*

The cling-click of the old grandfather clock in our dining room had become my dinner companion since moving to Seattle. Cedric had a two-hour break and had come home, not bothering to change out of his sickly green scrubs. Taking a bite of the lemon salmon and wild rice I'd whipped up, he glanced up from his tablet. "How was your luncheon with your friends today?"

Unexpectedly sexy.

"Fine. Nothing exciting." I drummed my fingers on the table, not bothering to hide my slouch.

Cedric's gaze remained fixed to me instead of flicking back to his work.

"Eva didn't mention Henry, or your promotion, sorry," I mumbled, assuming that's what he was asking with his eyes.

"I don't care about that right now. I care about you." He reached over and put his palm over my knuckles with a light squeeze. "Are you okay, Dot?"

Straightening slightly, my eyebrows rose in surprise at his questioning. "I don't know, honestly, Ced. I feel so..."

"Bored?" he supplied, somehow with no trace of judgement in his tone. My husband was good at that. I was sure I could tell him I'd developed a wolf-shifter kink from my paranormal romance novels and he wouldn't bat an eye. Instead, he'd ask me to describe the characters and plotline to him. His superhuman lack of criticism was one of the many reasons I fell in love with him. It was another reason why me

sleeping with other men didn't bother him. He truly wanted me to be happy. I could be wholly myself with Cedric and, as young as I was, I recognized how rare that was in any relationship.

His question rolled around like an eight ball in my mind. Was I bored? Bored seemed like such a trivial emotion. If I were bored, I'd dye my hair black or go see a movie. Whatever emotion that had burrowed its way into my psyche was deeper, a dull, nameless little creature.

Tears prickled behind my eyelids. "I miss you," I breathed.

Care flashed across his expression before he tensed his jaw and blinked. "I'm right here, Dotty. I love you, you know that? There's nothing I wouldn't do for you."

I nodded. I knew that. His sincerity twisted my heart and painted "selfish bitch" on the walls of my soul. Why couldn't he be enough for me? "I love you, too." I hesitated a moment, but his hand was still on mine. The physical touch felt so nice. His icy grey hair was combed back with a Clark Kent stray piece of hair over his forehead. My husband may have been twenty-six years older and coming up on his fiftieth birthday, but he looked finer than most men my age. He had this smart, timeless, old Hollywood sexiness about him. I loved it and hated it at the same time. It would be much easier to have a repulsive husband whom I never wanted to sleep with. Unfortunately, I was twenty-five, horny, and unbelievably attracted to the man I married.

"Hey, we have about an hour... want to jump in the shower with me?" I asked, holding my breath. It had been a while since I'd made a bid for intimacy. And I loved bathroom sex. The cold tiles, the echoes...

Cedric let go of my hand and sat up, taking a quick sip of his iced tea. "I have to shower at the hospital before my emergency room shift tonight," he shot me a tight smile. "Sorry, Dotty. Raincheck."

*Liar.*

Ignoring the stab of rejection, I gathered our plates and sat them in the sink. Looking out the kitchen window into our soggy backyard, my fingers tinkered with the gold pendant on the end of my necklace. Yanking the chain slightly, the metal pressed into my skin. Closing my eyes, I replayed Desmond's bite for the one hundredth time since the drive home.

One moment with a stranger had sent me into an absolute frenzy. Silk panties were a mistake, the wetness taunting me. And I wasn't a stranger to encounters with strangers. This man was different. There was something dark and dangerous about him. Desmond wasn't the typical Seattle button-up, craft brewery enthusiast, bland finance man. His presence was threatening... I wanted a taste, too.

But I couldn't.

He knew my name. My real name. One of Cedric's rules was to use a fake name. And honestly, it helped me keep my distance. Ruby was a mask, or a suit of armor, a character in a play I was playing with myself and whoever swiped right. I couldn't be Ruby Knight with Desmond Gregory. Eva's stepson. Doctor Gregory's son. Doctor Gregory, my husband's boss and the one holding the keys to his much sought after promotion. Our rules were iron clad, and I couldn't break them and risk ruining our arrangement, or worse, hurting my generous and loving husband.

The rules kept me safe, physically and emotionally. They guarded my heart, leaving emotions out, and taking out the risk factor of being found out and the personal and professional embarrassment that would ensue. I didn't mind. I liked that Cedric at least exercised enough protectiveness to keep a few parts of me all to himself. My old-fashioned husband had gone out on a limb in agreeing to me becoming a hotwife. And I respected that. I'd never felt tempted to break his rules. Hell, I'd never even felt the urge to do any of the off-limit things, regardless of the boundaries we'd set.

Until now.

The thought sent a jolt to my wet panties. Maybe I could dance close to the edge of the rules a little bit...

“I’m taking your car to be serviced in the morning, so take mine if you need,” Cedric interrupted my fantasies with a jolt.

“Oh, thank you.”

I’d never even filled my own gas tank. Cedric always made sure he did it for me because gas stations creeped me out. At least back home in Georgia they did.

“Can I wash the dishes for you before I leave?” he asked, shimmying up to me and looking down at me with that boyish smile. My own grin appeared at the sight of it. “There she is. There’s my Dotty,” he said, cupping my jaw in his hand. “I love these dimples,” he said, pressing a thumb into the dip in my cheek.

“I love you,” I replied, standing on my tiptoes and stealing a quick peck. “I got the dishes, go save the world.”

Digging in the pantry, he pulled out a box of granola bars. “Sure thing. Oh, and I want to hear all about the book you’re reading when I get back from my shift tomorrow. What did Foxlove think when Ricardo shifted into a polar bear?”

“Spoiler alert, she was into it,” I grinned, throwing a dish towel at him.

He chuckled, tucking the box of snacks under his arm and grabbing his keys. “I expect a full recap. Bye Dotty.”

“Bye Cedric,” I replied, though he was already out the door.

And the grandfather clock tapped its foot in impatience again.

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GROWING UP AS A PASTOR’S KID, I WAS ACCUSTOMED TO sporting multiple identities. There was church Dortha clutching a hymn book and definitely not falling asleep during Dad’s sermons. There was rebel Dolly who made out with boys in storage closets when we were supposed to be praying.

Likewise, as an adult, I wore several hats.

Wife. Hotwife. And... unsupervised teenager.

As soon as Cedric left for his overnight shift, I tossed the salmon I'd barely touched and popped a bag of cheddar cheese popcorn into the microwave. Grabbing my steaming bag and a bottle of rosé out of the fridge, I slumped into my dent in the sofa and watched a reality show about bored housewives.

The irony wasn't lost on me.

My phone buzzed with a calendar reminder. I didn't need a reminder, but I put it on my lonesome schedule nonetheless. Volunteer shifts at the aquarium were the highlight of my week and I was eager to see the new sharks we'd gotten in over the weekend. My phone felt heavy in my palm as my mind wandered back to the rather aggressive work-out man from earlier. *Dorthea who swims with sharks but doesn't get bitten*. Sharks. He couldn't know about the aquarium, right?

My curiosity piqued, and I abandoned the women on the screen fighting about which luxury villa they'd each stay in on their million dollar vacation. Really, who would give a shit?

Slipping into my room, I pulled my burner phone from my closet and sat cross-legged on my massive king-sized bed. Yeah, you caught me saying *my* bed... Cedric and I slept in separate rooms. He insisted it was to not disturb me when he got home at odd hours. And I bought that excuse for a little while- until now. Until the distance between us had a foot on my throat. My phone lit to life and I waited for the buzzing of multiple messages from men to filter in. But I wasn't interested in checking them right now. Right now was for stalking my mystery biter.

My chest tightened, and I glanced towards the door. Why was I feeling paranoid? I wasn't doing anything wrong. It's not like I was making out with the dude. I was just... researching him. Putting his name, Desmond Gregory, into Google, only pulled up some weird, obscure photos. Art, maybe? It was hard to tell. Abandoning search engines, I went to Eva's social media page. Snorting before taking a sip of my wine straight from the bottle, I rolled my eyes at her filter-heavy curated image. Her profile photo was a shot of her and her wrinkled

husband smiling on a beach. The whites of their eyes the brightest thing in the photo. “Nice photoshop job, Eva,” I muttered to myself.

Clicking on her friends list, I searched for any Desmond, again, and nothing. Jesus, no man had ever been this difficult for me to get dirt on. Then again, Eva seemed to hate him, so maybe they weren’t internet-friends. Or real friends, by her theatrical display of chagrin earlier.

A huff of breath shot from my throat, and I popped my laptop shut. Rolling over, I scrolled through the unread messages on Ruby’s phone. There were a few indolent “*hey’s*” and “*what’s up’s*” from names like “*Josh with the Scooter*” and “*Scott Bearded Guy*”. Yeah, no, too lazy for me.

Kenneth had sent three messages checking in like we were way closer than people who just sort-of hooked up once. A photo of the cockpit of an airplane saying, “Taking off, hope to see you again soon!” and then another good morning text the following day. As if that weren’t cringe-worthy enough, an hour ago he sent, “Thinking of you.” I groaned and tossed my phone. That may be one I need to cut loose. He seemed too needy.

That was the problem. Guys were either slack-ass and low effort with random “*hi*” texts- or they were trying to wife you up after one roll in bed. There was no in-between, no variety. It was getting redundant. Hotwifing was supposed to add spice to my life. And now? That spice was dulling in a shoebox in my closet with text messages I didn’t even want to open. It might as well have been a spam folder that could make calls.

I picked up my actual phone and considered dialing my sister but abandoned that idea in favor of curling up in my duvet.

His dark stare smoked behind my eyelids. Maybe I’d imagined the entire thing. On paper, I had a free and sexy situation. Yet in my time dating other men while being married, no man had sent my heart into a frenzy like that muscled “oaf” as Eva called him. Which was crazy, and



desperate, and sent a wave of confusion through me for some indiscernible reason.

Sleep found me between the plush mattress, my tangled thoughts and tingling neck.

Orcas travel in pods. They have an entire family and group structure that varies between pods. Much like humans, some are friendly, playful, and even kind. Then some groups are more violent, territorial, and vicious.

Orcas stolen from the ocean and forced to live in captivity have shown signs of depression. They're eerily similar to humans in many ways. When they're separated from their pod, they've even been known to cry and display grief.

That's not exactly information you find on a plaque in front of a tank. Most people don't want to know things like that. People want neat compartments and whale plushies to give their children. They don't want to hear the haunting sound of a mother screeching for her stolen calf.

These are the things I think about as I sit cross-legged on the carpet. The smell of chlorine and salty butter popcorn faint and blued by the dancing rippled lines. It was a slow Thursday morning in September. Kids were at school, and aside from the occasional passerby or employee, the aquarium sat vacant. Well, vacant of humans. Hundreds of silvery and orange fish fluttered by. Pino, the twelve-foot manta ray, flapped his wings and glided past my vision.

I completed my work early. Being a volunteer didn't even qualify me to feed a goldfish. Instead, my duties began with emptying trash cans and sweeping up crushed tortilla chips and ended with the glamorous task of putting together fish-gut buckets for the professionals to feed the carnivores.

Today, though, was exciting. Three hammerheads and one sand shark were acclimating in a tank before being released into the larger aquarium. We had a few reef sharks and a nurse shark or two, but the prospect of seeing a mighty hammerhead up close had my adrenaline pumping. The veterinary staff and trainers would take a lunch break soon. In the meantime, I sat parked in front of the manta rays, adjacent to the employees' only entrance. My volunteer keycard wouldn't allow me access, but if I caught the door on their way out...

Pino wafted to the sandy bottom of the aquarium and rippled his fins right in front of me. I swear he shot me a look of reprimand and I squinted my eyes. "Don't look at me like that or I'm not putting extra zooplankton in your food bucket like I usually do."

With a flutter of fins, kicking up a cloud of sand, he levitated through the water, zooming away. Manta Rays were nicknamed "The Devil Fish," and I'd grown fond of my little devil. However perceptive he may be. Or rather, how crazy I may be to be forming attachments to a fish. Laughter and a creak of metal pulled my attention back to my mission. Two staff exited, sipping from soda cans and wholly distracted. Perfect.

Scooting over at lightning speed, I caught the slow-closing, heavy metal door before it clicked shut.

Once inside, I followed a narrow staircase up to a fluorescent-bright room. Humid, salty air invaded my senses. My heart leapt when I spotted the hundred-foot tank. Unfortunately for me, the tank wasn't made of glass, but a thick, white, plastic material. I couldn't see anything from ground level. Brushing past a yellow triangle sign, I climbed up the ladder to the platform. Circling the tank was a narrow walkway, but my interest zeroed in on the terrace that jutted out into the middle of the tank. It sat a mere twelve inches above the sloshing water. Dotted with holes, water splashed up at irregular intervals.

I should have hesitated. Anyone would. Any normal, stable person would.

But I didn't.

Kicking off my ballet flats, I padded onto the plank like a pirate's prisoner. My blue sundress swished side to side. My heart raced harder than ever before and it felt... exhilarating. Taking a deep breath, I lowered myself onto my ass and sat cross-legged, trembling.

Once my breathing steadied, I leaned forward to peer into the dark water. Nothing but the flounder of water and the deafening hum of a filtration system met me. They'd make an appearance. I just had to be patient. Staff lunch break was an hour long, but they were always late returning. I had at least an hour and a half. My heart rate softened as I stared down at the tank, waiting for any evidence of my favorite predator. Something uncomfortable spiraled in my gut as my heartbeat steadied. I didn't like the feeling of normalcy. The high had to come back. Something primal inside of me needed it to return.

Against all better judgement, I inched my feet out from under me and slid towards the edge of the platform. The heavy beating in my chest returned, and I closed my eyes to revel in the pleasure of that feeling. Kicking my feet over the edge, I slowly lowered them until my heels met water and my feet submerged. It was surprisingly warm. Duh, I guess I forgot Hammerheads like warmer oceans. My trembling palms held tight to the edge, and I relaxed my legs so that water reached my calves.

My vision went blurry with the distinct possibility of danger. It was unlikely that an acclimating shark would bite, but it also wasn't unheard of. Though the water was dark, I was sure I'd see one coming... right?

"You know," a man's deep voice rumbled from somewhere close behind me and I startled. "When I said you swam with sharks without being bitten, it wasn't exactly a challenge."

A gasp shocked through me as I turned my head over my shoulder. Desmond stood at the top of the ladder, wearing a white t-shirt with a heavy-looking camera strung around his neck.

“How-how are you here?” I asked when a flash blinded me. “What the hell? Did you just take my photo?” Stars danced behind my vision as blood rushed to my cheeks.

“You’re asking me how I’m here when you’re the one offering yourself up as fish food?” Carefully removing his camera and setting it on the ground, he took a cautious step onto the platform, causing a disturbing wobble.

“I don’t even know you. And I’m not exactly in the mood to be fucked with right now,” I replied, breathless and gravelly, a tone I didn’t recognize.

“I’m Desmond,” he said, reaching out his hand in offering. “Most people call me Des. Here, let me help you up.”

“Stop,” I ordered without thinking. Something kept me glued to my seat. A freakish determination to keep the rush, to hold on to the danger for just a moment longer.

His deep green eyes scanned my body, and I noticed his jaw tick. “I get it, believe me, I do. But losing a leg isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

Raising an eyebrow, I opened my mouth to respond, but fell silent. Des lifted his pants leg, exposing a glint of metal where the flesh of ankle should have been. The sight of it infused a hundred more questions about this man on top of the ones I already had.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I pulled my attention back to the dark gray water. “I just need to feel something,” I whispered hoarsely. “Anything.” A renegade emotion sat like a boulder on my chest as I wiggled my toes in the warmth below me. Half of me wondering if I’d be jerked below by teeth at any moment. The other half wondering why I didn’t care about that possibility more than I did.

“I can help with that,” Des replied, his voice softer now. He took two more strides towards me and the plank dipped a bit lower. “Trust me.”

Thunder in my ribcage returned at the feel of his warmth close to me as he towered above me, extending his huge hand. Nodding, I resigned. I had to get up at some point, anyway.

Taking his palm in mine, the storm inside my bones hushed for the briefest of moments. It felt... peaceful. His strength overpowered me as he effortlessly pulled me to stand, holding tight to my grip. Our eyes met in a way that made me wonder if we'd met before. He seemed so familiar. A slow smirk curved his lips like a sarcastic comment was forthcoming.

But it was too late.

It all happened in slow motion. The sound of a thrashing splash pulled my attention, and I tried to turn. My heel slipped, and I fell backwards. Warmth and murky wetness engulfed me, drowning my senses and pulling me under.

The first feeling that registered was embarrassment. I *would* trip into a body of water in front of a gorgeous man. The second emotion gut kicked the first for being such a shallow bimbo and shouted, "You're in a shark tank, idiot!"

At least if I died, it was in pursuit of dick.

Lack of air burned my lungs, but I didn't kick to the surface, like any sane person would. I stalled, slowly squinting my eyes open. Tiny effervescent bubbles zigzagged within my short range of sight.

Then I saw it.

Or them, rather.

The massive body of dark grey glided in front of me, displaying his sharp dorsal fin. Eyes bobbed back and forth on its flat head, and while my attention was stunned on his size, another swimming right for me shot a pang of fear through my chest.

Reaching out my trembling hand like I was about to pet a docile puppy and not have it bitten off, the massive predator startled, taking a sharp left turn and bumping me with his pectoral fin. A firm grip grabbed under my arms and propelled us upward, breaking the surface.

I gasped with a feral vengeance, coughing and splashing the surface of the water, and holding onto his thick neck. My rescuer grabbed my waist and lifted me up, where I ungracefully belly-flopped onto the drenched platform,

hacking like a seal. The sting of saltwater burning my eyes and lodged in my throat.

A second later, a heavy body thumped next to me, dripping and swearing.

Without thinking, drunk on adrenaline and the image of being swatted by the fin of a hammerhead, I laughed. And I couldn't stop.

Desmond pulled himself to sit upright and leaned an elbow on one propped knee. "You're a fucking nutcase, you know that? What the fuck?"

Sitting up, I inhaled, willing myself to stop cackling, still delirious. Desmond stood and offered me his hand, pulling me up. His white shirt revealed his wide and chiseled body. "You're lucky I didn't have my camera on me. No way would I risk ruining it. Come on, let's get out of here before Ted gets back and commits you to the mental hospital."

He was joking, surely. But the thought of being wheeled into my husband's hospital for less-than-stable mental health silenced my hysteria. I nodded. "There're some boxes of gift shop merch down the hall. We can change in there."

With a firm grasp on my wrist like I was an errant child, my cocky rescuer grabbed his camera and stuffed it back in its bag before slinging it over his shoulder and motioning for me to head down the ladder. Turning around and gripping the bars, I cast one more glance over the rippling water of the tank and caught sight of a fin breaking the water-line. My heart caught.

What beautiful, dangerous, and misunderstood creatures.

I lead the way to the storage room and began sifting through boxes of cheap fleece hoodies and sweats. "These should work," I said, noticing Desmond leaning on the doorway, looking down at something.

"If I sit down, are you going to make a break for it?" he asked, raising an accusing eyebrow.

"Why would I run?" I pulled out two extra large pairs of sweatshirts and joggers in an off-putting royal blue.

“Oh, I don’t know. Because you’re trying to off yourself, like a fucking idiot, maybe?”

Anger burned in my throat. “I’m not trying to kill myself, I just wanted to see the sharks.”

“Yeah? Well an aquarium is a good place to do that. You know, like behind glass? Like what this whole goddamn place was designed for? Where the fuck do you get off doing something so irresponsible—”

“No one asked for your commentary, Desmond. Or your stupid flirty behavior the other day, either.” I leveled him with an angry look and pulled on my pants under my sopping wet dress and turned around, peeling the wet fabric off. Cool air touched my bare back. I felt my accomplice’s eyes on me and shivered with heat. God, he looked good all wet like that.

I heard movement behind me and pulled on my hoodie. “I tripped. I didn’t mean to fall in,” I said, spinning around to see Desmond unbuttoning his pants.

“Yeah, and dangling your legs like hotdogs in front of a deadly animal? You meant to do that one too, right?” He yanked the sides of his dark jeans down and I flushed.

Smirking, he held eye contact until he stepped out in only his black boxer briefs. My eyes trailed his hips to his bulge, then landed on his prosthetic leg. The metal thin and contrasting to his muscular thighs and the chiseled calf on his other side. Pulling my eyes away, I met his.

“I’m going to need your help, flight-risk. Can you handle that?” Pulling off his shirt in one swift movement, he sat down with a thump on a large cardboard box.

Asshole. *Hot* asshole.

“Yeah, sure. What do you need?” I asked, crossing my arms.

“I don’t have much time until the saltwater gets into the joints and fucks up my machinery here. I’m going to need a wet cloth and a microfiber towel. Know where we can find any of that?”



Oh shit. Jumping in after me could ruin his leg. Now I felt like the asshole.

“There’s a janitor’s closet right next door to this room. I’ll grab those,” I answered, finding the elastic on my wrist and pulling my already-frizzing hair into a ponytail.

“Cool. Avoid any dangerous animal habitats while you’re at it,” he muttered, running a hand over his knee and surveying the metal.

Walking by, I threw his hoodie at his head. “Thank you for the concern, jackass.”

The door drifted shut behind the sound of a deep chuckle. Thrill trickled down my body at the sound of it. Dark, smoky, sexy.

Hesitantly, I glanced around to make sure no staff had wandered in. The coast was clear. Ducking into the janitor closet, I found the towels requested flew out the door- right into a stick-like figure.

“Dorothy? What are you doing back here? This area is for professionals only.”

Ted.

Ted Murry was the assistant manager of the aquarium. Like most assistant managers, he served no real purpose. All of our departments worked like clockwork without anyone hanging over our shoulders. But owners and investors want the appearance of control on paper, thus, Teds. Wandering around from room to room giving asinine suggestions. Back in the spring, when a teenage penguin was molting, Ted suggested someone take her to a groomer. It was still an inside joke that whenever an animal or fish would need attending, we would all suggest calling up a kennel.

“Oh, hey, Ted. A kid stuck a piece of gum right on Pino’s exhibit. I didn’t want to wait around for janitorial to notice. Nancy scanned me in.” Wow, lying was a talent I should add to my resume at this point.

Ted slung his clipboard by his hip and looked down at me above his pencil-thin mustache. He was taller by me but only

by the length of his oddly long neck. “You see? That’s the kind of initiative I like to see. Keep up that work ethic and you’ll be a paid staff member in no time.”

Giving an awkward nod, I scooted past him before halting in mid-step.

“Dorothy, be careful. I’m sure you’re unaware, but there are brand new bull sharks in containment just up ahead. I wouldn’t want you wandering over to sneak a peek and injuring your sweet little self.” His words dripped like greasy condescension. I had to physically grit my teeth before turning with a pasted-on smile.

“Wow, how scary. Thanks for telling me.”

“One last thing. I’m looking for a photographer we hired to shoot some of the animals behind the scenes. You haven’t seen him, have you?”

*Yep, I almost killed him, in fact.*

“Nope, sorry. But I’ll let you know if I see him.”

Seemingly pleased with fulfilling his meaningless aim, he gave me a curt nod before continuing on his way.

Reentering the storage room with an exhale, Desmond shot me a quizzical stare.

“Ran into Ted. He’s looking for you. But I threw him off your scent. We’re safe for a while.”

“Yeah well, it was the least you could do, being that I risked life and remaining limbs to save your pretty ass.”

Heat flooded my cheeks, and I swallowed. “Here,” I tossed him his towels, and he leaned back, gripping his prosthetic. Suddenly, self-consciousness overtook me and I spun around, pretending to look in a random box of beluga whale stuffed animals. I’d never met anyone like Desmond and didn’t know the etiquette for watching them with their prosthetic. It felt a little like seeing someone naked, and not in the sexy way, more in the intrusive and awkward way. Of course I wondered what happened. Was he born this way, or did he lose his leg due to injury? Surely it would be rude to ask.

“It doesn’t bother me if you watch,” he rumbled softly. “I wasn’t exactly prepared to be submerged in shark shit or I would have worn my waterproof.”

Turning, I put an unsure hand to squeeze the back of my neck. “Sorry about that. You’re right, it was reckless of me to be up there. I don’t know what came over me—”

“Sure you do,” he interrupted, not looking up from his meticulous assessing and cleaning.

Maybe it should have seemed strange to me to see a man pull off his metal-leg and place it in his lap, nothing but dense thigh left behind, but it wasn’t odd in the least. It was just a part of who he was. And whoever that may be, I still knew virtually nothing about.

I crossed my arms. “You seem to think you know a whole lot about me for someone I’ve only sort-of met once.”

A chuckle escaped his throat as he pieced his leg back in place and pulled on his sweatpants. “Are sharks your favorite sea creatures?”

I blinked at his change of subject. “No... I think orca whales are my favorites. Why?”

I gulped as he stood at full, magnificent height and strode over to me, shirtless, dark hair messy, and jaw sharp as hell. When he was close enough that I had to strain my neck to look up at him, he smirked slightly. “I know you a lot better than you think I do, Dorthea.”

“Prove it,” I challenged. My heart pounded so loudly in my chest I was afraid he’d hear it in the cool, silent room. He lowered his lips, and I resisted a magnetic desire to wrap my arms around his broad shoulders. My legs were dying to wrap around him too, if I’m being honest.

Was he going to bite me again? God, I was dying for another nip of his teeth... But only the warm breath of a whisper teased the outside of my earlobe. “You want to ask me what happened to my leg.”

“Yes,” I mumbled, my filter faltering.

He leaned back abruptly, looking down with his sharp emerald gaze. “Surfing. Shark attack.”

A gasp escaped my throat, and my chest gripped. He was hurt in a shark attack and I made him jump into a tank. I’d never forgive myself. “Oh my god, Desmond. I’m so sorry-”

“I’m joking,” he admitted with an amused turn of his lips. “But wouldn’t that be some shit?”

I shoved his chest, trying to push him away from me, but it was like beating against a concrete wall. “You’re the actual devil,” I exclaimed, sliding out from his reach.

“I’ve been called worse, darling. Now, let’s get out of here.”

“*Let’s?* As in both of us? Yeah, I don’t think so. Maybe you should go surfing or something,” I quipped, trying to sound meaner than I felt.

“No waves in the PNW, unfortunately. And I’m afraid you have no choice,” he purred, pulling on his aquarium hoodie that matched my own. I looked like an idiot in this get-up. He looked like a model for the aquarium catalog.

“Excuse me?” I crossed my arms, feigning offense, though something hot burned in my chest at his order.

“It’s either come out with me for a while or grippy socks and a white padded room. What kind of man would I be if I let you go, and you jumped off a dock or some other crazy shit like that? I’m keeping an eye on you for the afternoon.” He finished lacing his boots and stood, towering and cocky. “I’ll drive.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but he was already out the door without waiting for my reply. Following him outside like a puppy in navy fleece, I gave him an exasperated look, though my heart was beating out of my chest at the sight of his ride. “No way. In Seattle? Are you insane?”

“Don’t pretend you’re not into this,” he said, swinging his leg over and extending helmet in my direction.

He was right. I *was* into it. All of it, and that was concerning and thrilling at the same time.

I should have hesitated. Anyone would. Any normal, stable person would.

But I didn't.

*five*

## *FIVE YEARS PRIOR*

Sweat dripped down my bare midriff as I leaned against the freezer. I hoped to catch some residual cold from the metal because the shop's window air-conditioning unit was buzzing like a hive of bees and barely sputtering out a chill. "I want to crawl into the ice cream buckets right now," I whined.

"That breaks like one hundred health code violations. And your outfit breaks like five hundred of Dad's rules," my sister grinned, fanning herself with a magazine.

"Yeah, that's why I change when I get here. Don't act like you don't go through my wardrobe when you work a shift alone. I've seen you wearing these exact booty-shorts." I gazed out the glass door into the vacant cobblestone streets. It was too hot for tourists. Southern heat differs from any other. It's a sticky kind of feeling. Like sitting in a steamer-pan above a pot of boiling water. Drinking ice water doesn't help. Air conditioning could help for a while, but we didn't have one at home and the ice cream parlor's barely functioned.

"It was ninety-five degrees, and you weren't here, so your booty-shorts were fair game," She flicked a plastic straw at me and I rolled my eyes. Odette would forever tease me for defying my parents' wardrobe rules, all while stealing every cute spaghetti strap tank top at the same time. "You can go home if you can get a ride," my sister shrugged. "We haven't had a customer in forever."

"I can't. I need the hours or Ariel will never be ready," I sighed, grabbing a cone and opening the freezer to a welcomed blast of cold. Ariel was currently a dilapidated piece of metal in our run-down shed. Every cent I made went towards her repairs. Well, a little went towards clothes and handbags, too. And maybe earrings. And maybe the belly-button piercing I snuck out to get on my eighteenth birthday...

At that moment, both of our phones pinged. “See? They know. They have a psychic sense for when you’re being a heathen.” Odette pulled out her phone from her back jean pocket. “Yep, group text.”

Groaning, I leaned into the case with a scoop, rolling a ball of strawberry ice cream and plopping it into my waffle cone. “What’s the good word today? Let me guess, we’re both working at nursery this Sunday? No, wait, five-year-old’s Sunday school?”

Odette gave a dramatic shudder. “Don’t even joke about that. The five-year-old’s class is the worst. No wonder they can’t keep a teacher. A few weeks ago, John-Mark literally glued his hands together. His mom had such a fit.”

Laughing between licks of my treat, I pulled out my phone from my tiny-shorts and scanned the message from my mom. “Hell no. We’re working late.”

“Dolly, they’re going to catch us one of these days.”

“Odie, I am *not* playing the part of meek-and-mild eldest daughter while Dad Bible-speaks some old dude throughout dinner. I’m nineteen and you’re seventeen for god’s sake. We’re too old to be ordered around by our parents.” Shoving my phone back in my pocket, I let the sweet taste of sugared strawberry drown out my anger.

Odette read the text aloud, mocking our mother’s too-soft southern tone. “BE HOME BY FIVE. DAD HAS AN IMPORTANT GUEST COMING FOR SUPPER. WE EXPECT MODEST OUTFITS! Well, that last bit counts *you* out, that’s for sure.”

I laughed. “Angel’s picking us up at four. We can tell Mom we’re working late and hang out until whatever crusty old bastard friend of dad’s leaves. They’ll never know.”

Odette pursed her lips, raising an eyebrow. “Fine, but I’m texting Steven to meet us too.”

I puckered and made kissy sounds, floating over to my sister and tussling her french-braided pig-tails. “Steven, you’re just so hot when you play the piano at church on Sunday



mornings. I wish I were the keys and your fingers were all over my-”

My sister spun, grabbing my wrist and pushing my ice cream towards my face, smushing it on my chin while we both cackled like idiots.

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THE TART AND TOO-SWEET AROMA FROM A PERFUME BOTTLE named *Wild Pop-My-Cherry*, mixed with breath mints, permeated the air of the Honda Civic as hip-hop rumbled through the shaky speakers. Odie leaned forward and turned the music down. “Thanks for the ride, Angel, but if my Dad hears me listening to anything other than southern gospel, I’ll be on pew-cleaning duty for a month.”

Angel giggled, tapping her joint out of her window. “You two are hilarious. I don’t think I have any Amish clothes you can change into. You gonna be okay, Dolly?”

“It’s eight. Mom and Dad eat at five every night, like clockwork, then are in bed for Bible devotions and nightly prayers by seven. I’ll change in my room. But thanks for looking out. I’m bringing you back a souvenir from every stop on my road trip,” I grinned, rubbing her shoulder before climbing out into the night air.

“Hey *our* road trip,” Odie corrected, joining me. “Are you sure we don’t smell like smoke?”

“We smell like candle-shop hookers, Odie. They won’t smell anything over all that body spray and peppermint.”

“If you say so...” my sister muttered, trailing behind me before tripping into my back. “Hey what the-”

“Shh!” I commanded, stopping in my tracks on the first step of our porch. “The lights are still on. Dad never forgets to turn them off...”

“They’re still up!” my sister whisper-yelled, tugging on my arm and pointing to the movement near the house’s front

window. “What the hell are we supposed to do? We can’t walk in looking like this!”

“You’re in a tank top, Odie. I’m the one in short-shorts and a crop top. *And* I’m the oldest. Who do you think they’re going to yell at more?” I could handle the scolding. Odette though... She was slightly less tough than I was. She’d cry and apologize into a heap of King James Psalms laced lectures. I wanted to avoid that. And if they caught us dressed like this together, they may not let us work together at the ice cream parlor anymore.

And I needed that job if I were going to escape.

I also needed my sister to work with me if I was going to survive the place.

“Okay, listen. We’ll sneak around the back, through the kitchen.” Standing on my tiptoes, I snooped through the sheer curtains. “They’re still at the dinner table.” Weird.

My little sister nodded. “Let’s hurry.” Grabbing her hand in mine, we ducked around the side of the house and up the back steps. A Porsche sat waxed and glimmering at the back of the house. The dinner guest’s car, I presumed. It was a humorous contrast to the dandelion coated gravel and patches of dirt surrounding it.

Slowly turning the knob, I carefully creaked the splintered door open. “Coast is clear,” I whispered, ushering her in front of me. Once we were inside, I turned to carefully shut the creaky old door. “Go on, hurry,” I ordered. She knew as well as I did that old ass door would give us away if I didn’t take an extra moment to lift it while closing it softly. Odie scurried past the fridge and up the back staircase up to our room. When I turned, I froze in place. The refrigerator door was open and someone was leaning inside. I could only see shiny leather loafers and let out a short-lived exhale of relief, knowing those shoes were way-too-expensive to belong to my father. It must be dad’s dinner guest.

Some old pompous...

The refrigerator door closed, and a man stood holding a plastic pitcher.

*Sexy as hell, man.*

His blue eyes met mine and my breath froze in my rib cage. It was dim in our tiny linoleum kitchen, and the air was thick with steam from a cooling oven. I felt my cheeks warm and not from the heat. A smile danced across his smooth face after briefly taking me in. “You must be Dortha,” he said, taking a step towards me and extending a hand.

Looking up into his eyes made me feel dizzy. Or maybe it was the blunt I’d just smoked with Angel. Or maybe *he* was an angel coming to gather me before my parents killed me for my decidedly immodest wardrobe. His hair was an icy, ash blonde with streaks of grey, but his face revealed only youth, with a chiseled jaw and a breathtaking smile. Taking his hand, I nodded. “That’s the unsweet tea. I don’t know why Mom makes it. No one likes it. Oh, and who are you?”

He ran a hand through his hair and I noted his button-up shirt and tie. So formal for supper with The Reverend and Mrs. Queen. “I thought all iced tea was the same?” he asked, standing close to where only I could hear him.

“You must not be from around here. The one with the blue lid is the one you want,” I breathed.

“I’m Cedric,” he replied, blue eyes not leaving mine. It’s like we were talking in code. Were we still talking about tea?

“I’m dead meat if my parents see me in this-” I began before a shrill southern accent wafted into the kitchen.

“Doctor Winslow?” *Mom.*

“Are you lost?” *Dad.*

It was too late. They were about two seconds from discovering me half naked in front of their guest. A *doctor* at that.

The man pulled the lid off the liquid and before I could ask what was happening; I felt the sting of cold slithering down my front.

“Wow, Miss, I’m so sorry about that!” Cedric boomed, reaching over to the small round breakfast table and pulling his sports coat off the back of a chair.

“What’s going on?” My father’s voice boomed from the doorway and I cringed before feeling heavy fabric being draped around my shoulders.

“Hands steady enough for surgery but apparently not steady enough to figure out this carafe,” Cedric turned, giving a charming chuckle. “Your daughter saw me struggling and came to my rescue,” he glanced over his shoulder at me with a wink. “Unfortunately, I’ve gotten her all wet.”

*Oh my god.*

“Oh, Doctor Winslow, I hope you didn’t get any on you. That lid has always been awful,” my mother said, fluttering over to me. “Honey, you’re dripping wet. Go on up and change while I clean this off the floor.”

“Let me help,” Dr. Winslow offered, and my poor mother looked like she’d had a stroke. Men didn’t do things like clean up spills around here. Just then, my father spoke up from the doorway.

“Thank you, Doctor, but Dorothy can handle it. I see you’ve met my eldest daughter, Dorthea. She was absent from dinner because she had to... work.” My dad said the word as if it were a strain. If he had his way, I’d stay home awaiting the moment he arranged my marriage with some bland missionary or youth group leader. My place was to marry and pop out kids. Yeah, no to both. At least not for a while.

“How does it go?” Dr. Winslow said, smiling warmly at me before meeting my father’s eyes. “*‘Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,’* I think that’s right.”

My father’s face went slightly blanch with either embarrassment or confusion, and I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. “Yes,” he cleared his throat. “Well, we don’t want to keep you all night. Speaking of work, I speak on behalf of the church. We are very thankful for your assistance.”

“The pleasure’s all mine, Theodore. I should really get going,” Cedric replied, shooting me a glance. “It was nice to meet you, Dorthea.”

“Go on and get changed, Dolly,” my mother ushered me towards the stairs. “We’ll get your jacket dry cleaned and to you-”

Mom’s voice trailed off as I padded up the stairs. Somehow spared from the scolding and embarrassment of being caught in booty shorts and a crop top, however, blushing all the same. Dr. Winslow was...

“Dolly!” Odie wrapped her arms around me. “How much trouble are you in? I wanted to listen on the stairs, but you know they creak and I heard the other man’s voice-”

Placing my hands on her shoulders, I interrupted her anxious moment. “Odie, chill. I’m fine. The guy, Doctor-Cedric. He kind of saved my ass...” His jacket came down to my knees, and I nuzzled my nose into the collar. He smelled like leather and pine.

“Is that his coat? Oh, my gosh... you’re into him!” My sister shrieked. “Is he actually under eighty years old? It *would* be the one time dad lets us skip out on dinner where he actually brings a hot guy our age.”

“Keep your voice down!” I whispered, though I was grinning so hard my cheeks hurt. “I don’t know how young. He doesn’t look that old. Like, mid-twenties, maybe? But yeah, he’s got this really smart sexiness about him.” Shrugging off his jacket, I carefully laid it on my bed as if it were made of silk, before stripping off my wet clothes and pulling on a baggy night dress.

My sister perched on a stool by the open window. “Do you think Mom and Dad went to bed?”

“Yeah, seemed like they were wrapping things up when I came up here. Why?”

“Because there’s still a very fancy car parked out front.”

“What!?” I squealed, stumbling over shoes and blankets while my sister giggled at the window. Pulling the curtains

open, I gasped. It wasn't only a fancy car.

“Oh, did I forget to mention the fancy man standing next to it? Must have slipped my mind...”

Red filled my cheeks as Cedric met my eyes with a half smile. Ducking out of sight, I promptly punched my sister in the arm.

“Ow!” she yelped between giggles. “Go talk to him. The parents are asleep, but I'll stand watch anyway.” She crossed her arms and raised a strawberry blonde eyebrow. She knew she owed me from all the times I'd covered for her and Steven making out. Though I wouldn't be making out with this guy, I was curious to talk to him more.

“Fine, but don't watch. It's weird,” I said, not bothering to slip on shoes before tiptoeing out of our room.

“No promises!” she called after me sarcastically, and I rolled my eyes. Carefully avoiding every mapped out screech of the stairs and the kitchen floor, I lifted the back door and slid outside.

“Why hello again,” Cedric said, leaning against his car like some eighties heart-throb. He didn't have a southern accent like most people from around here. In fact, he didn't have an accent at all.

“Thought I'd check on you, Dr. Winslow,” I said, stepping through the wet grass to his car. “Few quote scriptures at my Dad and live to tell the tale.”

“Cedric,” he replied, chuckling low in his throat. “I knew that theology class I took in college would pay off someday.” He pulled out a box from his pants and put a cigarette to his lips before extending the box to me. “Besides, I'm opening a free pop-up medical clinic to your Dad's church and the community. So I think he'll be able to look past my bad attitude.” He winked as I pulled a cigarette from the box.

“You smoke? Aren't doctors supposed to be all, I don't know, holier than thou?” I sucked in as he cupped the cigarette and brought the flicker of a lighter-flame forward. His finger

lightly brushed my cheek, making me tingle in excitement just as the first inhale of nicotine hit my throat.

“Aren’t reverend’s daughters supposed to be good girls?” he responded, and I swallowed in surprise. After lighting his own and blowing off a long puff of smoke, he stared at the sky for a moment. It was a gloriously clear night, each star so pronounced. The cicadas sang a chorus in the night while a few stray fireflies lingered, glowing every few moments. It was as if a few stars had fallen down and were floating among us.

*Good girl.*

Brushing off my sexual attraction, which was making every word and movement this man made some sort of innuendo, I blew my own puff of smoke into the heavens. “Clearly you’ve never seen *Footloose*,” I raised an eyebrow, and he chuckled. “I guess we’re both not what we’re supposed to be.”

“I don’t know you very well yet, Dorteia, but I kind of like you the way you are,” he said, casually putting out his cigarette and looking down at me. “Anyone who does *so many* things their parents disapprove of must be working damn hard to retain some sort of individuality. I think that’s commendable. Not many people have that kind of strength. It’s easier to just conform to what people expect of you. Not so easy to break outside the box, try something new, different.” He shrugged, leaning back on his car and looking up at the sky again.

My heart swelled. This man had known me for all of an hour and saw me in a brighter light than my own family, who’d known me for nineteen years, had.

“You can just call me a brat. That’s fine,” I said darkly, and he chuckled again. I grinned, realizing I was beginning to love the sound of his laughter. I loved the feeling of making him laugh.

“What’s that over there?” he asked, nodding toward the shed. Half of Ariel sat in the open shed... and the other half sat strewn along the lawn.

I cringed. “That’s Ariel. I bought her from a junkyard and I’m trying to fix her up so I can get out-” I stopped myself, realizing my filter had slipped. “So I can go on a road trip,” I finished softly, looking down at the ground.

Cedric eyed me before nodding. “Looks like an Oldsmobile, is that right? You know, I know a bit about cars. I could come by tomorrow and have a look, if you’d like that?”

My heart fluttered like fireflies in my chest. He was a surgeon, in Italian loafers, leaning up against his Porsche, yet there wasn’t a hint of pretension about this man. He was so warm and kind. It was as if my junkyard of a home, and life, if I were being honest, didn’t phase him. He saw past the gravel and the plastic tins of sticky iced tea into something else entirely. He saw me, somehow.

“I’d like that a lot.”



One day you're tossing store-bought baked goods into a dish to pass them off as your own with your friends.

The next, you're falling into a shark tank, only to be rescued by a mysterious man. A mysterious man who bit you, confounds your mind, and insists you jump on his Harley so he can torment you.

Life's funny like that.

And where, you may ask, does that man take you?

Would you have guessed a shop with neon pink walls with yellow daisies and white fluffy rabbits stenciled delicately over the archways? *Yeah, me either.*

"I'll take a banana split, please." Desmond looked down at me as I stood, bewildered in front of the case. "And whatever she wants."

"Can I have a scoop of strawberry on a waffle cone, please? Thank you," I replied, glancing at the purple-haired teenager as they nodded and took Desmond's credit card.

"Why are you looking at me like you've never seen ice cream before? Do they not have that in the south?" He snickered, taking his bowl from the counter and passing me my cone.

"How do you know where I'm from?" My fingers brushed his as I noted how his palm dwarfed the cone, making it look like a child's portion. Why are hands so attractive?

"That accent don't hide much, darlin'," he said with a forced southern drawl that should have repulsed me. Of

course, it did the opposite for some infuriating reason. Sliding into opposite sides of a booth by the window, my eyes followed his to watching the drops of rain slither down the glass.

“I forget how much that makes me stand out here,” I said softly, taking a lick of strawberry. “Where are you from?”

“All over,” he replied absently. “And your southern charm isn’t the only thing that makes you stand out, Dor-” he paused, sucking on his spoon. The look of it sending a jolt to my core. *Stop it, I need to get properly laid STAT.* “You just don’t look like a *Dorthea*. Family name?”

“Dorothy and Reverend Theodore, my parents. My full name is Dorthea Ruth Queen. Well, add Winslow, my husband’s last name, to the end. Queen-Winslow,” I included awkwardly, suddenly not in the mood for ice cream anymore.

Desmond’s stare lingered, but he didn’t press the issues, which I was thankful for. “So why are you trying to kill yourself?”

My eyes jerked away from the rain and into his forest of green. He’d finished his ice cream and was leaning back in the booth, arms crossed, dominating the space with his size. “I told you I’m not. You think I’d jump into a shark tank if that’s what I wanted?”

“What do you want?”

His question shot a lightning bolt to my chest. What did I want?

“I don’t know. To feel alive, I guess,” I sat my dripping cone in his empty bowl and stared at it. Where was all this emotion coming from?

Desmond leaned back, rubbing his stubbled face in contemplation. “You said earlier you ‘just wanted to feel something’, but pain isn’t something that’ll make you feel alive. Maybe for a moment, but that’s just chemicals.”

“Sounds like you know a lot about that,” I replied, trying to draw out any straight answer from this man.

He sat his spoon in its bowl. “Pain? I’ve gotten a paper cut a time or two so, yeah, sure.”

I rolled my eyes, struggling to hide my smile. “You said earlier you could help me?”

“I can and I will.” His definitive tone almost making me scoff.

“Okay, cowboy, try me,” I said, crossing my arms, the hint of a smile still relentlessly tugging at my lips.

“Cowboy?” Desmond put a hand over his heart and chuckled. “I’ll take it.”

Heat rose to my cheeks and dropped to my belly at the sight of his smile. He always looked devious, like he was holding a secret behind his lips that no one could guess.

*And now I was obviously staring at his lips.*

“Here’s what’s going to happen. I need a photography assistant. Someone to help lug my gear in harder to reach areas, help me scout, and set up for nature shots. You desperately need some perspective outside of your desperate doctor’s wives AA meetings. It’s a win-win.”

My eyes shot up at his blatant pride and audacity. Who did this guy think he was? “Excuse me?”

“Ah cut the shit, you’re not offended. You’re bored as hell, Queen. I can help with that. Get you outside of the pretentious mansions and into the forest, nature, into the wild. Now, don’t tell me that doesn’t sound good.”

My heart fluttered at his using my maiden name as a nickname. A name I always kind of liked. Maybe he was right, maybe it did suit me. Maybe I did need to get out. “I’m not really an outdoorsy girl,” I pushed back weakly. He was right, I was already halfway on board with this plan.

“You don’t say? I thought you were a seasoned survivalist. Well, that changes everything...”

I threw a straw at his chest, and he grabbed it, chuckling. “Come on, help me out. I don’t know many people in Seattle and I need someone who at least enjoys the natural world in

some form. I've been around the aquarium for a couple of weeks. I've met dozens of staff. But you're the only one I've seen talking to the animals. Manta-Ray is your favorite, right?"

"His name's Pino," I offered, grinning. "And you're a stalker."

"Being observant is my job." The smile that answered mine set a flame ablaze in my chest. "Pino," he repeated. "You don't just like nature, you feel it. You call it by name. I could use that in my work. A new set of eyes. So what do you say, you in?" He reached his wide and rough hand across the booth and I stared at it skeptically.

"If I agree to help you, we can't tell Eva. She'll flip if she finds out I'm working with you."

"As much as I'd love to see that chirpy-bird of a woman combust, I agree. Let's avoid the drama of it. So, you in?"

Nodding, I took his hand, electricity shooting up my palm at the contact. A smirk played on his lips as he leaned back in his seat, eyeing me with some sort of emotion I couldn't name but sent sparks misfiring in my ribcage.

I might have just made a deal with the devil.

And I might have liked it, too.

—

Desmond dropped me back at my car. The ride back we talked like old friends, though we'd only really just met. Our dark sense of humor played well with the other and the banter was unmatched. Pulling off his helmet, he eyed my Porsche. "That thing come with Barbie or is she sold separately?"

"Ha. Ha. It was my birthday gift and I happen to love it, thank you very much." I rolled my eyes, tugging off my helmet and handing it back to him.

"I'll be seeing you soon, Queen. Try not to wander into any other predator habitats or otherwise maim or dismember yourself, okay? I got that covered for the both of us," he smirked, gripping his motorcycle handles. Just *flaunting* that

stupid hot indent on his forearm. He was so sexy it infuriated me.

“Obviously being a comedian didn’t work out for you, Des. Maybe you should stick to taking pictures.” His helmet muffled his laugh as he clipped it under his chin. The engine revved to life, and after a salute, he sped off into the distance.

Resting my forehead on the steering wheel, I took my first deep breath of the day. A buzz from my purse pulled my attention. Two missed calls from Odie and a few texts asking me to call her. One text from Cedric.

*Cedric: Hope you’re having a good day. I picked up another ER shift tonight so I won’t be home.*

My heart dropped slightly. I still felt disappointed when he didn’t come home at night, though he rarely did anymore. Home was just his quick-stop kitchen before hurrying back to the hospital. My husband was an important man. He saved lives for a living. There were people breathing and eating and laughing, who wouldn’t otherwise be able to do so, all over the world, because of his skill. So that made the ache in my gut, missing him, wanting his time, feel all the more selfish. The more time spent with me, the fewer people could potentially be alive. There were other doctors and surgeons, sure, but none as good as him.

Cedric was at the top of his game.

But he wanted to go higher. He wanted to be Chief of Surgery, which was a promotion, but also an opportunity to be behind a desk more. To call the shots, take charge of the surgery department, and, my favorite, have set hours. Normal hours. I was banking on and pining for his promotion just as much as he was. Albeit for less altruistic reasons. Cedric wanted the ability to choose his own cases, take on more complicated surgeries, perform case studies, and train other doctors. He deserved that.

I just wanted my husband home every night. I wanted a chance to rebuild our marriage.

Though I could tell he was nervous. He was working too hard, overcompensating for something that wasn't his fault. Something that could overshadow his entire career. He was just hoping that with enough hours and expertise put into this new hospital, that would speak louder than what happened a few years ago.

We could hope.

And thus why I tried to get on Eva's good side. Maybe if she liked me, she'd put in a good word with Dr. Gregory. My stomach sank at the thought of her finding out I was helping her stepson. But she wouldn't find out, right? We'd keep it professional. And to be honest, it *did* sound nice to get outside. Maybe climbing some mountains, or something, would help pull me out of my funk. Maybe fresh air and sunshine was what I needed.

No drama. Just picture perfect nature. A side-gig.

That's all it was. *Yeah, I'm sticking with that story.*

---

EVEN THOUGH I'D BEEN SEVERAL KINDS OF WET ALL DAY...  
the only thing I wanted when I got home was a shower.

After changing out of my horrendous sweats and scrubbing the fish water off, I changed into shorts and a baggy shirt. Standing outside my closet, I hesitated a moment, before grabbing my burner phone and my actual phone. My routine was usually the same. Snack on the couch to reality TV, text or swipe right on some potential hook-ups, read a smutty book, go to bed. Today, however, I was feeling off. Which makes sense because there was the whole falling into a shark tank thing.

But aside from that, something about Desmond made me feel off-kilter.

And something about Cedric not even stopping home to eat had me feeling uneasy.

I was always alone, but tonight, I felt lonely.

Desmond was probably only asking me to come along on his photo outings because he felt sorry for me. Pushing away my insecure thoughts, I padded into the kitchen to pop my customary, lonely bag of popcorn. The marble and tile sparkled and smelled like lemon and mint. Tori must have stopped by to do a cleaning today. I totally forgot she'd be coming by. I enjoyed talking to her. As kernels popped, replacing the fresh fragrance with butter and salt, I felt even more like a loser that I felt sad that I missed chatting with my cleaning lady.

A trail of steam following me into the living room. I avoided my dent on the sofa and slumped into the overstuffed love seat instead. These couches were made for appearances. For photos in magazines. Not for eating pizza and binge watching every episode of Gossip Girl. I had a sudden and strong desire to burn them and haul home lived-in thrift store furniture instead. Cedric would be horrified.

Flipping through the channels I landed on an ocean documentary for background noise. The *ho-phone* binged with a measly five messages. All from Kenneth. Hooked up with the guy once and he wouldn't shut up. Clearly he wasn't getting the picture, so I typed out a quick reply.

*Me: Hey Kenneth, you seem like a nice guy, but I'm just not interested.*

Hopefully that would shut him up.

My other phone buzzed next to me.

*Cora: Hey, this is random, but I have wine and need some girl-talk. Can I stop by?*

I'd totally forgotten that I'd given her my number before we left the meeting last week.

*Me: Yeah! Come on by.*

Sitting up straighter, my spirits lifted a bit. Girl talk and wine sounded nice, and I was beginning to like Cora a lot. I needed friends who came over when they wanted to. My self-absorbed ass rarely had the foresight to make actual plans with anyone.

My phone buzzed again, only this time it wasn't Cora.

*Odie: Call now?*

*Me: I'm about to have a friend over. Tomorrow morning?*

*Odie: Tell your booty-call to wait! I have news!*

As I was typing out a response, my doorbell rang. My sister could wait. She'd swear she had the most important thing in the world to talk to me about and it would turn out to be about a sale on her favorite perfume. Odette had a penchant for dramatics. Leaving my phones on the coffee table, I greeted Cora in the foyer.

"Dolly, you shouldn't have dressed up for me," Cora teased, poking at a hole in my shirt.

I laughed. "Believe it or not, this is better than what I was wearing earlier. It's been a day. Want to chill in the living room?"

"Yes, bitch! Wow, your house is huge and beautiful," she remarked, following me into the kitchen.

I pulled out two wineglasses and a corkscrew. "Thanks. I mentioned I liked it one day, just driving by. The next day Cedric came and offered the owners cash on the spot to vacate." Smiling at the memory, I motioned towards the living room.

"Goddamn, that's quite a man you've got there. You're lucky. Simon's idea of romance is buying himself a new flatscreen television and saying it's for me." She rolled her eyes.

I chuckled, sitting on the couch and hugging knees. "Tell him to buy me one. I love watching TV."

Cora uncorked her bottle of red and poured us both a glass. "I'll give you his. He's never even home to watch it. To my new Seattle bestie," she smiled, and we clinked glasses.

Something about Cora reminded me of my sister. Her boisterous laugh, her irreverent humor, the dusting of freckles along her nose. The similarities caused my walls to drop faster



than they usually would. Though my filter had been shaky ever since meeting *him*.

“What’s the deal with your husband?” I asked. “Workaholic or god complex? It’s always one or the other with these men. Trust me, I’ve been to enough doctor’s wives meetings to hear it all.” I took a long sip, letting the tannins roll over my tongue.

“You know,” she replied, opting to sit on the floor, her back against the couch opposite me. “I could probably handle either of those. But he doesn’t seem particularly interested in anything lately. He’s at the hospital all the time, yeah, but he at least used to be passionate about it. I’d hear about his cases on his dinner breaks, he’d text me good morning and good night. Now? Nothing.” She shrugged.

“It’s hard,” I nodded in understanding. “I feel like I’m married to a ghost some days. But I don’t know, they have a lot on their plate. Lives, heavy illnesses they treat, death. I imagine it’s a lot.” It sounded weak coming from my lips. I was full of shit. I knew those things, but did I care? Not really. I wanted my husband around more often, too.

Cora took a heavy gulp of wine. “True, but they signed up for that shit and got married on top of it. We didn’t sign up to be on-call wives.”

“Damn, when you put it like that...” I reached for the bottle of wine, flinging my wrist with mock urgency. Cora giggled and topped off my glass.

“It helps to have someone to talk to,” she sighed.

Just then, my phone buzzed... and then *Ruby’s* phone buzzed.

Shit. I’d forgot to stash that one before Cora came in here. My cheeks flushed as I reached out, but it was too late. Cora grabbed the one closest to her. “Two phones, hm? Are you a drug dealer? Where I’m from, only drug dealers have two phones.” She tossed it onto the cushion next to me and I racked my brain for a lie, but for once, came up short.

“Where are you from again?” I asked, grabbing my other phone, too. Another text from my annoying sister.

“Why Tennessee, honey,” she said, caking on a very authentic accent. “Us southern girls need to stick together. Now, if you’re selling drugs, tell me what it does and how much because I probably want to try-”

“It’s for a guy. Well, guys, plural,” I interrupted. I didn’t know enough about drugs to even lie and pretend it was a phone for that purpose. I may have been talented at bullshitting, but living as a pastor’s kid in Savannah, Georgia, didn’t exactly lend itself to ample time to learn street-smarts.

Cora gasped. “You’re cheating on Cedric?”

“No! I’d never,” I inhaled a breath. I’d told my sister already, but this was different. I’d told no one besides her. “We have an... arrangement. You can’t tell anyone, okay? Especially not the girls in the club.”

Cora topped off my glass, her eyebrows shooting up. “Of course not. Your dirty little secrets are safe with me,” she promised, settling into a cross-legged position on the rug.

“Okay, so about a year ago we decided I could, you know, *date* around. Cedric’s gone a lot and when he’s here he’s not really here... you know?” I was rambling, and the words sounded silly, but Cora nodded thoughtfully.

“Wow, I can’t believe he went for that. My husband would fucking rage if I suggested something like that. He’d get so jealous.”

“It was his idea.”

“No!” She leaned back, shocked. “Holy shit. You really are the luckiest bitch in the world, huh?”

My heart constricted at her sentiment. Not because I felt judgement, but because of deep longing. I wished Cedric felt that. I wished I could squeeze some jealousy out of him. Part of me hoped he would hate the idea of me hotwifing too. But with his rules, he didn’t mind. And the fact remained that he wouldn’t touch me. Not anymore. And that was killing a small

piece of me I tried to ignore. But that part of me was growing agitated.

Like a whale in an aquarium, she was bumping against the walls of my consciousness.

---

SEVERAL TAKEOUT BOXES OF ORANGE CHICKEN AND RICE, AND another bottle of wine, later, Cora's driver picked her up. Guilt swirled around my stomach as I pulled out my phone, slightly tipsy. I shot a text to my sister.

*Me: Are you still up?*

Nothing. It was past midnight my time, so she was probably asleep. Odette was my opposite in being an early-to-bed, early-to-rise freak of nature.

Abandoning my dinner mess in the living room, I made my fuzzy way back to my room, flopping on my duvet. I held both phones in my hand, peering at them through a hazy gaze. My mind waded through emotions I thought I *should* feel and emotions I actually felt.

I *should* have felt relief to have confided in a new friend. I should have felt thankful to have a husband so understanding and accommodating. My life lacked almost nothing.

Instead, I felt envy. Jealousy burrowed like a hermit crab in my chest. Cora's husband would *fucking rage* at the thought of sharing her. Cedric and I had barely even attempted sex in over a year. *A year.*

And I had a path forward. I loved my husband and always would. Cedric Winslow was my rock, my stability, my love. I could sleep with whoever I wanted as long as I didn't stray from his reasonable boundaries. *No one we know. No kissing on the mouth. Check emotions at the door. Don't tell him about any of it.*

But none of these were bringing me any peace. Or even any sexual fulfillment. My beaus had been disappointing

encounters more often than sexy trysts. And my mind was straying into places it shouldn't.

Like the way a certain set of incisors felt scraped against my neck. About how my thighs felt as they ached slightly to wrap around him on his motorcycle. His long fingers brushing mine. His devilish glare when we promised to keep this a secret.

What else could we keep secret?

In my drunken stupor, I tossed Ruby's phone to the side. Tonight would have been an acceptable night to drunk-text literally any man in my burner phone. But did I? No. Suddenly it wasn't good enough.

Opening my personal phone, I pulled up Desmond's contact. My eyes focused in on his number until my heart was fluttering at just digits on a screen. God, I was insane.

My thumb became possessed and pressed the camera icon next to the chat box. Then suddenly my arms were inhabited by the same demon and I pulled off my shirt. My heartbeat raced as I extended my arm, looking at my breasts in full, pixilated display through the phone's camera. He basically told me he wanted to see me topless when we first met in the gym, right? Fusia swatched my cheeks, my red hair curly and wild, splayed on the white bed behind me like a basket of spilt berries. My soft stomach and pale skin so white only broken up by imperfect ruddy freckles. My tits, though? Voluptuous, womanly, sexy.

Without thinking, because clearly, my thinking-brain was at the bottom of a box of egg rolls in the living room.

I hit send.

*seven*

## 13 MONTHS AGO

S moky, earthy aromas of sage lingered in the stale office air. Tiffany always saged the room between clients. I figured she'd need to light a Christmas tree on fire to have enough smoke to rid the room of the energy Cedric and I brought in. She asked if we'd done our homework, and I lied and said yes. My husband didn't correct me. Rather, he sat back with one ankle propped on his knee, his confident presence the centerpiece between giant, leafy ferns.

"I think we're at a stalemate here, guys." Tiffany sat her notebook on her lap, peering at us over thick red rimmed glasses.

*Stalemate.*

"Are you saying you can't help us?" Cedric questioned, pulling his gaze from the drizzly window.

"Probably not, not on this issue. I can only help couples if change is an option. As it stands, Dolly, you have sexual needs and desires that deserve attention. Cedric, you've stated that you are not in a place to provide those things to your wife."

I reached a hand over to Cedric's leg, and he flinched. That bid to comfort him rejected, like a million other attempts before.

"Dot, I understand if this isn't something you want anymore. You're in your early twenties and I'm nearing fifty. I can't ask you to--"

Shaking my head, I interrupted. "No, don't even finish that sentence. I love you and I'm not leaving. I married you knowing you were older."

Cedric's jaw tensed, but his shoulders relaxed in relief.

"There are other options..." Tiffany cut in, her eyes darting between us inquisitively. "You could open your marriage up to other sexual partners."

My mouth dropped, but when I looked to Cedric his face remained impassive. “Could you expand on what that may look like?” My husband asked and I gasped.

“Ced, you can’t be serious?”

Our therapist gave me an understanding look before answering my husband. “I’ve counseled many couples who have implemented unconventional solutions to solve sexual differences. In your case, your trauma, and maybe your age, too, is preventing you from sex with your wife. Yet, regardless, sexual intimacy remains something that Dolly needs to feel fulfilled in her life. What I’m suggesting is, maybe you could both have an open mind.”

“I could be fine with you sleeping with other men, Dot. We’d have to set some rules for your safety and to protect our relationship-”

“Absolutely not!” I stomped my foot like a child. “No, this is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“What about that idea upsets you, Dolly?” My therapist asked so calmly. *Yeah, she would be calm. Her husband wasn’t pimping her out to other dudes.*

“This isn’t what a marriage should be. He should be the one in my bed, not other guys.”

Tiffany nodded. “I understand. Perhaps take this week to dissect that *should* a bit more. Who says every marriage needs to look the same? What makes you think this couldn’t work?”

Rolling my eyes, I stood, grabbing my purse. “I’m getting some air. Why don’t you two work out my sex life while I’m gone and just let me know what you come up with.”

Okay, I was being dramatic, maybe. But the whole point of these three months of therapy was to work through this. To *fix* him. To fix us. Not to find some creative solution to me getting laid. The suggestion was ridiculous, and I wondered how Tiffany came so highly recommended by Cedric’s hospital.

Standing outside in the cool, soggy air, I leaned against the stone building. People on the sidewalk passed me by without a

glance. After a few minutes, Cedric's warmth radiated next to me as he pulled out a box I hadn't seen in a while. He took a deep inhale and offered it to me. Accepting, I let the nicotine hit my lungs and soothe out a couple of my wrinkled nerves.

"I think you should do it, Dot," his timbre breaking the silence between passing cars.

"Sleep with other men?" I took another drag before handing his cigarette back.

He blew his smoke into the street. "Tiffany says the kids call it being a Hotwife."

A graveled chuckle left my throat. "Hotwife? What a stupid name. Sounds like a smutty novel I'd read late at night."

"I sold you a lie, Dot. I promised to care for you, and what have I done? Sex was great the first couple years until..." He took another long draw of his smoke. "Then I dragged you out here. You pretend to like it, but I know you hate it. I don't particularly like it here, either."

I sighed. "We've done the best we can—"

"And now I think you should try this. If we're committed to each other for the rest of our lives, what's sex in the long run, hm? I have your heart, and I know that."

My chest constricted with pain. I don't know if it was his resignation or his acceptance of this alternative plan, but mixed together, they created an excruciating cocktail in my soul. My husband was impassive about me sleeping around. Not only unbothered by it, he wanted it.

"We'd have to agree to some stipulations, which we can go over later. But I think this settles it. It's the best solution we've got."

*No, the best solution is you getting past this hang-up and having sex with me like you used to.*

Maybe I should have said that out loud instead of only thinking it. Maybe I should have fought harder. If I had, everything would have been different. But instead, I watched



an old couple walking their dog, arm in arm, and without even glancing up at my husband, I signed our marriage away.

“Okay.”

---

# PRESENT

No one would call me a sentimental person. When I left my childhood home, I took nothing with me. My church dresses stood hovering in my closet. The shoebox under a floorboard remained loaded with makeup, a half-empty box of *Marlboro Reds*, and a *Spice Girls* CD. Odette's face when I told her it was all hers now still made me giggle when I remembered it. But I didn't care anymore. That Dorthea was gone. The church girl that had to hide who she was from her family couldn't accompany me in my new life. At least, that's what I told myself.

I was Dorthea Winslow now. Mrs. Cedric Winslow. My husband saw me for who I was and loved me. Our age-gap didn't matter, though Odie was more skeptical than my mother once she found out. My father, of course, was livid.

My mother offered me my grandmother's fine china as a wedding gift. I'd spent so much of my childhood memorizing the delicate pink flowery designs on the plates behind the glass of the antique display cabinet in our modest dining room. Daydreaming into the daisy petals was the only thing that kept me awake through hundreds of my father's mandatory Bible studies around the table.

But even when she offered up every bowl, teacup, and salad plate, I declined.

Sentimentality wasn't for me.

However, the smell of greasy, salty bacon and bitter coffee floating through the air before my eyes even opened? That was a feeling I wanted to hold close forever. I'd carry the feeling of Cedric making me breakfast into every home I ever walked into.

I was sentimental about that. That and the vintage gold ring he proposed with. It had belonged to his great

grandmother. It looked like a flower. Ironically, it resembled the daisies on my mom's china.

The sound of my husband clearing his throat from my doorway jostled me from my closed eyelid thoughts. With a stretch, I sat up, yawning. "Hey, you're home," I smiled, sleep rasping my voice.

Air touched my bare skin and I remembered I was topless. Before clutching a blanket, my eyes caught his dropping to my bare breasts. "Good morning, Dotty. Breakfast in bed?" He held out a tray and my stomach rumbled.

"Yes, please," I nodded enthusiastically, crawling to the top of my bed and under the duvet, propping up pillows behind me. "Join me?"

Cedric hovered in the doorway, glancing lightly down to my breasts and then up to me. Thoughts flurried through his mind. Thoughts he wouldn't share even if I asked. I knew that by now. He didn't immediately say no, though, and I could work with that.

He walked to the foot of the bed and extended my tray to me, perching on the corner. Yanking up my duvet, I covered myself and positioned my breakfast over my lap. Like a barrier, a pen. *Hey look, I won't jump you, don't worry.*

My husband was like a wild animal I was fearful to spook.

"I suppose I can join you for a bit," he smiled, walking around and sitting next to me. My gaze wandered to the darkening circles under his eyes. The wrinkles that were appearing beside his soulful blue stare. Not from age, though, from worry. My heart ached. Clutching my mug in my palms was the only thing keeping my hands from flying out to rub his jaw, to kiss him, to comfort him. A sip of sweet, foamy coffee warmed my throat.

"Best brew in Seattle," I said appreciatively.

He chuckled. "High praise being we're in one of the best places for coffee in the world. I need to take you to Paris again. Remember the espresso from that little cafe?"

I groaned, taking a bite of jellied toast. “How could I forget? Wait, I mean, yes, I’ve totally forgotten and you need to remind me immediately.”

He laughed again, his stressed edges softening, shoulders relaxing. A grin curved my lips in accomplishment. I loved soaking away some of his burden.

“I may need to promise you a European excursion to make up for what I’m about to tell you,” he said, giving a sideways glance.

“What?” I narrowed my eyes at him, extending a piece of toast towards his mouth.

He took a big bite. “I may have volunteered you to host a dinner gathering for me and my colleagues.”

Grabbing a throw pillow, I whacked him on the shoulder. “Ced, you what? Oh holy hell, you know I suck at planning parties.”

Giving a shrug with his hands out in surrender, his head shook. “I know, I know. It’s just that most of the men aren’t exactly on...” he searched for the word, “*Party* asking terms with their wives. But my wife is just so lovely and sweet,” he added, smiling his dashing handsome smile.

I rolled my eyes. “Now I know you’re lying. Eva could throw a party in her sleep. She probably does. I bet Dr. Gregory doesn’t even notice.”

Cedric huffed. “There’s a lot that man doesn’t notice, that’s for sure. But I get the impression the clock is ticking on that marriage.” Then suddenly, his palm took mine into his and I almost gasped at the contact. His hands were warm and tender. I gripped him back and put down my mug. “I’d like to try to move along the politics of my promotion. Henry’s tired. He’s been eyeing retirement for a decade now. It’s my time to take over and he’s dragging his feet. He mentioned getting some people together for a meal and before I knew it, I was spouting off about how much you’d love to host.” Still returning my hold, his other hand ran through his hair. “Forgive me?”

Taking my tray, I sat it on the floor and turned to my husband, still carefully clutching the duvet to my collar. “Of course, I’ll do it. Anything for you. Anything to get you some normalcy again.”

“Get *us* some normalcy again,” he corrected and my heart swelled. The love I had for this man was immense. He was always thinking of me. Of us. From the way he soft scrambled my eggs to wearing ear-buds to not risk waking me in the morning as he listened to NPR.

Then I couldn’t help myself any longer. His smile, his tousled hair, the way his body relaxed next to mine.

Dropping the blanket, I rose onto my knees and put one over, straddling him. His previously slack pose hardened. Wrapping my hands gently around his neck, I rested my forehead on his.

“I miss you,” I whispered.

*Don’t reject me. Don’t push me away.*

His hands floated to my soft hips and rested on them lightly. My shorts had ridden up, exposing a whole lot of ass to go along with my lack of shirt.

“I miss you too, Dot,” he breathed.

*Yes, yes, yes.*

My lips brushed his softly, waiting. After a moment, his kiss answered mine. His lips were as sensual and warm as they were when we shared our first kiss. It happened under the stars next to that rusty Oldsmobile he fixed up for me. I could have floated away on his kiss then and now all the same.

My center fluttered with heat. The feel of him under me had me lightly bucking my hips, desperate for contact. He hadn’t pulled away or broken touch. This could work. It could finally happen.

My hand glided down from his neck to his tight abs, centering on the middle of his silky grey basketball shorts. I loved those shorts on guys. They revealed everything and were

so soft and sexy to grind against. Give me a hard cock behind those loose shorts any day. But my hand came up empty.

Giving him a quick glance, I pulled back. "I'd love to suck on you," I whispered. That would get him hard, surely?

Cedric swallowed, jaw tensing.

"Not today, sweetheart."

My heart sank into the floor. Shoving off of him, I suddenly felt naked. I *was* half naked, but now I felt it, and not in a sexy way.

"Dot," Cedric said in a pained tone. "Please don't be that way. We've talked about this."

"That doesn't make it any better that my own husband isn't attracted to me anymore," I spat, storming into my closet and pulling out a green top and jeans. "You know most women are begging their husband's for a break in the bedroom. I'm begging mine just to look at me."

Cedric got up and walked to the closet doorway. "You know it's not that I'm not attracted to you. I am. You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, Dotty." He ran a hand through his hair again and looked at the ceiling. "We've been over this. It's why we decided to... you know."

"Say it, Cedric." I was spewing venom now, but I didn't care. Over a year of reenacting this very scene. Of me being vulnerable, naked, wanting, and being ultimately told no. "Say that you've outsourced fucking your wife."

"You agreed to this arrangement, Dot. It's not what I want, but what choice do I have? If it's between that or losing you, I'll do whatever I have to. Sex isn't on the table for me right now."

I pulled on my jeans and shirt, not bothering with underwear or a bra. "You think letting other men fuck me fixes this? You think I just want to get off? I can get off fine with my vibrator, thanks. I want you."

"I can't give you that right now, Dot. Not after..." He swallowed again, looking down at me with those sad, tired

eyes.

“Cedric,” I took a step closer, “you did the best you could.”

A mournful smile emerged as he looked down at me. “I wish I believed that, Dot.”

And that’s where the fight always ended. Right there. There was no way around it, under it, over it.

I had come to terms with the fact that I was existing in a sexless marriage. I had decided that even if Cedric never touched me again, I still wanted to be with him. My husband couldn’t get it up anymore. He couldn’t make love to me even if he could. His desire was gone because he felt that he was gone.

Because my husband thought he was a murderer.

---

AS IF MY WINE-HEADACHE AND REJECTION WEREN’T ENOUGH of a slap in the face, I reached for my phone and memories of the prior night flashed through my mind. So I took a nude, I didn’t send it, right?

One new text from Desmond.

No. Oh no no no...

Opening the chat box, my topless photo above his response greeted me. A cringe sank my eyebrows. My cheeks were rosy, eyes glassy in the dim light. I looked like the goddess of drunk-texts. The grey box holding his response sent a thrill of desire surging through my blood.

*Desmond: You’re in trouble next time I see you.*

---

MY PARTY PLANNING EXPERIENCE EXTENDED TO GROCERY store cakes and streamers from church baby-showers. The

internet was no help and only sent a wave of overwhelm over my already foggy brain. Should I host here at home or at a venue? Private chef or caterers? Did I need music?

Eva made every event look effortless.

I made a mental note to pay closer attention to her setup at our upcoming Doctor's Wives meeting. Would Des be there? The thought lifted my heart rate.

What did he mean I'd be in trouble? He probably thought it was wildly inappropriate that a married woman sent him an unsolicited nude. But he *did* bite me. That meant he found me somewhat attractive, right? More likely explanation was he was just messing with me in that devious, hot-guy way. A man as sexy as Desmond probably had no shortage of beautiful, *unmarried* women to choose from. I was sure getting a nude was a regular occurrence for him.

A knock on the doorframe pulled me from my laptop. I'd parked myself on the round breakfast table in our kitchen. Truthfully, the coziness of the kitchen made it my favorite room in the house. Glancing over my shoulder, I flicked Cedric a glance before returning to the screen. I didn't want to look at him. His slick back grey and blond hair. His sharp jaw and those stupid-hot glasses on the brim of his nose. My unbelievably hot husband... who wouldn't touch me.

"I'm going to the gym to swim a few laps before surgery. Do you need anything, sweetheart?" Sincerity and care dripping from his words. Why did he have to be so goddamn perfect in every other way?

"No, I'm fine. When's surgery today?"

"Three this afternoon. I have a few scheduled and then I'll stay to oversee a few assisting."

"Of course you are," I muttered under my breath. My bratty attitude hadn't dissipated even as the day lagged on. Cedric had retreated into his study with a bowl of oatmeal and I straightened my hair and did a twenty-step skincare routine like that would get my life together. *Spoiler alert, it didn't.* But at least I was a moisturized mess.



My husband's warm presence radiated next to me and I turned, looking up warily. He put a hand on my shoulder, as I imagined he did for people before explaining a medical procedure, or to comfort old ladies waiting for their husband to return from the operating room. "Next Thursday I'm off-call. I want to take you out on a date. Would you like that, Dotty?"

Some battered and bruised butterflies poked their heads out of the dark cave of my soul at that suggestion. "Really?" I asked, skeptical. I couldn't recall the last time we went on an honest to god date.

"Really, really," he smiled. "I'll make reservations. Leave it to me." He leaned down and gave my cheek a chaste kiss. Maybe a date was what we needed. Time to connect outside of scrubs and lemon-scented tile. "There's that smile I love," he remarked, pulling back and shouldering his gym duffle. "I'll text you later. Have a good day."

"You too," I said to my laptop as the sound of the front door closing alerted me my husband had left.

*Tik tok. Tik tok.* The Grandfather clock interrupted my rabbit hole into online conspiracy theory videos. But really, what if Titanic *was* an inside job? Opening my phone, I stared at Desmond's last message. *What should I say? Nothing?*

As if by magic, my phone buzzed in my hand and I startled. My jack-rabbit of a heart picked up at as a new grey box appeared.

*Desmond: Send me your address. Picking you up in twenty minutes.*

Every feminist urge I'd worked so hard to cultivate since leaving the south poked me in the ribs, urging me to tell this bossy bastard to fuck off. But the horny-bitch put her on mute and clapped like a seal.

Still, I couldn't resist the urge to be a little obstinate.

*Me: What if I'm busy?*

A text shot through.

*Desmond: 18 minutes. Painting your nails doesn't qualify as busy.*

*Me: Asshole.*

*Desmond: Still been called worse. And wear the opposite of what you normally do. Like, actual walking shoes and nothing with frills or lace.*

My cheeks ached with the smile that plastered itself to my face. Rushing to my closet, I combed through and came up short. The loose, low neck shirt and mom jeans I was currently wearing would have to do. I found some old running shoes and laced them on. Stopping at my vanity in my walk-in closet, I shrugged on a pink waterproof bubble jacket. Surveying my face, Cedric wasn't the only one sporting a few new wrinkles. I dabbed some concealer under my eyes and blended a few dots of blush on my cheekbones. With a quick swipe of mascara, I looked pretty but not *too* pretty. My freckles were visible but dulled. My red hair wild with curls. I sprayed a spritz of leave-in conditioner and raked my fingers through, trying to breathe some life into my washed-out look. Summers in Georgia had my freckles bright with sun. My skin missed the sun. I missed its warmth, too. Which reminded me. I pulled out my phone. No text from my sister. Weird. My thumb stalled over the call button when a heavy knock sounded at my door.

Shoving my phone into my coat pocket and pulling a pink scrunchie onto my wrist, I bounded down the stairs, stopping just before the door to take a steadying breath. When I opened it, Des stood arms crossed, leaning against his bike. His biceps bulged beneath his leather jacket and his eyes were hidden behind aviator shades. God, he was like something out of a magazine. Too hot to even be real. His eyes scanned me top to bottom, lazily taking their time on their descent. I noticed his gaze darken over my low-cut top and linger over my hips. But he didn't mention my text from the night before like I thought he might.

"Jump on, Barbie. The weather's only going to be nice until this evening," he ordered, slinging his leg over his bike and extending a helmet.

Walking over, I pulled the helmet on, hoping it didn't completely ruin the hair I just worked to tame. "Where are we going that it's so important I had to miss my nail appointment?" I asked, threading my tone with sarcasm.

He huffed, but his smile was evident in his reply. "You'll see. But first, coffee. Or do you only drink sunshine and sarcasm?"

"I'll make an exception today," I replied, feeling butterflies ignite in my stomach as I pressed my breasts against his back. Des chuckled and the Harley's engine roared to life, drowning out all other thought or sound. My legs instinctively hugged him tight, and I tightened my hands' grip around his waist. Getting going was jarring, but once we picked up a steadier speed, I relaxed my hold. My mind emptied, spilling out onto the pavement behind us as we glided forward, increasing in speed. Des took back roads all the way to the coffee shop, and I half wondered if he did it because he thought taking his bike onto the highway may scare me. He was right, but the thought of going faster still sent a thrill of curiosity and adventure through me.

When the motorcycle's kickstand landed outside Port City Java, I stood outside, pulling out my phone. "Can you get me a dark roast with cream and sugar? I need to call my sister real quick."

Des walked around to the back of his bike and opened a hatch attached to the back. Pulling out two thermoses, he nodded. "Be right back. Don't dive into any bodies of water while I'm gone."

"No promises," I said, shooting him a caustic grin.

After two rings, my sister's drawl answered. "Dude, I've been trying to talk to you for days!"

"I know, me too. I don't have much time, I'm actually um, well, I'm on a motorcycle with this guy."

"Jesus, Dolly. Your life is so interesting now. Is he hot?" The sound of Odie's smile warmed by heart with a bittersweetness like dark chocolate and memories.

“He’s hot as hell. But it’s not like that. He sort of knows me, like my actual name and life and stuff. I’m just helping him with some photography work.”

My little sister clicked her tongue. “Uh-huh, sure.”

Rolling my eyes, I grinned. “So what’s so urgent you’ve been call-bombing me?”

“God, Dolly, there’s so much to tell you. I-”

“Ruby?” a male voice interrupted, and I lost the last part of what Odette was saying.

“Hey, I’m really sorry Odie, I need to call you back,” I said before ending the call.

Standing stout and awkward, clutching a coffee cup, the man gave me a quizzical yet excited look. “I hoped I’d run into you. Look, I don’t know what I did, but I really think you should give this another chance.”

What was his name again? Kevin? Kirk?

“It’s not personal,” I muttered, caught off guard and fumbling for words. “I’m just not really in the same place anymore. I-”

“Ruby, come on,” He lunged forward, taking hold of my wrist. Something like fear and annoyance climbed up my body at the feel of it. Kenneth. That was his name.

I made to jerk my hand away when a tall, looming presence appeared next to me. Kenneth dropped my hand in an instant and gazed up, eyes widening. “Ah shit. Ruby, you could have just said you’re with someone now. It’s not cool to lead a guy on-”

“Don’t look at her.” Desmond’s low voice was eerily calm and Kenneth blanched.

“Sorry man, I didn’t mean any disrespect to you.”

Desmond handed me the two warm thermoses and stepped in front of me. Kenneth took a step back, flinching before Desmond even continued. I had to admit, Desmond was pretty scary

looking on a primal level. I'd be frightened too if I didn't know he was a nice guy under all that brawn.

"Don't call her, don't bother her if you see her again. Don't even think about her. You got all that?" Desmond commanded in a low, dark tone.

Kenneth nodded. "Yes, sir." He gave a nod and paused as he turned on his heel to flee. "Just curious," he added bravely. "Military man?"

"Marines," was Desmond's only response, and Kenneth nodded.

"Thanks for your service, bro. I won't cause any more trouble. Bye, Ruby." With that, he disappeared in the throes of people walking the busy street.

"Marine, huh?" I asked as Des snatched back the coffees. Somehow my over-eager one night stand recognized a military air about my accomplice and I didn't.

"Ruby, huh?" He repeated, tone light, but anger coated his words. Was he angry at me?

"He must have been confused," I stalled, unsure of what to say.

"Confused. Right." Des unzipped the hatch and placed the drinks carefully inside, before mounting his bike again.

I wordlessly followed suit. It was hard enough to get a read on this guy without having a tinted black helmet completely blocking all of his facial expressions. So I gave up, hoping he wouldn't press me for any info on the awkward encounter. We shot out onto the street.

This time, Des took the highway.

Miles of pavement slowly gave way to rougher roads then finally only dirt. Des pulled off to the side of a bleak and tree-lined road and hopped off. He grabbed a thick pack out of the back compartment and nodded towards a narrow gap between a row of trees.

“I take it we’re hiking?” I asked.

Not even a grunt. Des brushed past me, stomping into the forest.

“Alrighty then,” I muttered to myself, taking a few big gulps of coffee before following behind. Great, now we were fighting.

The trail alternated between carved and worn dirt paths and steep juts upward that were tangled with roots. At many points, anyone may have assumed the trail ended at a sharp incline or root covered dirt wall, but Desmond wasn’t deterred. He blazed forward, only acknowledging me at points where he had to help me up or steady me. His hands gripped my hips and lingered a fraction longer than necessary. I found myself feeling butterflies at the sight of any tilt or rugged patch of trail. After over thirty minutes of silence, I leaned on a tree, trying to hide my heavy breathing. “Hey, you may be a marine, but I’m not, Des,” I panted.

Stopping, he glanced up the trail and then back to me. Pulling a water bottle from his pack, he sauntered over. Breathing completely normal, like this mountain was nothing but a walk in the park for him. Meanwhile, I was fighting for my life and resisting the urge to ask how much farther.

“Not too much further now,” he answered my thought as I took a heavy drink of water.

“You going to talk to me or keep ignoring me?” I asked, raising an eyebrow as my breathing stabilized.

Des tightened a strap on his backpack, not responding, before grunting and motioning me to follow.

“Okay, I guess we’re full-on caveman today. This is really fun for me. Thanks so much for bringing me along, Des. I definitely don’t have the urge to jump into a shark tank now.”

I thought for sure my irreverence would pull a response out of my ornery hiking buddy, but nothing other than the sound of birds chirping chanted for the next half mile.

*You’re in trouble next time I see you.*

Rang through my head. Was this my punishment? His silence and some sort of death hike? Maybe I was supposed to be contemplating my sexual deviance.

Finally, we reached a clearing in the trees. Desmond inhaled deeply as we stepped out onto a massive overlook made of solid rock. The surface was flat, smooth, and surrounded by trees.

“Come look,” he said, a smile lifting his lips slightly. Smiling was a good sign, I guessed.

“No, you’re going to push me over the edge,” I said, crossing my arms.

He leveled me with a raised eyebrow, extending his hand. “Yes, so far I’ve saved you from losing your toes, drowning, a shark attack, and being abducted by a strange man on the street, all to push you off a mountain. You caught me.”

A grin tugged at my cheeks, and I rolled my eyes, taking his hand. We walked carefully to the edge while I watched my feet each step. I didn’t know how high we were, but it felt *high*.

“Look,” he whispered.

Gasping, I held tight to his palm. “It’s beautiful,” I breathed. But those words seemed so shallow. So far and removed from what I was actually seeing. Mountains jutted up all around us and as far as the eye could see. Covered in thick green, jagged trees and sprawling as far as the eye could see.

Desmond pointed into the distance. “Mount Townsend is right there. We’re in the middle of the Olympic Mountains up here. My secret spot.”

“Thank you for sharing it with me,” was all I could muster as I stared over the vast beauty in the mountains. The rock beneath my feet felt cold and solid. The feel of it vibrated into my shins and seeped into my bones. Like the mountains were sharing some of their magic with me. The air was crisp and pure and smelled like a secret forest. The warm rays of the sun danced on my skin between wisps of breeze twirling my hair. I could feel the Vitamin D seeping into my pores and it was already lifting my mood. Fresh from the source Vitamin D was a hot commodity in the rainiest state in the United States.

When I glanced over, Desmond was gazing down at me with a hard expression. He was so angry, but why? Maybe my company really was that annoying.

Not wanting to ruin the moment with questions, I let go of his hand and walked a few steps away from the ledge and towards the tree line where we dropped the packs. Surely he had a granola bar or two stashed away. “Bring me my camera bag on your way back over here,” his voice ordered from somewhere behind me.

I rolled my eyes. A “please” wouldn’t go amiss. “Sir, yes, sir,” I muttered under my breath.

It happened so fast I worried for the briefest moment that I was being attacked by a bear. Strong arms lifted me from where I was kneeling, spun me around, and pressed my back to a giant, moss covered spruce. My heart jumped into my throat and I gasped, Desmond’s hands tight around my shoulders. He pressed his body to mine, completely pinning me in.



“Does your husband mistreat you?” The question came out more like a growl. His breath so close I could feel it. My mouth ached to taste his lips, though I wasn’t allowed to. Even though my entire body was tensing in some sort of bizarre, tantalizing fear. I knew he wouldn’t hurt me, but he was posturing like he could, and for some wicked reason, that sent a flutter straight to my core.

My head shook in hazy confusion. “No, Cedric is amazing.”

“Then what the fuck is your game, Queen? You sending out pictures of your perfect tits to men just to fuck with them? You enjoy driving me crazy?”

“What? No!”

“Is that what you did to that guy on the street? You fucked him up like you’re trying to do to me? Be straight with me. Why are you messing around on your husband?”

“I’m not-” I started, wriggling under his firm hold.

“Yeah, *Ruby*? Because it sure looks like it. And I’m not even saying I care, Dortha. I never claimed to be a good man. I knew you were married when I came onto you in the gym. I want you, but I need to know you can handle it.”

My breath caught in my chest. He wanted me, too?

“We have an arrangement,” I whispered. “I’m allowed to sleep with other men.”

“Why? Why the hell would any man want to share you?” His breathing went ragged for the first time during our hike. The sound of it, hot and steady, pooled between my thighs and I ached to buck my hips forward into him.

A deep breath flooded my lungs in an attempt to clear my racing thoughts. “He can’t... He just can’t.” I looked down. Feeling the shame, the embarrassment of having a husband who could no longer give me what I needed.

Desmond pulled back slightly, taking in my features, searching for any hint of deception. He must have decided I was being truthful because he gave a short nod. “Okay, then.”

“Okay then, what?”

“This-” His lips met mine in a crash of ecstasy. A moan escaped my throat at the severity of the way he pushed his body flush to mine. His soft lips parted mine and his tongue slipped into my mouth, coaxing mine to tango. He tasted like he smelled. Like pure, masculine danger. The rules my husband had set charged through my mind. *Don't use your real name. Broken. Don't kiss on the mouth. Broken.* This was wrong, in some sort of way, but I couldn't stop. I didn't want to stop. Like fire in human form, this man burned through my soul and body within just two weeks of knowing him. I wanted more, no, I *needed* more. Like being trapped underwater and coming up for air. I had to breathe this man in.

I'd spent over a year caging my desires. Even with the men I dated since Cedric. It was all just going through the motions. But not now, not with Desmond. My hands fought between our torsos and grabbed his belt, pulling on the leather and undoing his pants with frantic movements. Answering my call, Des tossed off his jacket before doing the same with mine. His jeans dropped to the ground as his rough hands reached under my shirt. I gasped as he slowed, his tough palms meeting my soft stomach and inching up my ribs. Leaning forward, he nipped my earlobe as his hands cupped my breasts. A small whimper escaped me as his thumb and forefingers began twirling my nipples.

“Des, please,” I whined.

His eyes met mine and a dark smirk played on his lips. “Can't a man take his time?”

“No,” I answered. He chuckled darkly and pulled up on the sides of my shirt. Lifting my arms, he peeled it away.

“*Fuck me,*” he said in awe, taking me in. My bare back met the soft moss of the tree trunk. “You drove me crazy with that fucking text last night.”

“Good,” I replied.

With a soft growl, he looped his long fingers into my jeans, unbuttoning them and pulling them down.

“Fuck, no bra and no panties either?” he remarked, his gaze hot on my hips.

“You told me no lace or frills,” I replied, grinning mischievously.

“That I did,” he stepped back, pulling down his boxers and stepping out. My mouth dropped agape at the sight of him. Naked, my eyes feasted all the way from his five o’clock shadow, down his broad chest dusted with dark hair, to his tight abs, landing on his large, erect cock.

“Oh my god,” I whispered. He was huge.

Shooting me a smirk, he replied, “You can take it.”

My eyes shot up from where they’d wandered over to his prosthetic leg. He looked bionic. Manly and strong. Like he was indestructible somehow. Like maybe he was strong enough to handle me, even. The contrast between him and the backdrop of the relaxed mountain range had me keenly aware of the wetness that slicked that spot where my thighs touched. Thigh gaps were overrated. Stalking towards me, I swallowed just as his lips met mine for another passionate kiss. How long had it been since I’d kissed someone? Not since kissing my husband all those years ago. I felt his length press into my slit and we both sighed at the feel of it.

He dipped a hand between us, separating me from what I really wanted and replacing it with his fingers. “God,” I breathed as his rough digits lightly stroked my wet center.

“Birth control?” he questioned. “How much can I do?”

Humming against his lips, I smiled. “IUD. Do everything. Please,” I whimpered in short breathless fragments. His fingers worked for a moment longer before he pulled them away and up to his lips. Inserting each one into his mouth, he sucked, like I was the most delicious thing he’d ever tasted.

“If you don’t fuck me right now, I swear to god-”

In one unexpected movement, his cock met my entrance and pushed in with full force. Holding onto Desmond’s broad shoulders, I cried out. The fullness was excruciating and exquisite all at once. He held me effortlessly against the tree

trunk as I lifted both feet to wrap around him. Easing out, we both groaned in unison as he slammed back into me. My body had adjusted to his size and was devouring every inch of his girth.

Each thrust brought me past any other peak I'd ever climbed with other men. Suddenly I was in unfamiliar waters. I had no idea when or if I would come. But it didn't matter. The feeling of being fucked naked against a tree by Desmond was pleasure enough to last me a lifetime. One rough palm then gripped under my knee, holding me steady against the tree with ease, while the other snaked between us. This next time, when Desmond crashed into me, his thumb found my center. My ecstasy accelerated at a rapid pace, each plunge of his cock and brush of his thumb ushering me toward both internal and external peaks of euphoria.

"Fuck, Dortha, I've never felt anything as good as you," Desmond growled into my ear.

"Oh my god, Des," I whimpered as he continued his onslaught of desire. Each dizzying time he filled me, the stars behind my eyes got closer and closer within reach.

"I want you to come for me right as I come inside you, Queen. I want to feel your pussy squeeze out every drop of me." The gruff order heated my lower belly.

*Oh, my god.*

His words were gravelly and indecent, but the thought of it combined with his hard thrusts sent me over the edge. Tilting my head back against mossy wood, Desmond's teeth found my neck and bit down on that place right between pleasure and pain. My climax echoed through the mountain range just as Desmond roared his orgasm into the nape of my neck. He jerked forward, burying himself as deep as he could go, and I felt his hot and heavy release fill me, spilling out the edges of my stretch.

The aftershocks of my intense orgasm lasted for what felt like ages. But Desmond just held me there, wrapped in his arms, until finally pulling out of me. Our breathing still finding a normal pace, I absently went to reach for my clothes

when he stopped me. Gently taking my wrist, he pulled me closer, and grabbed my chin. “You alright?” he asked, voice still brusque.

I nodded. “That was...”

One corner of his lip lifted in a smirk.

“That was... decent,” I finished, grabbing my jeans and stepping in.

It’s no exaggeration when I say his laugh flew like a hawk over the Olympic mountains. Echoing through the passes. I’d always loved his rumble of a chuckle, but his full on belly-laugh was a delight to behold, just like the range behind us.

“I need to be fucking whoever you’ve been with then because if that’s only decent...”

“Oh, hush,” I quipped, tossing his shirt at his chest. “It was above average. How’s that?”

“Above average, my ass,” he replied, tone lighter than I’d ever heard it. A warm sense of pride overcame me that I was the cause of that. “That was phenomenal. But I’m always down for trying to surpass it.”

“I think that can be arranged,” I said, still tingling from our encounter.

The heat from his gaze, the way he held me so tight and rough. He was already talking about more. Which was a good thing because now that I’d had a taste, I wanted more too. I’d experienced nothing like it. But more than just the exceptional sex was the desire I felt with Desmond.

“Oh, and Dorthea?”

Desmond called over his shoulder while still gazing into his camera lens, clicking away over the steep ledge.

“Yeah?”

“You’re not sleeping around anymore. From now on, it’s me. Only me.”

My thighs heated all over again. “Why?”

What claim did this guy think he had over me that he could demand such a thing? And why the hell did I have a strong urge to give it to him?

“Because you’re swimming with sharks and I’m the only one who’s allowed to bite you.”

I could have said no, but I didn’t. I found myself nodding. Agreeing. Who could argue with that? The jealousy that tinted in voice was like honey on my tongue. If only my husband cared enough to be jealous like that. To claim me.

My life had been so devoid of passion. And now, being next to him, I felt like he’d breathed new life into my being. A life with intensity and high mountaintops of passion.

He was what I’d been looking for. In life, in Cedric, in other men while hotwifing. This was everything. The strength and assertiveness I’d been missing. The adventure I’d been craving.

The only problem, however, was that I was now breaking every promise I’d ever made to my beloved husband.

Because now his rules were shot to hell. I’d never wanted to break them before now. I’d never had a reason to. But now?

Nothing would ever be the same again.

The next day, I found myself with a bowl of cereal in bed as the rain pelted our home. I opened my window because while I preferred the sunshine, I did like the sound of the rain, and apparently newer homes have thick roofing where you can't really hear storms. A major design flaw, in my opinion. Back home, when a storm rolled through and hit our metal roof, it was so loud you couldn't carry a conversation. I loved it.

It was three in the afternoon and I'd done little more than walk to the kitchen and back all day. After Des dropped me off yesterday, I showered and collapsed into a heap of blankets. Between my fight with Cedric and my sexy hike with Desmond, I needed a dark room, some sugary cereal, and time to process my life.

Des had texted minimally, and I appreciated that about him. I hated a clingy man. He let me know he was checking out apartments today and asked when I may be free for another *photography* mission this week. I wasn't sure if he was serious or if that was now our code word for sex. Either way, I wanted it. Though I felt guilty about that. Why did I feel guilty when this wasn't logistically too different from what I did with Kenneth? Or Travis? Or Brian?

It's not like my husband was ignorant of my extramarital activities. He signed off on it.

But he did ask that I keep my personal information private. Didn't do that. He didn't want me going around with anyone we knew, and Desmond was the Chief of Surgery's SON. I just had sex with my husband's boss's son.

Not only that, but Des knew my name, about my life, he knew about my husband.

Most importantly, my husband wanted me to promise not to get emotionally involved and, despite how much I wanted to lie to myself and say this was only sex, it wasn't. I felt a connection to Desmond unlike any other. His wildness, his mystery and intrigue. The way he saw me and saw the world. The way I felt totally claimed and enraptured when we had sex on the top of that mountain. I was catching feels. Which was ridiculous, but true.

This was becoming complicated. Which was everything Cedric and I set out to avoid when we started this whole arrangement.

My thighs ached from Desmond's motorcycle. And Desmond's body. Ignoring the feeling only made it worse. My panties were already damp from just the thoughts of yesterday. A knock on my door frame jolted me to the present, and I almost spilt my cereal.

"Sorry to startle you," Cedric leaned on the doorway, peering at me. Something about his gaze made me squirm. I did nothing wrong. Okay, I didn't do *too* much wrong.

"It's fine. I'm just having a lazy day in bed. What's up?" I noticed he was wearing low slung grey sweatpants and a blue shirt. Whenever I shopped for him, I always picked out blues. They made his eyes pop and highlighted his stone colored features.

"Where were you yesterday?" His gaze revealed nothing.

My cheeks heated, my tell-tell sign of something being amiss. But he didn't want to know about other men. We had a don't ask don't tell policy... so why was he asking?

"Hiking," I supplied, keeping my voice casual.

"Hiking," he repeated, jaw tensing.

"Cedric-" my voice catching on desperation. I was ready to tell him everything, rules or not, because this was all getting too weird. But he interrupted me.



“I got you something,” he smiled, face softening. Walking towards me, he sat a large box on the bed.

“Oh? What’s the occasion?” I grinned, crawling over to the white box tied with a pink ribbon. *I’m easily distracted by gifts, okay?* Shimmying the lid off, I squealed. “Cedric, this is so beautiful.” Carefully pinching the garment, I held it up to my chest.

“I saw it in a shop window and thought it would look gorgeous on you,” Cedric smiled. “I’m taking you out tonight.”

“Are you serious?”

“I am. You deserve a proper date night and I’m off call for twenty-four hours starting...” he glanced down at the Rolex on his wrist, “thirty minutes ago.”

“Eek! Cedric, I can’t wait!” Gently placing the dress back in its box, I crawled to the edge of the bed and wrapped my arms around his neck. He stiffened for a moment before tapping my back lightly. Ugh. It was a far cry from the passion I’d experienced the day prior, but I loved him, and he was trying. That had to count for something. Though I wasn’t quite sure what brought on his change of attitude. Beggars can’t be choosers.

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CANDLELIGHT TWINKLED ACROSS THE DIMLY LIT RESTAURANT, casting tiny little stars on the expertly polished wine glasses. Bubble champagne tickled my tongue as I relished the bittersweet essence.

Cedric sipped his pinot noir across from me, wearing a dark grey pinstripe suit and royal blue tie. His platinum silver hair was combed back and his shoulders broad and defined in his coat. He looked sharp and swoon-worthy. Cora was right. I was a lucky bitch, indeed.

“Cheers,” Cedric said, lifting his glass, “to new beginnings.”

My heart caught in my bubbly as I clinked his glass. “You look radiant, Dot.”

“Thank you,” I smiled back, his toast catching my attention. “What do you mean by new beginnings?”

Cedric reached across the table, taking my hand. Something warm swelled in my chest at the public display of adoration. “Darling, I’ve been thinking a lot about the other day, and our entire situation. I’ve realized that this isn’t what I want. This isn’t how I want to be.”

“What do you mean?” Confusion muddled my thoughts as I thumbed the bottom of my champagne flute.

“I don’t want to be the man that I’ve been. The husband I’ve been. I’ve grown complacent, and you’re the one who’s suffered in the wake of my issues.” He noticed my furrowed brow and elaborated. “I called Tiffany and made an appointment. I think that’s a solid start. But I want to work on this. I want to get to the place we used to be...” His fingers found my ring and twirled in around on my finger. I always wore it solo. It was too beautiful to wear with a wedding band. It deserved all the spotlight of my ring finger. He raised my knuckles to his lips and brushed them over my hand softly. Red heated my cheeks. It was an innocent movement, but after so long with nothing, it had been the most erotic thing my husband had done in a very long time.

“The way we used to be. Making love, touching, feeling closer to one another. I want that with you, Dot. No more of these...” He paused, searching for a non-offensive word, no doubt. “Entanglements. These other... guys,” he finished.

My mouth swung open in shock.

Taking a heavy sip, I finished my glass. A waiter promptly appeared, refilling it from the ice bucket flanking our table. Nodding my thanks, he disappeared and my attention returned to my husband. Looking sharp, pensive, and debonair.

“You want to go back to having sex with me?” I repeated in disbelief.

“Is that so shocking?” he countered, swirling his wine and taking a sip. “This was never meant to be a permanent solution. It’s been just a bump in the road.”

Who was this man? Days prior, he’s stiff in all the wrong places. Tonight he’s saying he wants me all to himself and he’s booked a therapy appointment to get his head on straight.

“I don’t know if it’ll be that easy, Ced. It’s been a long time and even today you cringed when I hugged you-”

“Are you saying you don’t want to?”

“No, I’m not saying that. I’m just pointing out that I think it’s going to take a lot more work than just one nice dinner and some hand holding.”

Cedric leaned back in his seat, tensing his jaw. Servers filtered by, clearing plates and refilling water glasses. The sounds of their clinking and niceties acting as a buffer between the conversation grenade on the table.

“Is there someone you don’t want to give up? Someone else?” he asked darkly, staring down at the table, expression stern and unmoving.

*Yes.*

“No. I just think-”

“Then it’s settled. We stop this foolishness and get back to basics.” Cedric picked up the black folder and pulled out his wallet to pay the tab.

Why did I feel like I just got steamrolled by everything I’d been pining for so long? Anger burned between my shoulders. If he’d said this only three weeks ago, I’d have been crying with happiness. But he chooses now. Right now. After I’ve met this fiery and passionate man. *Now* my husband decides he wants a sexual, monogamous relationship.

“You’re unbelievable,” I muttered, standing and tossing my napkin on the table. “I’m going to the ladies room.” Clutching my handbag, my heels clicked towards the black marble, too-freaking-dark restroom. My dress was too tight, it was pinching my ribs. Everything felt tight and small in that

moment. After using the restroom, I washed my hands in ice cold water and splashed a bit on my face, not worrying about my makeup.

Cedric was probably at the car, seething at the fact that I was making him wait. What was it about doctors that they could make a person wait for so long, yet the moment they have to be patient they lose their shit?

That was, ironically, a vital piece of my situation right now, wasn't it?

Slinking out of the ladies' room, I took a detour past the main restaurant and took an employee entrance out into a side alley. Pulling out my phone, I scrolled through my texts. One from Des.

*Desmond: I need to see you again.*

My breath caught in my chest.

*Me: Why?*

His response was almost instant.

*Desmond: Because I can't shake this feeling you're rethinking this whole thing. And for some insane fucking reason, I just can't let you go.*

*God Dammit.*

"Dot? What are you doing out here? It's not safe." My husband's voice startled me and I quickly shoved my phone back into my clutch. He didn't miss the movement. With a cold expression, he remarked, "Jumpy lately."

"Can we just go?" I asked. "I'm not in the mood to fight, Ced."

Why was he making me feel like I was having an affair? The feeling sat heavy in my gut and brought about a dirty feeling. Like when I was a teenager sitting in church after being felt-up at a movie theater the night before.

"I'm not either, Dot. I love you, you know that?" His hand found my waist and pulled me close. It wasn't forceful like Des, but rather tender and romantic. "Let's fix this. Please?"

He knelt a bit, showing me his blue eyes that were displaying his best puppy-dog adorable-ness.

I rolled my eyes, not resisting my grin. “I love you too. Let’s get you home, I think you’ve been hitting the pinot noir a little too hard tonight.”

He chuckled, pulling my hand back to his lips. “I’m sober and serious as ever, Dot.”

Suddenly, he pulled my hand away, inspecting it closely. “Dotty, where’s your ring?”

Confusion furrowed my brow as I looked at my empty fingers. “I just had it on at dinner. I haven’t been anywhere else-” I paused. “Shit, it must have come off when I was washing my hands.”

Cedric took my hand and we went back into the now empty restaurant. The staff said we could look for as long as we needed to. That ring was the only material possession I held dear. Tears pricked my eyes as I watched my husband dig through every paper towel in the trash bin and come up short.

“You were fidgeting with it on my hand at dinner. I got up, came in here, used the restroom and washed my hands. I’ve retraced every step. It has to be in here, Ced,” I whined, a tear falling free. He stood and pulled me in for a hug. *A non-cringing hug*. My body went slack, melting into his embrace. We hadn’t hugged in so long.

“We’ll find it, Dot. Stay here,” he disappeared and reappeared with a small toolkit. “The chef gave me these. I think they’re locking up and trusting us not to rob the place,” he smiled, rolling up his sleeves. His jacket draped over a bathroom stall.

“What are you going to do-”

“This sink, was it?” He asked, and I nodded. Lowering to his knees, he laid on his back with a wrench.

“Aw Ced,” I remarked, walking over to him and falling to the floor next to him. It was a fancy bathroom but it was still a public restroom. Our fine clothes were touching tile and sink

water. But Cedric worked diligently, unscrewing each and every tiny nut and bolt.

“Remember when you fixed up my car?” I asked, fingering the edge of my lacy black cocktail dress.

He huffed a laugh. “How could I forget? I didn’t know shit about cars. Still don’t.”

A gasp parted my lips. “Liar,” I accused.

“No, dear. A man just does what he must to get closer to the woman of his dreams. I knew I had to see you again.” Something clinked under the sink and he stopped, then continued. “I knew your father wouldn’t want me coming around just to see you. So I thought offering some free mechanics would get me an in to come over every day.”

“So how’d you end up actually fixing it then?” Shock raced through my thoughts. All this time I thought he fixed that old piece of junk out of the goodness of his heart.

“Internet research here and there. I didn’t have to make it run. Just make it look like it could.” He leaned over, shooting me a devious smirk.

I playfully hit his arm. “You dirty rotten cheat,” I giggled.

Cedric sat up then, inching closer to me. “Paid off in the end. I got you to be my bride.”

Staring into his eyes, my heart fell for him all over again. It was then his hand found mine and he slipped a wet piece of jewelry halfway on. “Dorthea Ruth Queen-Winslow, will you stay married to me, please?”

Heavy winged butterflies shot through my guilty, murky soul. We were on bathroom tile and yet I’d never felt more romanced. My head nodded, a tear trickling down. “Always, Cedric. You know it’s always you for me.”

His returning smile beamed before he leaned in. Touching my lips to his, he gripped me closer, pulling my chest flush to his. I tugged away, bewildered. Taking my wrist he guided it between us. “Ced... are you... hard?”

He glanced at the door and met my gaze with a devil-may-care expression. "I think we've got some time."

"Who are you and what have you done with my husband?" Sitting up, he unzipped his pants and pulled out his length. My core warmed at the sight of it. I immediately dropped between his legs. We'd had so many mis-fires over the years that I didn't want to lose him. I couldn't miss this opportunity. Holding his cock in one hand, I let my lips suck in his tip. A hiss of breath was all I heard before his hands found fistfuls of my hair. I moaned, taking him deeper into my mouth, but he yanked on me gently to pull me off. "What is it?" I asked, trying to keep my stupid heart from sinking.

"I won't last long, and I want to feel you," he confessed, breathless. *That* I could accommodate. Climbing onto him, I straddled him, bracing myself on his shoulders. His hands found my thighs and ran all the way up to my hips and around to my ass. He gave it a hard squeeze. "I've missed this," he murmured.

I was already throbbing with need as I reached down and pulled aside my thong to allow him access. Lowering slowly, I took in his breadth. Truthfully, I was still sore from Desmond. The fact that my pussy was sore from another man while I slipped my husband inside of me was naughty and sexy. It sent my skin tingling in all the right places. A sharp exhale answered his groan. His hands greedily pulled me lower until I gasped at the full feeling of him. Grabbing onto the sink for leverage, I began riding him harder.

"Ah fuck, Dot. You're so wet," he groaned. Sliding his hand between us, his thumb found my clit, while somehow, his index finger entered me. The stretch and pull of both his cock and his long, expertly skilled fingers sent me into a fast and hard orgasm. I continued riding out my waves of pleasure, sinking him into me deeper until he jerked my dress down, exposing my breasts and allowing them to hang free. I yelped as he bit at my nipple and then lapped it with his tongue.

"God, Cedric, I'm going to come again." He sucked my nipples, not forgetting for a moment he was also finger banging me as I fucked him. The skill, the precision.

*Marry a surgeon. The hours suck but the hands...*

Crying out again, I buried my face in his neck, panting through my climax. He then picked me up, not wavering in his strength, and sat me on the counter. Wrapping my legs around him, he quickened his speed, each thrust harder than the last. Gripping the back of his hair for balance, I peppered kisses along the side of his sandpaper jaw.

His release tore through him and he groaned loudly, letting it echo off the tiles, meeting my lingering sound of waves of bliss and whirling together. I went slack in his arms, feeling sufficiently sexed. “You like bathrooms,” he whispered, grinning in my ear.

Oh, my god. When did this happen?

“Who the hell are you?” I laughed as he helped me down and fixed my dress. “It’s ruined now,” I sighed, taking in the wet and torn material.

My husband’s reply shook me into the deep reserves of my black, undeserving soul.

“Nothing’s ever ruined beyond repair.”



Speeding home in Cedric's black Porsche had me feeling twenty-years-old again. His James Bond good looks and confidence. The way we laughed. We flew out of that restaurant like we'd done something illegal. I think sex in public technically is illegal? Still, it felt like I had my husband back. Like we could put the past year behind us.

There was only one issue.

The other man. The one who'd come into my heart like a bulldozer over my carefully constructed walls. Ignoring the buzz in my clutch, I followed Cedric inside. We showered separately, and everything felt a bit... awkward between us. Like the outdoors had been a different world with different versions of us. As soon as we walked through our familiar front door, unease set in.

Bundled in my robe, I tiptoed down the hall and peeked into Cedric's room. His lamp cast a dim, orange glow around him as he sat up in bed in plaid pajama pants and a white t-shirt. Wet, clean hair slicked back and glasses on the edge of his nose. Looking up from his book, he smiled and reached out a hand. "Come in, my dear."

Taking hold of his invitation, I jumped onto his bed and curled up under the covers. His laugh vibrated through the blankets. "You're so cute," he said fondly, sitting his book on his nightstand.

I pulled the blanket over my head and took a deep breath. "Cedric, I should probably tell you something. There's-"

“Dotty,” he interrupted. “You know when the incident happened? Do you remember that day?”

I pulled the covers down, exposing my face. He never talked about this. My interest was piqued and my own confessions put on hold. “Yes, you were a wreck.”

He snorted. “I smoked two packs of cigarettes that day. Drove down to the lake and sat for a long time, just wondering what we were going to do. Here I was, I’d just promised you the world. Married you, and suddenly I thought I’d lose it all.”

“Cedric,” I soothed, putting a hand on his forearm. “I wouldn’t have left you even if everything did fall apart.”

“That’s the worst part, though. Because you know what? Someone died. She died because of me, because of my error. And I went to the lake to smoke and contemplate how *my* life could be over.” He shook his head. “The selfishness of that has rocked me to my core ever since that day.”

Sitting up straight, I grabbed my husband’s face between my palms. “Ced, forgive my Bible-speak, but you are the most righteous man I’ve ever known. There isn’t a selfish bone in your body.”

His answering smile was forlorn and told me he didn’t believe me. “Her name was Wren Simpson. She was twenty-one, brought in with a mild concussion after a swimming accident and a fractured femur. Easy surgery. I got cocky. Let my guard down.”

I willed the tears to stay behind my eyes. This wasn’t about me and my pain. This was about my husband and his immense hurt he held away from me for so long. The gift he was giving me now was greater than the gift of sexual intimacy earlier. This was deeper.

“Wren Simpson loved people. She was a psychology major. Her dog’s name was Axel and her boyfriend’s name was Peter. Her macaroni salad recipe went famous on the internet and on the weekends she liked to swim.” He sucked in a shaky breath. “I didn’t even catch the brain bleed while she

was on the table, Dot. Negligence. Fucking negligence. Her family was right to sue me.”

“Accidents happen, Cedric,” I tried to comfort him, but I knew my comfort sounded weak. There was no reprieve from such complex feelings of regret.

“I should have lost my medical license. No, when I didn’t lose it, I should have given up medicine. But did I? No, instead I uprooted my new wife from her home, her family, and flew her across the country. I abandoned you, Dot. Fuck.”

He was crying now and so was I.

I peeled back his arms and slid in between them. “I love you, Cedric,” was all I could say. As my eyes grew heavy in his arms, I heard his whispers of love. The room fell silent, and a weight felt like it lifted.

So why did my mind still wander to what may wait in my handbag? Why did it feel like a vital piece was still missing?

---

LAUGHTER AND THE SMELL OF COFFEE PULLED ME FROM MY sleep. Waking in Cedric’s bed felt foreign, but right. With a stretch, I padded into the kitchen and stopped. Ced was talking to a woman with her back turned to me. He met my gaze and widened his eyes in an “I don’t know” kind of look.

Spinning around, she smiled, and my hands flew to my mouth.

“Try ignoring me now.” Crossing her arms, she painted on a bad portrayal of anger.

“Oh my god, Odette, get over here!”

With a giggle, my sister pattered over and flung herself into my embrace. My heart swelled with emotions. “What are you doing here? Did you come with Mom and Dad?”

“I’ve got some meetings today. I’ll let you two catch up,” Cedric said, walking over and planting a kiss on my temple. “I’ll text you.” I nodded, smiling at him sweetly.

“Nice seeing you, Odette. Please stay as long as you need.”

She nodded. “Will do, Doc.”

Rolling my eyes, I crossed my arms as Cedric disappeared, as all good husbands should when their wife’s best friend / sister randomly shows up on your doorstep. “What the actual hell is going on, Odie?” I asked, grabbing the latte Ced left on the counter for me. I sank into my spot at the breakfast table across from my sister, who by the looks of the empty plate, had already helped herself to some breakfast.

“Hey, he made you pancakes?” I asked, eyeing the maple syrup.

“I guess Cedric just likes me better. Hey, is he looking for a sister-wife?”

I narrowed my eyes and took a sip of vanilla and cocoa. “We’re Baptist not Mormon. Mom and Dad don’t know you’re here, do they?”

“I’m twenty-three, Dolly. I’m a grown ass woman. But no, they don’t.”

I tapped my foot. “Well? You have my full, undivided attention.”

“I got married,” my sister blurted out.

My coffee almost sprayed from my mouth like some cartoon character. “You did what? Odie, you could have done so much better than Steven Greene and you know it.”

“I know, that’s why I didn’t marry him.” She sat back, clutching her mug and taking a confident sip. “Ced put your pancakes in the oven to keep warm, by the way.”

“Okay, the talking in riddles is getting old. I’m not a goat trying to cross a bridge. Talk.”

“My wife’s name is Caroline, and she’s back at the hotel dying to meet you.”

---

AFTER FLOATING TO THE OVEN, RETRIEVING MY BREAKFAST, and placing it in front of me with a flourish, my sister went back to her coffee like she'd just told me about the premier of her favorite television show.

“Okay, very funny. Now tell me the real reason-”

Odette grabbed her phone off the table and clicked a button, illuminating her screen saver, and shoved it in my face. Skeptical, I snatched it from her hand and inspected the photo.

A beautiful woman, around the same age as Odie, hugged her neck and was kissing her cheek. Her black hair long and wavy. My sister was smiling- no- beaming. Sitting the phone down, my eyes landed on Odette's extended hand. An onyx stone glimmered atop a rose gold band. “I have black onyx for her. She has ruby red for me. We picked them out last week.”

“Odie.” I breathed, trying to process what my sister was telling me. “You're married?”

“Yep. Been trying to tell you for weeks now-”

“I didn't even know you were seeing anyone? For god's sake I didn't even know you were interested in women!”

She giggled between sips of her latte. “Neither did I, honestly.”

How was she so calm? I'd never seen my sister so at ease. Anxiety plagued her so constantly, it had embedded itself into her personality. Witnessing her leaning back, casually noticing the rain out my kitchen window, smiling wistfully, was sweet but unnerving.

“Odie, I mean- wow.” Jumping from my chair, I hugged her tight. “If you're happy I'm happy. I'm just so sad I wasn't there to be a part of it.”

Returning my tight embrace she nuzzled my messy hair. “It's okay, Dolly. It happened so fast. I'm really very happy. I can't wait for you to meet her.”

“What did Mom and Dad say?”

She gave an awkward laugh, sitting her mug down. “Well, uh, that's the thing...”

“I mean, you may have usurped me as the heathen daughter. You really didn’t have to try so hard by marrying a woman. I mean, a tattoo would have sufficed.”

“They caught us... *together*... on the roof. Dad had an absolute fit and kicked me out. Mom ran crying and locked herself in her room. She didn’t even come out to say goodbye.”

“Jesus, Odie... Wait, the roof?”

She shrugged. “You’re not the only one with secret sexcapades. Wasn’t yours and Cedric’s spot the shed?”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine, whatever. So you’re what, living with her now?”

“Ah... technically we’re living at *Seattle Suites Hotel* at the moment...”

“Odette!” I screeched. “I don’t check in constantly for a month and you off and get married, have roof sex, and move to a hotel across the country?”

“Not too different from what you did,” she muttered and a shot of guilt panged my ribcage.

Cedric’s words from the night before played through my mind. “*I abandoned you.*”

“I’m sorry, Odette. I shouldn’t have bailed on you like that.”

My sister’s hand reached across the table and found mine. “I wanted you to, and I understood. I just miss you.” She took a deep inhale. “But we’re close now. No more Georgia. So, any good fried chicken in Washington State? The gas station clerk looked at me like I had four heads when I asked if they had sweet tea.”

My mind was clattering with way too much to process. “Odie, are you sure about all this? Leaving home isn’t as easy as it looks. I’ve- well, Cedric and I both, have had a pretty hard time adjusting. It’s a lot on a new relationship.” I trailed off, forking at my pancakes. “We didn’t get everything right, that’s for sure.”

“Is that why you opened your marriage up?” she asked, her pale green eyes searching mine. Something about her looked older, and it was strange. In my heart, she’d always be sixteen.

“Yeah, I guess so. And the court stuff Cedric went through... I think it was all too much for him and he just couldn’t show up for me in that way. Maybe I should have stuck it out with him, I don’t know. But now it just feels too late.”

“Too late for what? You can always stop and re-commit to him, right?”

“That’s what he wants. And it’s what I’ve wanted, too.”

My sister raised an eyebrow. “Wanted? As in past tense?”

I groaned. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“It’s the motorcycle guy, isn’t it?”

“So, what’s sex with a woman like? I’ve always wanted to try it-”

Our laughter echoed through the house.

“Oh my *God*, Dolly! You’re so inappropriate!”

“I need to meet her and you need to tell me *everything!*”

Roars of laughter and animated story-telling filled my entire home. Melted cheese and spicy pepperoni replaced the scent of lemon cleaner.

And the grandfather clock sat silently listening, without a single rude interruption.

---

A FEW DAYS PASSED. DAYS WHERE MY SISTER AND CAROLINE moved in. Days where my texts from Desmond sat unopened and unanswered in my inbox. Days where Caroline and Odette helped me destroy my burner phone, forever saying goodbye to Ruby.

Ruby may be dead, but about Dortha? What about the new girl, *Queen*? My heart fluttered, remembering Desmond's pet name. I missed him. Even though my husband had been more attentive in between shifts at the hospital, I still missed Desmond.

"How are the plans coming along for the dinner party?" he asked me over a new manila folder one morning.

"Great, we're all set for Friday," my sister chimed in, taking a bite of scone.

"Thank you so much for letting us stay until we get on our feet, Dr. Winslow," Caroline said. She was so polite and demure. A far cry from my sister, who still wiped her sticky, honey hands on her jeans.

"Please, call me Cedric," my husband smiled, giving my hand a squeeze. "We're family now. Stay as long as you like as long as you keep making that pasta bolognese."

Caroline giggled. "My mama would be proud I've finally found a man to cook all of her Italian dishes for. Just... not in the way she thought."

My sister laughed and held her wife's hand. They were so goddamn cute together. And I was enjoying having my sister with me. We'd all three stayed up every night in the living room or in their room chatting, watching bad TV, eating junk food. It was the slumber party my soul needed.

Cedric left for work with a quick kiss on my head. He didn't seem to mind the extra company at all. In fact, he seemed relieved, somehow. I knew he liked it, because he had enough funds to buy them an apartment if he wanted to, but I was beginning to feel like he enjoyed the extra fullness their presence brought to our dull and silent home as much as I did.

"So the catering is all set, and Caroline beasted the wine list. We've got music, appetizers-

"And flowers," Caroline added. "You're going to love the centerpieces. I also hand mailed the invitations with all of the details. Your husband will be promoted on the spot," Caroline stated confidently.



“Thank you guys. I hope so.” My mind wandered to that possibility. What if he got everything he wanted? What would a nine-to-five, normal, monogamous life look like with Cedric? My heart dropped a bit. Isn’t that what I wanted? And if so, why did it conjure up a storm in my soul each time I considered it?

My phone buzzed with a calendar reminder. “Shit, I’m late for the meeting of the doctor’s wives. You two good?”

“Yep, and I’ve already got your counterfeit muffins in your tupperware on the counter,” my sister smiled.

I grinned. “You’re the best.”

---

SLICK HANDS SLID OVER MY STEERING WHEEL. NERVES. Would Desmond be there? Of course he would, it was his house, at least temporarily. But Eva had forbidden him from bothering us. It would all be okay. I’m sure he’d forgotten all about me by now, anyway. He probably had fifty flings on standby.

Shifting my car to park, I clutched my muffins and climbed out. My eyes flicked to the stairwell where I caught Cora’s gaze. She shot me a friendly wave. I bet she’d gotten the invite to dinner already. Apparently, her husband Simon was on the board of surgeons for the hospital and was a good guy to impress, along with Eva’s husband, the Chief of Surgery. No pressure. At least Cora and my sister would be there. I imagined they’d all get along great. Maybe I was overthinking it.

The coast was clear. All seemed normal. With a sigh of relief, I strode forward until a loud rumble trembled through the air.

*Oh no.*

My legs picked up their pace, but it was too late. A black motorcycle swerved right in front of me, blocking the walkway to the front door.

Desmond lifted the flap on his helmet, revealing his narrow glare. He looked mad. Sexy, dangerous, fucking hot mad.

“Get on,” he growled.

“Des, are you insane? Someone could see you. Us!” I screeched, my eyes darting up to find Cora still standing at the top of the stairs. Her eyes went wide, no doubt realizing who the man on the bike was. None other than Eva’s stepson. If she saw us out here like this it could be over for Cedric’s promotion. Eva’s vindictive nature would never let me forget it and she would be mortified.

“Then get on,” he commanded, not budging.

I stomped my foot in frustration, coming up with no other alternative. The longer I stood here, the higher the chance that Eva would stick her neck out the door or look through a window at the noise.

“God, you’re so immature!” I stomped again.

“Gotta work on those insults, sweetheart. Still been called worse.” He extended my helmet, and I yanked it away, tugging it on.

With a huff, I tossed my container of muffins into the grass and hopped on the motorcycle. The close contact, feeling him between my thighs and pressed against my breasts, sent a jolt of warmth through my whole body. I ached for this man and I’d tried to ignore it, ignore him, for over a week now.

Kicking up a cloud of dirt behind us, Desmond shot off into the street. Over my shoulder, the mansion disappeared, and I sighed a small breath of relief.

---

WIND TANGLED MY HAIR AS WE RODE, THE ROAR OF THE motorcycle engine frightening away my anxieties. It was the first time I'd exhaled a true breath of calm in weeks. That was wrong, because Cedric and I were turning over a new leaf, starting fresh, I should be kicking and screaming at my abduction from my meeting. But I wasn't. A small part of me was excited, hopeful, and impossibly turned on.

I never knew what Des was going to do next. The unpredictability was thrilling.

My explorations of the Seattle area hadn't taken me far outside the city. The thick, looming redwoods and lush green mosses carried a scent and feeling like none other. Like I had been transported to another planet. I know I teased Desmond about riding a motorcycle in one of the rainiest places in the world, but suddenly I understood it. The freedom from thought, emotion, and the connection to the land while riding a bike were unparalleled.

We curved through a narrow clearing and over a bumpy wooden bridge before stopping on a white, sandy beach in the middle of nowhere. Dismounting, I pulled off my helmet and surveyed our surroundings. The beach was small and enclosed, with overshadowing black rocks on either side. It looked dark and spooky in its gloom and vacancy.

We were alone except for an old man with a long white beard who waved when he saw us.

"Okay, I guess this is *really* where you kill me," I muttered.

Des put a firm hand on my lower back and waved back. "Do you trust me, Queen?"

The question shook me in an unexpected way, though I knew what the resounding answer darting through my mind was. “Yes.”

He smiled, dark and sexy. His black hair hung down and free and his stubbled face was a shade darker than the last time I saw him. My hand acted of its own free will and reached up to rub his jaw. “Are you growing this out?” I asked softly.

His palm covered my knuckles, and he leaned into my touch in the most tender gesture I’d ever received from him. My heart expanded at the sight of it.

“If you like it, I am,” he replied fondly before ushering me forward. “Come on, I’ve got a surprise for you before it starts raining again.”

Anticipation bubbled in my body as we walked down to where the elderly gentleman stood. “Mac, it’s good to see you, sir.” Desmond gave the man a hug, towering over him yet being gentle in his squeeze.

“Des, old boy. It’s always a pleasure. You must be Dorthea,” the man said turning his attention to me. “I’m Mac Keller. And I’ve got everything ready for you two.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I replied unsure.

“What’s ready?” I whispered at Des but he ignored me. He thanked his old friend and Mac slowly pattered down the beach.

Desmond nodded over my shoulder. “That.”

Spinning around, my stomach leapt into my throat. “I don’t know how to do that...” Yet as always with Des, excitement burned within me, and I didn’t refuse. “Is it hard?”

“Nah, it’s as easy as painting your nails,” he responded, walking past me.

I trailed behind, happy I’d dressed casually for Eva’s today, in tailored black jeans that outlined my curves and a silk button-up blouse and flats. “Sounds like you know from experience,” I teased, smiling at Desmond’s answering chuckle.

We stopped at our destination, and a strange silence lingered between us. It was so easy being with him. It was like we'd known each other our whole lives. I felt whole with Desmond. He deserved more than me just ignoring him because I didn't know what to say. "Des, I'm sorry."

"We need to get moving," he cut me off, taking my hand and helping me in. "You sit up front, I'll take the back," he instructed. I sat, my knees up near my chest. I gripped my paddle. Before I could protest, Desmond launched me with all of his strength forward into the shallow water. The back dipped slightly at Desmond's weight as he jumped on into the back seat.

An overly girly yelp escaped my throat, followed by giggling. Fear that I'd flip over soon subsided as the kayak felt sturdier than it looked. I paddled forward, feeling Des's strong presence behind me, his legs on either side of my waist. We were going deeper, leaving the shallows of the shoreline behind.

I could be in any deep, dark waters and feel safe with him. And that was scaring me more than the shadowy ocean.

"Just up here," he instructed, and I paddled in time with his, though I got the feeling he was doing most of the work. Suddenly, he put a hand on my shoulder and sat his paddle flat so I followed suit.

We bobbed in the water for several moments, silent, with only the harmony of waves and calls of the occasional seagull above us. The salty air cleansed my lungs as I sucked in deeply.

Desmond's voice broke the silence. "I'm scared too."

"I hope not. This whole thing was your idea," I shot back, glancing around at the vast water surrounding us. We weren't too far from abundant trees, though, and that fact steadied my nerves a fraction.

"Not kayaking," he gestured from me to him. "This."

*Oh.*

I nodded, not knowing what to say.

“I was married.” His deep voice pulled my gaze to his. “She left after this happened,” he put a hand on his prosthetic knee. This one was different, and I assumed by the design it was made for water.

“Des, that’s awful. I’m so sorry-”

“Don’t be, that’s not why I’m telling you. To be candid, she was right to leave. I was angry, bitter, drinking too much. She deserved better.” He inhaled a subtle breath, staring out at the ocean. “It was a rock climbing accident in Colorado. I was between stations with my troop, climbed too high on too many beers, and fell, bringing down some heavy boulders with me.” He shook his head. “I lost my leg, but I should have lost my life. I would have been brain dead or paralyzed, if I didn’t have such an excellent surgeon. My life was saved, but I was bitter for a long time, Queen. The Marines had no use for me anymore. My dad was too busy marrying his third or fourth wife, and I felt lost. Useless.”

Careful to not rock the raft, I turned sideways and hugged my knees, leaning back lightly on his thigh. My eyes never left the side of his face. I took in every emotion, every word like it was a secret, because I felt that hearing this part of Desmond was like a secret. A hidden part of himself he rarely showed. “That was almost eight years ago. Photography helped bring me back to life. I’ve traveled the world for the past five years and I’ll probably be a nomad until I die. I haven’t let what happened to me stop me from doing it all. But you know what?”

“What?” I whispered, reaching out and holding his thick forearm, loving the way he didn’t flinch at my touch.

“I haven’t felt truly alive, not truly, until I met you.”

A sharp intake of breath traveled down my throat.

“I watched you for weeks, Dorteia. When I saw you at the aquarium, your red hair glowing in the blue light of the tank, you looked like an angel. My angel. My crazy ass little angel talking to a fucking fish.”

I laughed. “That sounds about right.”

“Then the very next week, somehow you were sitting in Eva’s tea room, looking bored as fuck. I told myself that you were married and to back off, but you didn’t look happy. None of those women are. I know my mom was miserable being married to my dad. My dad’s married to his work and nothing else. Doctors are like that, as I’m sure you know.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Then, as luck would have it, you stumbled into my gym that day and I acted like a damn fool. But I couldn’t stop myself, Queen. I had to have you.”

“What are you saying, Des?” My voice just above a shaky whisper.

“Pick me,” he shrugged. “Let’s get the fuck out of here. Travel the world, get married in India, honeymoon in Paris, have babies in Germany.”

*Oh, my god.*

His words should have sent me diving into the water and swimming away, but they only pulled me closer as his hands found mine. “This shit is intense, but I’ve never been more sure, Dortha.”

“Des...” Was he for real? Why did my heart sing at his propositions? God, it all sounded so good coming from his lips.

A soft breeze played with my hair as my eyes met his earnest green stare. He deserved an answer that I couldn’t give. “I feel alive with you, too. You light a fire inside of me I can’t explain. I know we haven’t known each other for that long, Des, but, God,” I laughed, “I can’t imagine my life without you in it.”

Leaning forward, he planted a heated kiss on my lips. My body reacted, leaning in and passionately taking him in before breaking away. “But... I love my husband.”

Desmond looked out into the ocean. “Quiet.” He put two fingers to my lips and nodded over my shoulder, smiling.

Confusion furrowed my brow as I turned around settling back into the grove of my seat. Suddenly, a deafening hiss sounded, and I startled. “Oh my god,” I breathed, my heart rate

quickenings. “It can’t be. Desmond?” I asked eagerly, but I already knew.

Glancing over my shoulder, I caught his smile. “Look, baby. They came just to see you.”

A spray shot up from the ocean, sprinkling droplets down around us. The best kind of rain. About five yards in front of our kayak, a pitch black dorsal fin cut through the surface, followed by the splash of a tail.

My hand covered my mouth in shock, and four more fins shot up behind it, dipping back into the ocean and splashing their fins. Desmond chuckled, as I propped up on my knees and leaned over the side, peering into the water. “It’s an entire pod! Desmond! A whole family of orcas,” I beamed, giddiness ignited through my veins. A bright white eye patch the size of my head was visible through the ripples. Suddenly, the whale broke the surface right next to our raft, spraying us with his spiracle. I laughed and reached out my hand, touching his slick body.

“They stop through in the late fall and early spring. Mac lives up the hill over here. He owns this land and monitors these guys, letting me know when they’re close so I can photograph them.”

“Wow,” I sighed, my face wet, but not only from ocean water.

Desmond wrapped a powerful arm around me, pulled me back, flush to his muscular chest. Pointing, he smiled in my ear. “Looks like they added to their pod this year.”

“A baby!?” I laughed, noticing the small tail in the middle of two larger whales. They continued for what seemed like a lifetime and no time at all. Circling our kayak, peaking out their kind and mystical eyes to inspect us.

“You’re crying,” Desmond said, lips touching my earlobe. “Are you okay?”

Sniffling, I wiped my face. “This is the best gift anyone has ever given me. You have no idea how much this means... getting to see a pod up close like this.”



“I’ve wanted to bring you here from the moment I saw you at the aquarium.”

My lips found his, and he drew me close without hesitation. A hand wrapped in my hair while his scruffy face nibbled at my neck. “Lay back,” he ordered, and a thrill reverberated through me.

In a swift and sure movement, Des unbuttoned my jeans and pulled them down along with my panties.

“Des,” I whimpered, not believing this was actually happening. “Here?”

Rising to his knees, two palms gently nudged my legs to open. The ocean breeze caressed my bare center, sending a shiver down my spine in anticipation. “Let me worship my Queen,” he smirked, lowering his face to my core.

A moan drifted from my throat at first contact of his tongue to my slit. Holding onto the sides of the raft, it swayed lightly from side to side. Intermittent hisses told me the orcas were still paying nearby.

Desmond groaned his pleasure, sending shocks through my sensitive skin. His mouth worked in slow, torturous movements. I ran my hands through his hair, bucking my hips up, willing him to give me more intensity. Responding like he’d been my lover for decades, he picked up the pace and buried his lips deeper. His tongue circled my bundle of nerves as I moaned.

“Please,” I begged. He withdrew for an agonizing moment. I felt his wet, scratchy face suck my inner thigh before plunging back into my aching middle. When his teeth lightly found my clit, I exploded.

My cries echoed across the waves and into the deepest part of the ocean. An offering of love to the sea. As my waves of pleasure slowed, I tugged at him to come up and he obeyed his queen, crawling up to give me a passionate kiss. My climax tasted like saltwater and honey on his lips. I wanted to drink him in forever.

Sprinkles of water touched my buzzing skin as something powerful resounded in the distance. Opening my eyes, the world was a shade darker than before.

“The rain came early,” Desmond said, voice gruff with sex. He helped me pull my pants up before dipping his paddle in the waves, alternating sides until we were quickly gliding towards the shore. Picking up my own paddle, I helped, but we were already flying towards land. We slammed into the sand just as the sky illuminated with a crack of lightning.

“Mac’s cabin is right up here,” Desmond grabbed my hand as we jogged up a dune onto a grassy flat. The cabin was small and quaint, like something from a postcard or a painting. Desmond pounded on the door, before turning the knob and letting us in out of the storm. No one was home. In fact, it didn’t look very lived in at all.

Des disappeared before returning with several towels. “Mac only stays here when he’s fishing. He must have taken off for the day. We’ll have to stay here until the storm passes.”

“How long will that be?” I asked, glancing out the window at the now angry ocean. I’d never experienced the sky going so dark so quickly. Then again, I hadn’t experienced many storms on the beach.

“No service,” Des mumbled, looking at his phone. “An hour. Or a day. Who knows?”

“A day!?! Des, I can’t be gone for a day.”

“Why not?” he asked, sauntering into the kitchen and filling a kettle with water.

Rolling my eyes, my chest burned. “You know why.”

He grunted, pulling out two mugs. “Dr. Winslow, who loves you so much he lets other men have you? That’s who you’re rushing home to?”

“Des,” I threatened, warning lacing my tone. “Stop.”

“You know he’s not rushing home to you, too, right? He’s at work right now, Dorthea. He doesn’t give a shit. Yet you’re

trying so damn hard to make this work with him when you two don't fucking work."

"You don't know anything about my husband or our marriage, so I suggest you shut up. You're starting to piss me off," I shot back, sinking into a wooden chair by the window.

"I don't know anything about Cedric," he scoffed sarcastically to himself. "I know he's lying to you."

I felt like I'd been smacked. "How can you say that? My husband wouldn't lie to me." Though a tiny gnawing voice in my head wondered if he was right. Long nights away, gorgeous nurses on every floor... what if Cedric *was* lying to me. What if his lack of interest was due to another woman? My heart sank at the thought that I'd shoved far, far away the past year. It was hypocritical, being that I was sleeping with other men, but it was true all the same.

Peppermint scented steam radiated from the mug placed in front of me with a clang. Desmond strode across the room to look out the window, muttering as he went. "You'll always be second place, Dorteia. And you deserve more than that."

"You're just jealous," I replied, but the venom in my voice had dissipated.

Des took a sip of his tea. "I am, that's true. But what I'm saying is true too, and you know it."

Whatever response there could have been eluded me. The heavy rain pelted the beach as the storm raged.

An overwhelming mirror held to my mind and my heart.

---

MY TEA HAD LONG COOLED, ALONG WITH MY ANGER, BY THE time I dared a glance over at Des, sitting on the small loveseat. His eyes must have sensed mine because he immediately caught my gaze. Thunder roared in the distance, shaking the tiny cabin and making me jump. Cold air snaked through the tiny cracks in the window by the table, chilling my skin.

Des patted his lap in wordless invitation and I pushed back a smile. My feet moved of their own accord until I was standing before him. “I don’t want to crush you.”

He snorted. “If you could crush me then that would be the best pain of my life, Queen. Sit your pretty ass down.”

I rolled my eyes playfully but obeyed, positioning myself in his lap and into his broad frame. His arms melted around me like cocoon as I nuzzled the crook of his neck. He smelled like saltwater and redwood trees. His warmth and smell soon leaving me feeling intoxicated as the heavy rain pelted the thin roof.

“I’m sorry for what I said about Cedric,” his throat vibrated, and I sat up, meeting his forrest greens. “I’m jealous of the time he’s had with you. I’m jealous he met you first. I want years with you too, Queen.”

Swallowing my emotion hoping it would drown out the burning feeling in my chest, I pressed my forehead to his. “I feel for you so deeply. This is all so confusing.”

“We both know what will happen, who you’ll choose. You know too. But I want you to think about something. If there was only room for him, how’d I get in? Why’d you agree to sleep with other men if he was enough?”

My heart squeezed but instead of arguing, I met his lips with mine. He didn’t pull back like I expected, or maybe like how I was accustomed to. Instead, his rough hands cupped my jaw, pulling me in tenderly and kissing me slow and soft. There was insurmountable emotion behind his embrace. It threatened to drown me, swallow me whole and pull me into its undertow. The scary thing was that part of me wanted it. Part of me was fantasizing about running away with him, starting a new life, or multiple new lives, all over the world. The laughter we’d share, the fights, the adventures... I wanted it all. And I wanted them with Desmond. Des was right. What did that say about me and my marriage?

---

IT WAS PITCH BLACK OUTSIDE WHEN THE RAIN FINALLY subsided. My phone had died and with zero bars of service, the only thing Desmond's phone could do was tell us the time. Past four in the morning. I'd fallen asleep tucked up in his hold and awoken with a start. After relishing his warmth my mind flew into a panic. If Cedric had come home and I wasn't there...

Tugging his shirt frantically he woke with a lazy smile. "Hey beautiful."

"Ugh, don't make me swoon right now. I've got to get home, no one knows where I am and my car..." My eyes widened in horror. "My car is still at Eva's, dammit."

Standing, I took Desmond's hands and pulled, urging him to stand. God, he was heavy. Smirking, he stood to full towering height. "I'll tell my evil step-mother there was an emergency at the aquarium and we had to leave. Come on, I'll take you to your car if you really want me to." After a stretch, he opened the cabin door inviting in a cool, salty breeze.

*No, I don't want to.*

But I found myself nestling in behind him on his bike. I squinted under the helmet as tears burned behind my eyelids. My psyche felt the same as it did when I'd stay out too late and sneak home, wondering if Dad would be waiting at the door to yell at me. Worst of all, I didn't even want to go home. My magazine worthy house didn't feel like home anymore. Honestly, it never did.

When he dropped me at my car I climbed in without so much as a goodbye. If I said goodbye I'd end up crying and he'd never let me leave. Thankfully my car purred to life without a sound and I crept home in the low-light hours of the early morning, not knowing what would be awaiting me when I arrived. Most nights Cedric worked all evening and overnight. But sometimes he'd come home after midnight. His schedule was erratic. If he'd come home after midnight and I wasn't home he'd know I'd broken a rule and stayed elsewhere. I'd never broken a rule before now. Not one he'd so easily witness, at least.

I shut the engine outside our house, not wanting to click the garage button and risk waking up my sister and Caroline. Though I was desperate to see if Cedric's car was inside. Opening the front door slowly, I crept in, breathing a sigh of relief when it looked like all was well and normal.

"You're home late," a deep voice startled me and I froze. "Or should I say early," he added, checking his watch. Cedric stood, arms crossed, leaning against the doorway to the kitchen. I swallowed. In the shadows I couldn't make out his expression, but his impassive tone told me to tread lightly.

"Yeah, Cedric, I think we should probably talk..."

Cedric took a step closer and I noticed he was still in his scrubs. "Must have been some girl's night if we need to talk about it," he smiled weakly. "I just got home and thought I'd grab a snack before heading to bed."

"What?" I asked in confusion. "My phone died, I'm sorry if I worried you." *Yes, tread lightly, Dolly...*

"Not a problem, I called Odette and she let me know you were with her and Caroline visiting some of their friends. Did she not tell you?"

"Oh, yeah she must have forgot. Anyway, I'll let you sleep." I made a mental note to give Odie one of my *Coach* bags as a thank you for covering for me. Luckily she wasn't even home so my alibi would check out.

"Come with me?" He asked, reaching out to hold my elbow and my *guilty, lying, stupid* heart plummeted to the ground.

"Yeah, of course. I'd love to."

After separate showers, *baby-steps*, I climbed into bed with my husband. His arm wrapped around my shoulders as I rested my head on his chest. Just as sleep was close to claiming me, his gruff whisper sent ripples of both shame and panic through my blood.

"Dot, please don't be in love with another man."

## *twelve*

The next week passed similar to my last motorcycle ride with Des. Quiet, solemn, and with reluctant speed.

Desmond and I were at a stalemate. We were a bike waiting for a storm to pass that may never leave. Cedric absorbed himself in a week of surgeries and I played the excuse I was busy with my sister and party planning. His event was swiftly approaching, and I didn't know if I was more nervous he wouldn't get the promotion or that he would.

"Your dress is dry-cleaned and ready in your closet. Caterers will be here at two. We have menus and signature drinks ready to go..." My sister clutched a clipboard and muttered to herself while gnawing on the end of a pencil.

"You didn't have to do all of this, Odie. But I really appreciate it."

"It's been really fun, actually. I needed the distraction."

"Any word from Mom or Dad?" I asked, needing a distraction of my own. For once, I wasn't the center of the family drama. My mother had texted me the day prior asking if my sister was here and safe. I assured her that all was well and left it at that.

"No, just vague scriptures posted on social media by Mom. Nothing from Dad."

I snorted. "Good luck deciphering those. When I eloped with Cedric, Mom held a call to prayer at church for my salvation. So I'd say you're doing better on the sinner scale than I did."

Odette laughed, the sound of it curving my lips for the first time in days.

“You’re still thinking about that hottie you stayed out all night with last week aren’t you?” My sister missed nothing, and I hated her and loved her for that.

Slumping back, I grabbed a silk throw pillow from the couch and put it over my face. “Yes.”

“I thought you and Cedric were working things out?”

“We are.”

“Then why... oh.” She stopped. “Oh, shit. Dolly, are you having an affair now? I mean, you know our rule that we always cover for each other is forever, but dude, I don’t really want to help you have a full blown affair. Cedric is a nice guy.”

I groaned. “No, Odie, I’m not having an affair. At least I don’t think so. I’m not trying to.” My words jumbled in my throat. “I don’t know what I’m doing. But I can’t just walk away- from either of them.”

“Torn between two insanely hot men. Wow, what problems you have, Dolly. Really, we should hold a prayer meeting-”

My pillow launched itself at her face, and she cackled.

“Who the hell gave you a clipboard?”

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FOR ONCE, MY KITCHEN DIDN’T APPEAR TOO BIG. HALF A dozen caterers fired up stoves, ovens, and plating stations like they’d lived in my home longer than I had. My nerves spiked, and I felt in-the-way in my own home. That feeling didn’t infect my sister and her wife, however. They were both sampling the reserve cocktails and chatting with the chef. Odette looked lovely in a sapphire blue pants suit. Caroline stared on adoringly between sips of her martini. Her black hair pulled back into a French twist, accentuating her short sequin dress. The old clock interrupted with a chime, alerting us the



time had come. My husband's boss and his wife Eva, Cora and her husband Dr. Sanderson would be gathered around my dining room table any moment now. My husband's promotion hinging on impressing them, showing them his aptitude. His plan was to straight up to ask for the job after dinner when the men gathered around their whiskey in his office.

I plopped a bacon wrapped scallop into my mouth, careful not to smudge my deep burgundy lipstick and gloss. Everything was here and accounted for. Everything, that is, except my husband. "Odie, Caroline? Have you seen Cedric?"

"I think I saw him go out onto the back deck," Caroline replied, shooting me a look of concern. "He seemed stressed... but we reassured him all is well. Don't worry," she smiled. "Actually, I really love to cook and the chef has agreed to let me watch and help with the food this evening. So I'll be back here personally making sure everything is picture perfect."

God, she was way too good for my sister. Just kidding. Sort of.

My husband mastered the calm-under-pressure look. Caroline must have read too much into his dislike of a suit and tie. After sampling one more scallop, I weaved past the staff and flowers, slipping out the back patio door. The wood shone from rain in the moonlight. My husband stood in on the corner of the platform, staring up at the sky in a cloud of grey.

Cedric hadn't touched a cigarette in almost a year. I made him stop because, you know, lung cancer is a thing. Despite his youthful appearance, he wasn't exactly twenty anymore. "I thought doctors didn't smoke. One of those, practice what you preach things," I eased up next to him.

He blew out a puff into the heavens and glanced down at me. One corner of his lip curved upward. "I thought church girls were good girls? Oh, wait, I don't think that anymore," he winked, wrapping an arm around my bare shoulders. I'd opted for a silk slip dress. The deep emerald green brought out my red hair and freckles, the fabric lightly skimming my round hips and full breasts. The hem grazed the floor, but with the light fabric and slit, I felt practically naked. Maybe not the

look I should have gone with, but I knew Eva would dress to the nines, so I did the same.

“Do you feel like I took advantage of you?” He inhaled another long breath of nicotine. “That night by your house when you came down in just your nightgown. I was waiting around for a woman barely legal, outside her reverend father’s home. You were the most stunning creature I’d ever laid eyes on, and I wanted more. But maybe...” He sighed. “Maybe you were too young to make such a big decision.”

Shock left my lips in response. “What? No, Cedric. I wanted you. I loved you. I still do. Where is this coming from?”

The faint ring of the doorbell met our ears. He put out his cigarette on the banister and extended his elbow. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

My husband’s challenge jarred my nerves. Why was he thinking about that?

The sound of my heels clinked inside to the foyer, where Odette stood ushering in Dr. Gregory and Eva. Thank god she was here filling in my ineffectual hostess gaps. Eva kissed both of my cheeks, then Cedric, and without hesitation my sister got the Eva treatment as well. “Good heavens, there’s two of Dolly,” Eva gave a shrill and slow giggle.

She fumbled on her heel for a moment and her husband cleared his throat. “Thank you, Cedric and Mrs. Winslow for having us this evening. I’m looking forward to talking shop with you later, Doctor.”

Cedric beamed and gave Henry a firm handshake. “I’m looking forward to that as well.”

Okay, so far this was actually turning out to be just fine. Maybe I’d actually pull this dinner off without a hitch. My shouldered dropped with relief.

Suddenly, the door opened, and two thick black boots stomped inside. My heart leapt into my throat, bringing along all of my body’s blood supply with it.

“Oh, it’s *him*, of course,” Eva slurred, rolling her eyes dramatically. Was she drunk? Oh, this was too good. However, I couldn’t even enjoy her uncharacteristically zany behavior because of the brute standing in my doorway.

“Cocktail?” my sister cut in, putting a gentle hand on Eva’s back and drawing her away. Odette shot me a wide-eyed “*What the hell?*” on her way out.

“Ah yes, Cedric, I thought you’d like to see my son again. He’s in town, maybe he’ll actually put down some roots next to his old man.”

Cedric straightened, peering at Des and tensing his jaw. Des squared his shoulders, eyes traveling noticeably down my body before pulling away to meet my husband’s gaze.

“Wait, you know Des-, I mean, Dr. Gregory’s son?” I asked, looping my arm in my husband’s.

“I do,” he replied, looking at Dr. Gregory and regaining his composure. “Shall we head to the dining room?”

Cedric dropped my arm and struck up a conversation about the hospital with his boss on their way towards the dining room. Des and I were alone in the foyer.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered, crossing my arms. Desmond was in a dark brown leather jacket and jeans.

Looking like a demon prince, he smirked. “I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to see you playing little-miss-wife. So this is better than swimming with whales and fucking against trees, huh?”

“Stability is just so boring isn’t it Demond?” I spat. “You know that I love my husband. You’re not going to ruin his chance for a promotion-”

“The fuck? I don’t give a shit about that. I’m here to see you, Queen. And if Cedric were enough you wouldn’t be looking at me like that.” He strode closer and I froze, a hot thrill snaking down my spine. Taking the thin strap of my dress between his thumb and forefinger, he let out a low growl. “This would look better on the floor.”

Heat rushed to my center, and I struggled to hide my shallow breathing. “Des, we can’t.”

“We can and we have.” He leaned down to my neck, breath heavy, raising goosebumps on my skin. “And we will again,” he murmured before biting down. A small moan escaped my lips before my palms hit chest, shoving him back.

“Stop,” I ordered, steadying myself. My red-bottomed heels marched me out into the hallway, leaving my errant lover behind. I couldn’t deal with this right now. The faster we ate, the faster everyone would leave and this night would be over. When I reached the long dining table, I gasped in admiration. A white tablecloth, dark purple flowers, and dainty tea lights dotted every free surface.

“Odie, this is lovely,” I whispered, floated down to the chair next to her. She was chatting with Eva with vivid enthusiasm. While it was odd to behold, I was thankful my sister was keeping her busy. Though, by the looks of her already empty glass, Eva was doing a good job of keeping herself busy, too. Cora had texted earlier that they would be late and to start without them. I was looking forward to her levity at the table, so I hoped she’d show up soon.

Cedric and Dr. Gregory entered the room and sat. Cedric must have been giving him a tour because they were talking about architecture of homes in the Pacific Northwest. My eyes searched for my husband’s, but he wouldn’t meet my gaze. My sister leaned over with a pasted-on smile. “What the hell is going on, sis?”

Just then, Desmond sauntered in, his casual attire of jeans, a black t-shirt, and vintage leather jacket, both irritating me and turning me on. Passing the men, he pulled out the chair right next to me and sat, his arm softly resting against mine. Heat flooded my cheeks as I immediately looked to Cedric. I should have warned him of this possibility. But I’d broken so many rules with Des, I didn’t even know where to start. I’d tried to tell him, but he seemed so happy, so earnest about getting our marriage back on track. I thought maybe this attraction for Des would fade away, but the opposite happened. My stupid feelings only grew.

Now I was sitting at a table with both of them, tongue tied and reeling.

Cedric was looking in Desmond's direction, jaw tense, as Des leaned back in his chair. A server appeared with plates and more drinks. Des gulped his martini back like a shot and I shook my head, trying to focus on the idle conversation at the table. My sister was regaling our guests with tales of strawberry picking in Georgia. Thankfully, Dr. Gregory and Eva were eating up her charm.

"Dorthea, what is your profession?" Dr. Gregory asked, taking a bite of grilled romaine salad.

"Oh," I replied, taking a sip of my second drink. "I don't really have one, honestly."

"Dory, being a homemaker *is* a job," Eva slurred, reaching unceremoniously around my sister and squeezing my arm. Holding back a laugh, I nodded in thanks. Wow, she was sloshed.

"Actually, Dorthea does a lot of work at the local aquarium," Cedric added smoothly, making me feel like less of a loser.

"Ah, I see," Dr. Gregory responded. "Perhaps you've passed my son Desmond by. He's been their photographer for a while now."

"I've seen him a time or two, yes," I said, ordering my voice to remain impassive.

Des snorted next to me and I resisted the urge to elbow him. "We know each other, Dad." He smiled over at me. I was going to kill him.

"Interesting," Cedric drawled. "You never mentioned it, Dot."

I cringed at his words.

"Desmond owes you a great debt, Dr. Winslow," Eva spoke up, her silverware clanking clumsily across her plate.

"Why is that?" I asked, looking from Eva to my husband. Cedric remained stoic in his expression.

“Cheers,” Desmond rumbled. “To sharing your...” he gave an unnecessarily long pause that sent heat to my cheeks, “talents, with me.”

The sound of breaking glass met my ears, and I jolted. “Are you alright, Cedric? You need to be careful with your hands, old boy. Those are the money makers,” Dr. Gregory asked with a chuckle, eyeing the broken whisky tumbler.

“Quite fine, thank you. I don’t know my strength sometimes.”

Dr. Gregory, seemingly oblivious to the tense tone of the table, took a sip of his drink and met my eyes. “To answer your question, young lady. Cedric saved my son’s life. You can’t tell by looking at him, but he’s down to one leg, and he’d not be sitting here at all if it weren’t for your husband.”

My mouth hung open in shock. I peered between the two of them, but neither would look at me. Instead, they stared the other down like opponents in a ring.

“Hiking accident,” Dr. Gregory said, more to himself as servers arrived, clearing the plates and setting down the main course of prime rib and scallops.

“Rock climbing,” Desmond corrected, gripping his tumbler until his knuckles were white. If he weren’t careful, we’d have another shattered glass on the table tonight. Which would match my thoughts exactly.

*My husband was the surgeon to operate on Des and save his life.*

“Perhaps a mistake to take the case,” Cedric stated lowly under the murmur of my sister and Eva thanking the staff and remarking on the well-cooked meat.

Desmond scoffed, and I shot them both a wide-eyed look. Did my husband know about Des and me? The pieces were falling together in an avalanche that was feeling a lot like betrayal.

“Few things are quite as rewarding as a patient who keeps in touch, though, huh, Cedric? Des has told me about you and your correspondence over the years. It was above and beyond

the call of duty to check in with him on a personal level as he went through physical therapy. That's the sort of care lacking in the current medical climate in America. I knew immediately upon receiving your email that you were planning a move to Seattle that I had to have you on my staff. Your bedside manner and skill combined would make a great Chief of Surgery," my husband's boss complimented, and my brain spun.

"So you two have kept in touch for years? Like friends?" I asked, turning to Des and then Cedric, who was effectively ignoring me at this point.

Somewhere in the distance, a doorbell rang. My eyes absently followed glimpses of Caroline dashing towards the foyer.

"It's Cedric who told me about the job opening at the aquarium," Des said, just above a whisper. "When I told him I was moving here... he had a couple of jobs for me."

Cedric met my eyes then, and I felt tingles behind my eyelids. Still, confusion wracked me at what I was hearing. Why would Desmond hide the fact that he knew my husband, that my husband saved his life? Why would Cedric have him work at my aquarium?

*A couple of jobs.*

"Oh, my god," I said, feeling my sister's hand take mine.

"Just breathe, Dolly," she soothed softly.

Suddenly, a southern drawl pulled me from my breakdown. "So sorry we're late!" Cora announced, walking over to me and kissing my cheek. I stood, returning her embrace.

"I'm so glad you made it," I whispered in her ear.

We all stood to greet the newcomers.

And that's when it all fell apart.

Clutching a bottle of wine and brushing rain droplets off his shoulders, stood Kenneth. Desmond raised an eyebrow at

me as Cedric, Dr. Gregory, and Kenneth greeted each other like old friends. Like colleagues.

“Are you going to tell me what’s happening?” my sister whispered in my ear.

Cora grabbed my arm before I could attempt an answer and dragged me around the table. “You just have to meet Simon. I’ve told him all about you. Well, not all.” She winked as I watched the seven shades of realization fall over Kenneth, well, *Simon*.

He cleared his throat and reached out a sheepish hand. “Ruby, nice to meet you.”

I blanched, making eyes with Cedric as he looked from me to Ken- Simon. Cedric knew my fake name, and it took him less than five seconds to piece it together. His face turned red.

“Dolly, babe, not Ruby,” Cora corrected with a giggle.

That’s when Des appeared beside me and Simon reached out a hand. “You must be Ru- I mean, Dolly’s husband. Nice to meet you. Though I suppose I sort of met you the other day when we all ran into each other at the cafe.”

“You what?” Cedric grumbled in our direction.

“You heard the man,” Desmond replied, straightening and leveling my husband with a deathly glare. “I’ll gladly be her husband when you decide to fuck off, Cedric-”

*WHAM.*

Cora shrieked. My sister ran over by my side and put an arm around me, pulling me out of the way.

Desmond stumbled back, rubbing a hand over his jaw. “I’ve been waiting for this, old man,” he said before rearing back a fist and punching my husband in the face.

“Stop it!” I screamed, lunging for the brawling men but being caught by Simon.

“Ruby, you can’t say anything-”

“Can’t say what, Simon?” Cora asked, looking between her husband and I. “Oh my god...” She breathed when she put



it together.

“It was one time, Cora, I didn’t know.”

“Are you fucking kidding me!?” she yelled, shoving his chest away from me. “You little slut,” she screeched returning her attention to me. The rumbling of fists halted. Eva still sat at the table, wide-eyed. My sister stood in the corner, while Dr. Gregory had two hands pulling Cedric and Desmond off each other.

Everyone looked at me.

“Does everyone here know how Dolly fucks every man in Seattle? Even the married ones, apparently,” Cora accused, red finger nail pointed bluntly at my nose.

“Cora, I had no idea. He said his name was Kenneth, and he was a pilot-”

She cut me off with venom. “She’s a *hotwife*, everybody. It’s another word for a fucking home wrecking whore.”

“That’s enough of that,” Cedric boomed, pulling out of Dr. Gregory’s grip and smoothing his tie.

“I agree,” Desmond rumbled, staring me down.

“You can get the fuck out of my house,” Cedric replied to Desmond.

“What the hell is going on here?” Dr. Gregory asked, stepping back, clearly afraid of being caught in the crossfire again.

“You asked for this, Cedric. You asked me to keep an eye on your wife and I did it. You asked me to...” he shot me a gentle look before continuing, “*Take care* of her because you couldn’t, and I did. Now you’re drawing the line at me falling in love with her? That’s where you get pissed off? Yeah, I’m going to need you to fuck all the way off.”

I covered my mouth in a gasp, feeling my sister and Caroline’s presence beside me. “You-you set this up, Cedric?”

His jaw tensed as he tore his blue eyes from me and glared daggers at Desmond. “I wanted you to be happy. But I didn’t

sign up for losing you to another man.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Des said softly, walking over. I took an instinctive step back.

“My wife is staying here, in our home,” Cedric grumbled.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” I replied. “And I’m not staying here either.” I shot at Cedric’s short-lived but smug expression. “I may be a whore, but you two are liars. I tried to follow the rules,” I shot at Cedric. “But you set me up to fail, and you just watched it happen. That’s not a marriage, Ced, that’s a sick joke.”

“And you,” I said, turning to Desmond. “All these weeks, I’ve been brutally honest with you. You knew the love I had for my husband. You saw how torn I was, but you were playing his goddamn game the entire time, weren’t you?”

“No, Dorteia, I-” Desmond started, but my sister finished.

“Enough! Haven’t you people put her through enough?” Odette sounded like my mother.

“Let’s go, sweetie.” Caroline put an arm around my shoulder and marched me past the carnage. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I quickly filled a suitcase and grabbed my purse and keys.

On our march through the foyer, I heard Dr. Gregory’s timbre. “Dr. Winslow, this is probably a bad time to note that my wife has fallen asleep on your table.”

My sister snorted as she slammed the door behind us.

## *thirteen*

**M**y dad preached on a story from the Bible in church one Sunday when I was a kid. It was about a man who fell in love with a woman. He asked her father if he could marry her and her dad said he'd have to work seven years before he'd let him marry his favorite daughter. The lovesick guy worked seven years, and on his wedding day, pulled back the veil to see, not the woman he loved, but her sister.

The father then said, if you still want my daughter, marry her sister and then work seven more years.

Yeah, I know, the story is pretty fucked up.

But what stood out to me was that he did it. He worked seven more years to be with the woman he loved. Through deceptions and time, nothing stopped him.

It was romantic and I always hoped I'd be her to someone. Rachel, was her name. But my thoughts sometimes drifted to the sister, Leah. Did she ever find love with her husband or was she always second best?

I woke up in my hotel room thinking about that story. My dad's sermons had a long shelf life. I could be drawing in the margins of my Bible one Sunday, only to be thinking of the passage of scripture during a long drive years later. It used to annoy me. I felt like my parents had infiltrated my brain-space with their religious beliefs. But now that I'd grown older, it was a comfort to recall the simple stories, simple truths. My life needed a dose of simplicity.

Rubbing my eyes, I stumbled out into the kitchen, where a fresh pot of coffee was brewing. “Thanks Caroline,” I mumbled, pouring the hot liquid into a ceramic mug.

Apparently, Caroline had money. Her family lived in Italy and sent her to culinary school in France. She’d always wanted to live in America, so she landed in Atlanta, to interview for a head chef job at a swanky Italian restaurant downtown. That’s where she and my sister met. Her family was well off and funding her travels until she got settled. Their suite was opulent, but cozy.

“You’re welcome. Odette is still asleep,” she replied, perching on a barstool and scrolling through her phone. “It’s been four days here... any word from your guys?”

*My guys.* My heart contracted with emotion I didn’t want to show.

I shook my head. “I left my phone at home.”

“What do you think they’ll do?” Her tone rang with concern and sincerity. Caroline had become fast family since I’d met her. I wished my parents could see how wonderful she was, too.

Sighing, I pulled up the seat next to her and reached for a box of toaster pastries. “Cedric can’t take the time away from the hospital to chase after me, and I doubt he cares to. Not after the dinner fiasco and, you know, everything else.” I ripped open the packaging and took a bite of a too-sweet-strawberry square.

“Desmond... to be honest, I don’t know what he’ll do. But my guess is he’ll move on quickly.”

“Yeah, that’s likely,” my sister’s sarcasm stretched through the room as she walked over, taking the second breakfast tart out of my pack.

“Hey, get your own,” I batted her hand away.

Caroline got up and planted a kiss on Odette’s cheek. “I swear, I cook you both gourmet European fare and you each only reach for the junk food.”

She wasn't wrong.

"You guys," I took a deep breath. "I appreciate you letting me stay here with you. But I can't just sit here while my life falls apart."

"What do you want to do?" Odie asked, leaning on the counter. "Who do you want to be with?"

Shaking my head, I exhaled. "It's not that simple. I don't know what to do, Odie. They both lied to me and turned winning me into some sort of pissing contest there at the end."

"You have to admit that was kind of hot, though," Caroline added with a giggle.

I couldn't help the smile that curved my lip. "A little. But Cedric's likely steaming mad at me. I wrecked his chances for a promotion, embarrassed him in front of his boss, and exposed our lifestyle. Not to mention poor Cora..."

My sister snorted. "Fuck her. She called you a whore and tried to shame you for having sex. What year is it, 1950?"

"She found out her husband cheated on her in front of a room full of people... and with someone she thought was a friend. I deserved it."

"No, you didn't," Odie argued. "He deserved the blame, not you. You did nothing wrong."

"Whether I'm right or wrong doesn't matter. People are hurt, and it's because of me."

"What about the bad boy?" Caroline asked, breaking the momentary silence.

"I think I'm in love with him."

The sounds of their gasps weren't subtle.

Odette opened another Pop Tart and handed it to me. "Dolly... what about Cedric?"

"I love him too. I don't want a divorce. I want to grow old with him. But that doesn't change the fact that I'm also in love with Desmond." I slumped in my seat, resting my forehead on

the cool countertop. “I don’t know, you guys, none of this was ever supposed to happen.”

“Well,” Odie said, standing and hitting my back between my shoulder blades. “That’s what you get for chasing dick.”

Caroline laughed. “Yes, we don’t have that problem, do we?”

Their cackles made me smile against the marble. “Ha. Ha. You two are just so funny.”

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EVEN THOUGH IT WAS TECHNICALLY AUTUMN, THE DRY, sweltering afternoon heat clung to my skin and blouse. I’d missed Georgia.

Rolling down my window, I let the toasty air run its fiery fingers through my hair as I made the thirty-minute drive from Atlanta to Covington, my hometown. It always amazed me how in Georgia, you could be in a bustling, energetic city, filled with lights and glamour. And within a thirty-minute drive in either direction, you were transported back in time to rural country life.

I’d lived in cloudy, melancholy Seattle for so long that I’d grown to appreciate every detail of the place I was born and raised. I loved the stands on the side of the road with old farmer-men in overalls selling peaches, or honey, or canned jams. I loved how you couldn’t throw a rock without hitting a church steeple. Passing my dad’s church on my drive made me nostalgic, though somehow it looked smaller than it was the last time I was here.

“How are you so calm?” Odette’s voice from the passenger’s seat broke my trance.

“It’s Mom and Dad, not a two-headed snake, Odie,” I teased, making light of her predicament the same way she always did to me. “You have to face them, eventually. What was your plan? Live in a hotel with your wife for the rest of your life and never talk to your parents again?”

“You say that like it’s not a solid option, Dolly.” My sister crossed her arms and looked out the window. “You know, it’s not really fair you’re forcing me to stop running from family when that’s *exactly* what you’re doing.”

“I’m not running... I just need some time.” But my soul gripped at her accusation. She was right. But what else was there to do? I couldn’t sit in a hotel in Seattle when my own home, my husband, my... whoever Desmond was to me, were out there. I couldn’t drive past the hospital every day and wonder what Cedric was doing inside or search the aquarium parking lot for Desmond’s motorcycle. I was thankful to have left my cell phone behind when I’d left the house, but a part of me also felt forsaken by the men I loved.

All hell let loose and where were they? Granted, they didn’t have a means to contact me, and I didn’t exactly inform anyone that I was leaving town, but still. My mind was irrational. I had to get out of town and far from the drama that plagued me.

“If I have to talk to Mom and Dad, you have to talk to your husband and your boyfriend,” my sister pouted.

“Eventually, I might,” I sighed. Though I was terrified of what they would say. Fearful of where my husband’s head was at. He’d probably already drawn up divorce papers. I’d broken his every rule for hotwifing, I’d slept with a former patient, and a colleague, unknowingly to both, but still.

There was also the matter that Cedric had *asked* Desmond to pursue me. If that were true, then I truly didn’t know what to think. Why would he set me up to fail? Unless the startling truth was that my husband no longer loved me and wanted me to fall in love with another man so he could be rid of me in good conscience.

Then there was Desmond. Who pursued me because my husband called in a favor. Humiliation rippled through me at the thought. I played right into his hand, too. I ate up the stupid neck-biting and the bid to be his photography assistant. It had to have been a game or just an odd way to pay back Cedric for saving his life. I don’t think he planned for feelings

to get involved. None of the three of us planned for that. But it happened. And now we were in a huge freaking mess.

And all I wanted in the midst of a huge mess was some of my mom's lemon cake and some honest to god southern sweet iced tea.

"I didn't force you to come, Odie. You could have stayed in Atlanta with Caroline. Or hell, you could have stayed in Seattle," I said, turning the rental car onto our street.

Odie fiddled with the knob of the radio. "Dolly, give me a break. You knew when you announced you were flying back home, I couldn't just let you go alone. What kind of sister would I be if I just abandoned you like that?"

"A sister like me," I whispered, gripping the wheel and staring ahead. "I left you, Odie. I never should have flaked on our road trip. Eloping so fast and leaving you behind was one of the shittiest things I've ever done. I'm sorry." My voice cracked at the words I should have said years ago.

Silence filled the car as we suddenly hit a familiar dirt road. The dirt road that smelled like cut grass and honeysuckle. It reminded me of Cedric and how we first met. My heart broke into pieces at the memory. I wished he were here. "I know why you did, Dolly. It was hard, but I get it. These past few weeks have felt like... old times. I know you're going to go back to your life and everything, and I have Caroline now, too. But I don't know, I don't really want to lose you again."

Parking in the grass outside our old home, I turned to my sister. Her wavy red hair brushed her freckled shoulders as she fidgeted with her chipped fingernail polish. "Then let's not," I said finally.

"Not what?" she asked, pulling her eyes from the house and shooting me a quizzical look.

"Let's not lose this again. Let's, I don't know, let's stay together. You're my best friend. Cedric taught me how to love, and Desmond may have brought me back to life, but you're my soulmate, sis. You always will be."



“Jeez, Doll,” my sister wiped her eyes with her wrist. “Why’d you have to go all sappy on me? Good thing I wore my waterproof mascara in preparation for getting yelled at by Dad or I’d be screwed right now.”

I laughed. “I think I’ve been trying to fit into a box for a long time and just bursting at the seams of it. Forget boxes or how things should be done. I don’t care how most people do things. No matter what happens, me and you stick together. Deal?”

Odie nodded, smiling. “Deal.”

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MOM WELCOMED US BOTH INSIDE WITH OPEN ARMS. ODIE AND I not-so-subtly ran right to the kitchen and pulled down familiar flower etched drinking glasses. My mother’s giggle felt like home as she instructed us to sit while she cut us pieces of lemon loaf. To our delight, she’d also made baked macaroni and cheese, alongside a southern delicacy, beans and cornbread.

“Nothing tastes better than this. Not tequila, vodka, gin, whisky-” My sister yelped as I kicked her leg under the table.

Mom only pursed her lips. “I’m glad to see y’all. I’ve missed you so much. Your father just had a meeting down at the church, but he’ll be here soon.”

“Great,” my sister said sarcastically, and I shot her a look.

“You know, it’s not easy to have two daughters marry without including their parents. No dress shopping, no wedding in the church... We’re very hurt by the both of you.” Mom cut us each another slice of cake and we accepted like the hungry, little naughty toddlers we were.

Instead of trying to explain, I opted for apologies. “Sorry Mom,” I said between bites of cake.

“Me too,” my sister chimed in.

Mom's lips gave the slightest curve as she wiped her hands on her apron. Glancing out the window she announced, "Your father's home."

With that she disappeared out the back door. Either to greet him or to remind him to stay calm. Probably the latter.

I leaned in towards my sister. "If you piss Dad off before I get mac and cheese, I swear to god you're walking back to the hotel-"

As Odie swiped my face with whipped cream, the door slammed shut. Clutching his worn Bible, like he always did, our father walked into the kitchen. "Girls," he said lowly, setting his Bible on the table.

"Hi Dad," I said, straining to gauge his mood. My father was a quiet man who never let his feelings show on his face. The only real emotion we'd seen from him was anger. Sometimes righteous anger at how the poor were treated in our community. Sometimes disappointed anger at catching me and my sister watching an R rated movie or doing some other typical teenage thing. But I always wondered what, if any, other emotions existed beneath the surface for him.

Or maybe he just walked around perpetually disappointed in the world, and in his children. Maybe that's why he taught about change, about redemption and deliverance from evil.

"Girls," he responded simply, sitting with us at the table. My mother hurried to pour him a glass of tea. "How's Seattle?"

"Rainy but good," I responded, glancing over at my sister who was staring at her empty plate, avoiding Dad's eyes.

"How are your hus-" My father hesitated a moment. "How are your spouses?"

Well, that was one check mark for acceptance. Way to go, Dad.

My sister peeked up nervously and I gave her a gentle nudge. "We're doing okay, Dad. Caroline and I have been staying with Dolly and Cedric. Caroline's been cooking up a storm."

“She’s really a great chef, Dad,” I said, encouraging the positive vibes.

“Glad to hear it,” he responded dryly. Late afternoon was turning to evening as orange and purple twilight seeped through Mom’s yellow daisy curtains. Soon plates of southern cooking graced the table and my sister and I devoured it all.

“Lord have mercy, do they not have food in the Pacific Northwest?” my mother asked through a chuckle. My father’s lip even elevated slightly at our enthusiasm for Mom’s cooking.

“No,” Odie replied with a mouthful of macaroni. “They don’t, Mom and Dad, it’s awful. It’s all wheatgrass and gluten-free. Mom, I went to the store and couldn’t find milk. Like regular milk from a cow. It was all oats and almonds and peas...” My sister gave a dramatic shudder and we all laughed.

After my sister and I had gorged ourselves to the point of pain, a silence settled in the small country kitchen. The beautiful and calming symphony of the cicadas danced in through the open windows and I took a deep, cleansing inhale, soaking it all in. The grasshoppers reminded me of the pod of Orcas I’d seen with Desmond. The way nature could wrap my senses in a warm blanket was unlike any other peace I’d ever felt. Maybe that’s how my dad felt about church. Could nature be my church? My heart tore with an ache of missing *him*. His scruffy face and smart alec remarks. If nature were my sanctuary Desmond was my priest. My rugged, tattooed shepherd guiding me to bliss and redemption.

“They’re hanging around late this year,” my father remarked, noticing my listening to the bugs. “We haven’t had our first frost yet.”

My sister and I nodded, taking sips of iced tea.

“I hope you know that I love you girls. I’ve only ever tried to do what’s best for you both. There’s been times I know I’ve been too stern and pushed each of you too hard. But I never want to you to be afraid of coming here. This is your home, forever.” My father put a hand over his rugged Bible.

My sister and I passed an astonished look between us. “We love you too, Dad,” my sister and I replied.

Standing tall and hulking, my father took his dish to the sink. “Now, I’m turning in for my nightly prayers.”

Odette and I nodded, still in no hurry to leave. I guessed we’d stay over and crash in our old room.

My father walked toward his bedroom and stopped in the doorway, glancing over his shoulder. “And Dolly?”

“Yeah Dad?”

After my father spoke, he walked towards his room like he hadn’t just left my jaw on the floor.

“Your husband and another... *rougher* fella are waiting outside for you.”

## *fourteen*

**M**y sister's chair fell over with a bang as she rushed to the kitchen window.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” she said, smiling. “Sis, I believe there’re some gentlemen here to call on you,” she said with a flourish.

I gripped the table to keep myself steady. “Both of them? Why are they here?” I asked in shock.

Odette put a hand on her hip. “Why do you think, genius?”

Standing, it relieved me to find I didn’t have the urge to run away. That had to be a good sign, right? I quickly combed my fingers through my curls and smoothed my blouse. “How do I look?”

“Like the older, less-smart version of me,” my sister said, grinning like a maniac. “Now, go get your boys.”

Rolling my eyes, I pinched her arm on my way to the door, her giggle following me. “Don’t watch, it’s creepy,” I said, closing the door.

When I turned, my heart nearly exploded with emotion. Cedric leaned against the side of a Ford Mustang, while Desmond leaned against the hood, arms crossed. They both straightened when they saw me. I crossed my arms, walking through the dry grass. “What-”

Cedric put up his hands to silence me. “Let us go first, okay?”

I nodded, coming to a stop in front of the car. Though every bone in my body screamed at me to throw myself into

their arms.

“Dot, I knew hotwifing was a shitty solution. I could see it wasn’t making you happy. So when Desmond emailed to say he’d be in town, I proposed he court you. Believe it or not, I hated the idea of you with strange men. I thought if I arranged for a decent, non-committal guy to take care of you in the ways I couldn’t, that would be enough to make you happy.”

“And I thought, what the hell? I’ve been asked to do worse by less deserving men,” Desmond quipped, and I had to fight to hide a smile. They were so cute together, side by side.

Cedric cleared his throat, taking a step towards me. “My fear of losing you, of not being able to please you, pushed me into a corner I couldn’t get out of. And then Desmond telling me of your outings had me really fucking jealous... but...”

“But?” I asked, raising an eyebrow in intrigue.

Cedric gave a deep exhale. “I wish I had a cigarette,” he muttered and Des gave a hearty chuckle. “It also turned me on. That’s when we made love on the bathroom floor. It’s when I discovered that I do still have drive. Imagining you two together... It helps.”

My eyes met Desmond’s in surprise and then back to my husband. “So you think me having sex with Des made you want to have sex with me again?”

Cedric nodded. “It at least told me I could.”

Desmond stepped forward, reaching out to hold my elbow, and my heart rate picked up. I sent a nervous glance towards Cedric, but he only watched on, unbothered. “I can’t live without you, Queen. I’m in love with you, and the things I told you in the bay are still all things I want to do with you. Except, I don’t want you to have to choose.”

“What?” I asked, confusion setting in. “What are you guys saying?”

Cedric stepped forward, close enough I could smell his intoxicating cologne. His arm brushed my left arm while Des stood his ground at my right. “Dot, do you remember the first conversation we ever had, right here? I told you I liked you the

way you are. I told you I liked that you were brave enough to buck convention. It's what made me fall in love with you. Then what happens? Years later, you forged your own path again, and I get angry over it? I'm a hypocrite. Because when I'm honest, I can see how this may work. When I take convention and societal rules off the table... Something about it fits."

"Are you saying—" My breath hitched as Des moved closer, his scruff meeting my neck. Warmth flooded my core at the feel of both of them so close. "Are you saying the three of us could..."

Cedric took my chin and turned my lips to his, kissing me softly. "Yes, I am."

Desmond bit my neck lightly. "He makes a compelling argument, Queen. I couldn't take you away from him if I tried, so I'm going to stop trying and just be with you, however you'll have me."

"Oh my god," I breathed, my skin sensitive to every touch and breath. "We have to get out of here. My hotel isn't far—"

My husband took my hand and brought it to his lips. "We have a better idea."

"I could get used to this *we* thing," I replied, walking toward the guys' car.

"Oh, you have no idea how used to it we want you to get," Desmond purred, opening my door for me. A tingle wandered down my spine in anticipation. Once the engine roared to life and the headlights lit, I leaned forward to peep into the kitchen.

Rolling my eyes with a smile, I flipped my sister off, who was watching and waving from the open window.

---

CEDRIC PEPPERED MY PALM WITH KISSES AND WE DROVE through the night.

“I drive next time,” Des grumbled from the backseat and I giggled.

“How did this happen?” I asked.

Desmond leaned forward and twirled a piece of my hair. “After you left, and Cedric and I got drunk as hell, we decided neither of us were giving you up. So that only left two options.”

“Which were?” I asked, hiding my smile.

Cedric pulled into a paved driveway on a secluded lot. “Battle to the death... or share.”

Laughter shook my chest as I opened the car door. “Well, I know who would win,” I said, stepping out. A resounding, “Who?” echoing behind my teasing joke.

We were parked outside a big country house. “This is lovely,” I breathed. “Is this where we’re staying?”

“It is,” Cedric replied, coming around to take my hand again. I was loving all the affection he was giving me. So many kisses, touches, and holding my hand. That coupled with Des watching, waiting for any opportunity to swoop in with passion of his own... I was in heaven. Being with the two of them together felt so right.

Darkness covered the property, making it difficult to see the details of the home. But from what I could tell in the moonlight, it was like something out of a fairy tale. Dark green paneling stood complimented by white shutters with little flower boxes overflowing with yellow mums.

Walking up the stone steps and through the front door, the dark walnut wood floors and spiral staircase greeted us. “The place is remarkable,” I breathed, holding Cedric’s hand and giving Desmond’s shoulder a nuzzle. They both exchanged some sort of look over the top of my head.

“Come see the upstairs.” Cedric led the way up the stairs and down a hall. A huge room with floor to ceiling windows overlooked the property. Spanish moss covered willows swayed in the bright white moonlight as my eyes traveled from the scenery, to the plush, ornate rug under the...



“You guys, how is that...” I stumbled for words.

Desmond’s gruff laugh stoked the flame in my belly. “Now, how’d that get here?” he asked, coming up behind me and nuzzling my hair, sending shivers down my front.

“It’s custom made,” Cedric remarked, hands in his pockets as he sauntered over to the bar cart towards the wall, pouring himself a half glass of dark amber liquid. “Basically, it’s two California King beds in one, without the gap in the middle.” He looked like James Bond in the pale moonlight. His white button-up shirt undone halfway and grey slacks fitting him just right. My husband was sexy, and I was suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude that he was mine.

The bed was massive and lifted onto a shallow platform, taking up all horizontal space on its side of the room. Two stairs lead up to the beastly thing, dressed in a fluffy cream colored duvet.

“I love it,” I breathed, trying to hide my shallow inhales. “But where are you guys going to sleep?” I added, pulling a hearty chuckle from both of my men.

“I don’t think we’re going to be doing much sleeping tonight, Queen,” Desmond purred, his hands wrapping around my waist and up to the buttons of my blouse. “What do you think, Ced? Should I get our girl ready for bed?”

Cedric hummed, taking a sip of his drink and sitting in an armchair towards the corner of the bed.

Desmond peeled off my blouse, the sound of fabric hitting the floor sending a thrill to my aching core. I wanted him so badly, and equally so, I wanted my husband. “You glow like the heavens in the dark,” Desmond murmured before I felt his rough fingers unlatch my bra. My breasts fell heavy and free, catching the cool night air. My eyes met my husband’s, who leaned back in his chair, scanning me with dark appreciation. Reaching my hands up, I twirled my nipples, giving him a little show. “That’s a good girl,” Desmond purred, unzipping my jeans and tugging them down along with my thong, over the round of my hips. His hands pushing them down from the

inside, softly grazing every curve like a motorcycle dips around a sharp bend.

“God, your body is so fucking perfect,” he said, spinning me quickly around to face him. His hard grip pushed my lower back flush to him and I sighed at the feel of the cool metal of his leather jacket.

“You’re wearing too many clothes,” I whispered, standing on my tiptoes and pulling off his coat. He reluctantly let go of my ass and pulled off his shirt with one yank, revealing his broad frame and black and red tattoos. Sucking his bottom lip into my mouth, I tugged at his belt and dropped it to the rug with a clank, before pushing down his pants. Standing in only black boxer briefs, he picked me up in a swift movement, and I wrapped my legs around him. His mouth found my neck and sucked as he walked us steady over to the bed, dropping me next to Cedric’s corner. Lifting my head, I met his eyes, my nipples hard and pink from the window’s soft light.

“I love you,” I murmured, and his lip curved under his heavy eyelids.

“I love you, Dot. Always. Now let me watch Des fuck you.” He took a long sip of his drink as my cheeks heated.

Desmond crawled over top of me leaning down and taking a nipple between his teeth. “You heard the man. Doctor’s orders,” he muffled with a mouthful of my breast. Arching my back, I moaned as his fingers and palm found my opening. “Ah, she’s so wet for us, Ced,” Desmond uttered darkly, dipping two fingers inside.

“Fuck,” I exhaled, gripping onto his strong back. He pumped at rough and delicious harmony before pulling out and leaving me empty. Whining, I sat up on my elbows as Desmond took my ankles and pulled me to the edge of the bed, leaving my calves dangling over the side. He leaned forward, breath hot in my ear. “Now you’re really dipping your toes into the shark tank, baby.”

*Oh my god.*

My inner thighs slicked with my pleasure while Des turned to Cedric. “Watch how good your wife takes this cock.”

Ced growled low in his throat, giving a nod. “Turn her over,” he ordered, shadows blotching his stare. I’d never seen him look so dark, so dangerous, like he was the evil king on his throne and we were servicing him with a show. This was fulfilling fantasies I hadn’t even known how to dream up.

“I like that idea,” Des said, kicking off his boxers and letting his manhood stand erect. I had to remind myself I’d taken it before, and I could do it again, because his size and girth were giving me a slight, aching pause. Before I could react, Desmond grabbed my knees and spun me over onto my belly. My body braced for the nudge of his crown, but instead I yelped at a gentler, wetter feeling. Splaying my cheeks in an indecent and inappropriate way, Des paused. I heard Cedric’s grunt of approval before his Des’s tongue traveled from my lower back, down every crevasse, finally lapping at my opening. His scruff hit my sensitive bundle of nerves in a hypnotic contrast to the wet and soft. Letting out a moan, I bucked my ass back towards him, begging for more. After taking his dear sweet time and bringing me towards several points of bliss, before backing off. I was panting my whines.

“Please, Des, please.”

“You heard her,” Cedric’s dark timbre shivered my bare back while Des stood, taking hard, almost painful hold of my hips. Jerking my ass upright, with no nudge of warning, Desmond slammed his cock into me to full hilt. A scream of agonizing pleasure shot from my throat, balancing his own deep groan of satisfaction.

“God, Queen. You take it so good.”

The plush bed muffled my moans as Des thrust, each push in bringing me higher and closer. “Come for me while your husband watches, baby,” Desmond growled, and I lost control. My orgasm wracked through me, trembling my bones. Des quickened his pace, going harder and harder, before grunting his release.

A pair of hands turned me over and traveled up my ribs. Opening my eyes, I felt the cool and smoky lips of my husband. My fingers ran through his hair as I pressed my body into his. He was still fully clothed and the feel of the fabric on my oversensitive body was as mesmerizing as his touch. When I fell back, Des was laying propped on the other side of me, a hand on my hip, drawing circles with his thumb. "I think I got her warmed up, Ced. Why don't you check and see?" His suggestion was laced with desire.

Cedric hummed his agreement, his hand snaking down my middle to the expanse of release between my thighs. I moaned at the feel of him as Desmond took one of my nipples between his lips. "Tell me you like it," Cedric ordered darkly, his palm finding its slow circular movement.

"You know I like it," I replied, breathless.

My husband licked at the opposite breast and the feel of both of them at once was almost too much anticipation to bear. "Tell me you like it when I touch you with another man's cum."

A sigh escaped my lips. "It feels so good when you touch me with Desmond's cum," I panted, heating at the dirty words as they left my throat. Cedric removed his hand and turned me towards him. My hands greedily unbuttoning his shirt while my hips searching for friction. Desmond settled in behind me, his erection already hard and positioned within the fold of my ass.

They completely trapped me. My body lied caged between the two men I loved, and they were exacting more pleasure from me than I ever knew possible. Cedric pulled off his shirt and finished my work of pulling down his pants. His manhood springing the gap between us. My moan vibrated through the soft glow of the room as my slit found him, sliding over his length. Finding his crown, I made to ease him in when another member nudged at my opening. With a gasp I went still, both men easing towards me.

"Be a good girl and take us both, Dot," Cedric growled low, palming my breast. I groaned, unsure but definitely not

unwilling.

“I don’t know what to do,” I confessed, feeling the aching pressure against my core.

“Lay still for a moment, baby,” Des instructed, reaching a rough hand around and thumbing my clit. Resisting the urge to move, I felt Cedric enter me. Letting out a sigh, I gasped at the feeling of Des moving in from behind, entering alongside my husband. My body stretched a deliciously painful and erotic stretch. I was so full I felt delirious. Could you be high off dick? Because that’s what it felt like.

“Oh my god,” I moaned loudly. After a moment to let me adjust, my men began to move. Their synchronicity building another deep climax within me. Ced groaned into my mouth as Des gripped my hips while biting my neck. “I’m going to come,” I said, noticing the tremble in my voice. Like my soul knew this was it. This was the last time I’d ever be this person. This orgasm, this sexual experience with both of them, was going to tear through me and destroy me from the inside out—but in the best possible way. Surrendering to its call, my toes curled and my back arched. One hand fisted Cedric’s hair while my other arm reached around to hold Desmond’s muscular forearm. I needed them to hold me down to earth and keep me from floating away. My climax shattered me until I saw stars. Somewhere towards the middle of my ripples of orgasm, Cedric came, filling me. Des shoved in as deep as possible, following behind, and his own bliss found him as well.

We all lay in a puddle of pleasure, Des softly stroking my side while Cedric kissed along my jawline. Leaning back and turning my head, I met Desmond’s lips for a passionate kiss, before turning back towards my husband. My arms wrapped around him and I kissed him softly. With a gasp, I looked down. “Ced, are you hard again?”

It was a pleasant surprise. Nothing I did for months had even gotten him to half mast, then all of a sudden, Desmond entered our lives, *and bed*, and Cedric was ready for multiple rounds of lovemaking. “You didn’t think I was done, did you?”

I gave a little giggle, pulling him close. Des got up and moved to the chair, leaning on his elbows with a soft curve to his lips. My eyes left his to find my husband's soulful blues gazing into my soul. As he entered me with slow and intentional movements, tears pricked my eyes. I loved this man so much it hurt. This intimacy was everything I wanted, everything I needed. Something deeper grew and blossomed as he rocked in and out.

The mixture of all three of our bliss spilling over and drowning us all within its depths.

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I THOUGHT THE PHRASE, "MAKING LOVE ALL NIGHT," WAS ONLY an expression... until I did in fact, make love all night.

We stoked the flames of our passion until the orange morning light drenched the dark hardwoods in morning rays. I awoke alone and crawled my sore body across the bed. Smiling, the aroma of bacon and coffee wafted up the stairs as I reluctantly ignored it to turn on the shower on scalding hot. The water hit my aching muscles just right as my mind recalled the events of the day prior. It was a lot to wrap my brain around and while it had been the most magical, sexiest night of my life, the logistics of our life forward still hung in the salty, humid southern air.

I loved both men. Cedric with his loyalty and his deep generosity and goodness had loved me in a way I'd never known possible. Cedric accepted me, all of me, always. His love planted deep roots of trust in my heart, even though we'd just endured our hardest marriage trial yet. I was confident he and I could get through anything together.

Desmond had come crashing into my life on the beat of a thumping bass and the rumble of a motorcycle engine. Des was wild and free with the heart of a man who'd known loss and pain. Des had fought death and loneliness and won. So when he met me, he reacted easily and with a familiarity few would know how to give. I was lost, aimless, and in a dark

place when he found me teasing sharks with my bare legs. Des had pulled me from the literal and metaphorical depths of despair and showed me what life could be. Outside of the walls of my model home, outside of the title of doctor's wife, Desmond taught me so much over such a short span of time. He lit a fire within my soul and melded himself into every fiber of my being. In a way, Des saved my marriage, along with my life. A sense of adventure that had been there my entire life reemerged, and I suddenly wanted... more.

But would this work? Like, really work long term? Could Cedric and Des learn to love each other like I loved them? At least in a deep and mutually respectful way. Most men wouldn't be okay with a polyamorous lifestyle. Maybe they feel that way now, but what about when we go through another rough patch? There were still a lot of questions to sort through once my sex haze faded.

Drying off and slipping my clothes back on. I padded down the stairs and stopped when I heard familiar laughter. Peeking around the corner and into the kitchen, Cedric stood at the stove, stacking pancakes on a dish, while Des pulled mugs from the cabinet. Desmond made a joke and Cedric tilted his head back in a laugh that warmed me from the inside out. They looked so natural together. It was clear they had a history. In my brain's frenzy to piece this situation together, I hadn't considered that in a platonic sense, Cedric and Desmond had been together longer than either of them had been with me. Their friendship was established before I came along, and their respect for the other shown through.

"Good morning, Dot," Cedric smiled, sliding a small stack of pancakes onto a plate. Desmond smiled and poured a cup of coffee. I yawned and tiptoed over, planting a kiss on each other their cheeks, before sitting down to my breakfast. My stomach growled in appreciation.

"Good morning," I murmured, thankful for the pile of food. "I think it's technically afternoon," I said between bites. "How long do we have this place for?" Something in my heart gripping. A part of me wanted to stay in this little world we'd created between the three of us.

“Well, that depends,” Desmond drawled, taking up the seat next to me.

I raised a curious eyebrow at both of them. “On what?”

Cedric grabbed his coffee and took the other seat next to me. “On you. On us, and what you want to do.”

“I want this,” I replied easily. “Every day, I want exactly this. Breakfast with you both. But is that too much to ask?” Worry etched my tone. Surely one or both of them were about to pull the curtain back and tell me this was just a one time thing.

They both let out a small chuckle. “Don’t you think we’ve talked about this at length while you’ve been gone?” Cedric responded, eyes full of care. “It’s not too much to ask for because you’re not asking. We are. Desmond and I have decided we want you and we want you forever.” He shot Des a glance. “And I suppose there’s some benefit in joining forces... for Desmond at least.”

“Ouch! Good one, old man. Act like you don’t want to take my Harley for a spin.” His sly expression darted between us before catching my gaze. Des took my hand in his. “I know I’m stepping into something already established, and I don’t want to bulldoze that, not anymore. I realize how unfair that was of me to ask of you, and it was a shitty thing to try to pull on my friend, too.” He gave Cedric a sympathetic look. “But what I want, is for this to work with all three of us. I know I can only hope to gain the kind of love and respect you have for your husband, but I’d like to try for as long as you’ll allow me.”

My heart swelled and fluttered above the table. “And you’re okay with this, Cedric?” I asked, looking into his blue eyes.

“I am. Des wasn’t the only selfish one. I clearly recognized the need for another in our relationship, it just took my heart some time to catch up with my mind. Seeing you with him makes me happy. And I know he makes you happy too.”



“God, you guys are too perfect,” I responded, feeling sniffly and overwhelmed with love. “Let’s just stay here forever,” I joked, though neither of the guys laughed. “What?”

“I mean, we could...” Desmond shrugged, leaning back. “Because Ced and I bought it.”

“You what!?” I yelped, almost spilling my coffee.

“You love Georgia, Dot, and you should be close to your family. We need a space big enough for all of us so... Des and I bought it. With Odette’s help in finding it and telling us you ladies were flying down here. Do you like it?”

My sister *would* be a double agent. “Like it? I love it so much. And it’s in both of your names?”

“Sure is, Queen. We told you, this is the real deal. Though, the realtor did congratulate us on our marriage to each other,” Des laughed. “Didn’t he, honey dear?”

“I punched you pretty good once, I could do it again, hotshot,” Cedric smirked.

“What about work? Cedric, the hospital. Oh, my god... your promotion I completely wrecked it all...”

Reaching a loving hand over my knuckles he gripped lightly. “Actually, Dr. Gregory was so thankful for the distraction from his impending divorce, he offered me the promotion on the spot. I turned it down.”

“Why the hell would you do that? It’s everything-”

“*You* are everything, Dot. I was working so hard towards something I didn’t even want. I want to travel again. I want to make good on my promise to take you to Paris. As far as work, I want to go back to what I was doing before we met and work as a travel surgeon for a while. And then maybe open a private practice somewhere once we all decide to settle down. But I know one thing for sure, I’m never ignoring you for work again.”

Was it possible to die from happiness? “Cedric, you’ll be so great at that. The world deserves your talents, not just rainy-ass Seattle.”

He smiled and planted a kiss on lips. Before I allowed it to get to heated, I pulled back. “Okay, well, all of that sounds great. But I have some things to share as well,” I spoke up, everything falling together like puzzle pieces in my mind.

“We’re listening,” Cedric smiled, crossing his arms. The happiness around the table warming me like cinnamon dark roast.

“Odie and I are a package deal now. So where I go she goes and vice versa. And well, she’s married now, so that means Caroline too.”

Desmond chuckled. “I’m glad we opted for the twelve bedroom, Ced.”

Cedric nodded. “Of course. I’ve actually enjoyed having them both around.”

*Well that was easy.*

“Next...” I took a deep inhale. “I think I want to go to college. I’m thinking I want to study marine life and make a career out of it somehow. I know it sounds crazy but-”

“No,” Desmond interrupted. “That sounds absolutely perfect, Queen.”

“I love that idea,” Cedric beamed. “We’ll make it happen.”

Desmond stood, gathering our empty plates. “Great, so I’ll let your parents know we’re staying put for a while.”

My mouth fell open, and I thought I must have misheard him. “You’ll what?”

Cedric shot Des a conspiratory grin. “Oh yeah, didn’t we mention we met with good ol Reverend Queen yesterday? Told him the whole plan.”

“Nice guy,” Desmond remarked, washing the dishes with a soapy sponge.

“You’re kidding,” I said deadpan. No way were they being serious.

“We’re going to be basically neighbors while we stay in Georgia, Dot. I thought I’d let him know our...

unconventional... plan for a family setup from the get go. Believe it or not, he was more receptive than we thought he'd be."

"Said he knew you were hellfire, so you probably needed two men to hold you down," Desmond winked.

Somehow, somewhere in the middle of washing sudsy dishes and my sister coming over, literally screaming her happiness, everything clicked into place.

Pods come in all shapes and sizes, and somehow I'd found mine.

My perfect, unconventional pod.

FIFTEEN

*epilogue*

## *TWO YEARS LATER*

Rumbles of the black ford mustang preceded us as we rolled down to a stop in front of our emerald green home. The color of his eyes, the eyes of the man I loved, my husband. Desmond was anything but subtle and everything from his cars, motorcycles, and daring photography challenged the world to pay attention. “He’s not here,” I remarked, clutching several boxes in my lap.

“Good,” Des murmured before getting out and walking around to open my door. “I’ll bring in our luggage later. Let’s go inside and have a drink while we wait.

Nodding, I took my first deep inhale since stepping off the plane in Atlanta. The flight from Berlin to Atlanta had been long and exhausting. My mind flew alongside us with plans for when we arrived home. I sorted over every secret, every deception.

The door flew open before I could twist the knob and two yipping terror-balls shot out like bats out of hell. “There’re the newlyweds!” my sister shrieked. “Caroline is setting everything up. Of course we pulled out all the stops.”

Odette and her wife’s Yorkie pups jumped at my knees and bit at my heels. Scruffing the soft fur between their pointy ears did nothing to deter them and my calves were brightening with pink scratches from their blunt claws.

“Sit,” Des commanded, and like magic, they halted. Sitting on their rears, tails flapping like crazy. “Good boys.” He pulled out two treats from his pocket and sat them on the floor, but the canines remained steady, fixing their gaze on my strikingly handsome man.

“I still have no idea how you do that,” I remarked, giving his back a gentle rub.

“It’s all about showing them who the alpha male is,” Des said before his order. “Release.”

The pups snatched their treats and trotted off into the kitchen. “Where’d you get the treats and where’s my treats?” Odette crossed her arms at Des who rolled his eyes playfully.

“Little market in Berlin. You didn’t think I’d forget the little guys, did you?” He smirked at my sister’s pout. “And you of course,” he chuckled, taking one of the golden boxes out of my hand. “A mix of dark and milk, just like you requested.”

“Ugh, you’re the best,” Odie said, opening the box and popping a chocolate into her mouth.

“I’m going to go give Caroline hers,” Des said, giving me a kiss on the cheek and taking the other box. “I’ll make sure everything is in order, don’t worry.”

Once Des disappeared into the fragrant kitchen, I gave my sister another hug. “So, how’s it been while we’ve been away?”

“Pretty good. Jimmy Chew and Dobby have been keeping us company. The catering business is booming. Turns out with Caroline’s cooking and my party planning, we’re the perfect team. But enough about me. Are you excited?”

“Nervous and excited,” I smiled.

“Go on and scurry into the kitchen,” my sister instructed, peeking out the front door. “He’s here.”

My heart fluttered with anticipation as I made my way into our giant kitchen. Caroline had filled the table with flowers, decorations, and bruschetta, while the spicy fragrance of pasta bolognese caught the air. After greeting my sister-in-law, I found Des sitting at the table, holding another box, a box that made my heart burst in both love and a tiny bit of worry. He patted his lap with a smile and I came to sit, kissing his cheek. I was on my fourth semester at my university, taking the majority of my classes online and speeding ahead in my exams. I was on track to graduate early and then move onto a Bachelors Degree in Marine Science. My plan was to eventually work with the sharks and bigger fish at the Atlanta Aquarium. Our ceremony was a spiritual hand-fasting on

Desmond's favorite spot on Mount Townsend. During fall break, Des and I decided to take our honeymoon in Europe, just the two of us. We spent three weeks in India before settling for the remainder of the trip in Germany. I fell in love with Berlin, just as Des thought I would. Everything he'd promised it would be held up. Thought I might have preferred Indian cuisine over bratwurst.

"How long is their flight delayed? They said they'd be here yesterday and today is-"

Pausing in the kitchen in a sharp suit and tie, my debonair husband stood. Jumping up, I threw myself into his arms. "Surprise," I whispered as Cedric clutched me close, burying his face in my wild hair.

"This is the best birthday surprise ever," he breathed. "You bunch of con-artists, making me think I'd be spending my birthday alone."

"What's family for if we don't fuck with you every now and then?" Desmond grinned, sauntering over to give Cedric a bear hug.

My sister leaned over Caroline's pan and inhaled. "We hope you like the decorations and food. We made Tiramisu for dessert."

"We?" Caroline raised an eyebrow and my sister laughed.

"Okay, she did."

"Is that pasta bolognese? Ah, you guys, thank you." Cedric tucked me under his arm and I nuzzled into his warmth. Cedric had spent the summer traveling himself, doing *Doctors Without Borders* and helping with surgeries around the world. They'd even reached out to him about taking a corporate position on his off-travel time.

"We have one more surprise," I whispered, heart racing. My sister put a hand over her smiling mouth and suppressed a screech.

"Oh?" Cedric asked, pulling me close. "Is it kitchen appropriate?" He eyed my sister and her wife and I elbowed him in the ribs.



“Not that kind of surprise,” I teased.

Desmond handed me the box attached to a balloon with a saying that made my heart flutter, but Ced hadn’t read it yet. “That surprise comes later,” he winked.

“Ew, gross you guys. Just open the box!” my sister clapped.

Wiggling the top off, Cedric stood stunned. “Is this real?”

I nodded. “We took the test just two weeks ago and doctors in Berlin confirmed... We wanted to wait to surprise you-”

My husband picked me up and spun me around the room, kissing my neck and laughing. When he sat me gently on my feet, tears dotted his cheeks. “I can’t believe it,” he laughed.

We’d all three been trying for over a year now with not so much as a faint line. Then suddenly, poof, here it was. Our little miracle.

“Read the sign, Pops.” Desmond tugged on the balloon and Cedric looked up, reading it out loud.

“Happy Birthday Dad,” he laughed. “We’re dads now, Des.”

Caroline and Odie walked over, wiping tears from their bottom lashes. My sister was sniffing. She’d been hoping to have a baby in the house for so long. Laughter exploded in the kitchen at my sister’s next words. The radiance of our joy drowning out all other sounds. No ticking clocks, no idle television chatter, or lonely bags of popcorn popping. Just one enormous family, a house full of life and lives full of adventure excited about what the future would bring. Ready for our next adventure, as a team of five. Laughter echoed through our home at Odette’s declaration.

“This kid isn’t going to get away with shit, having three moms and two dads.”

THE END

## *acknowledgments*

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& to you the readers. For following along, reading, reviewing. I love you all.

*Let's stay in touch*

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