



LOVE

HATE

AND

Terrible

Dates!

← And this man is the worst Date. Ever.



A Romantic Comedy



ALINA JACOBS



LOVE, HATE, AND TERRIBLE DATES

A ROMANTIC COMEDY

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OTHER BOOKS BY ALINA JACOBS

Check out other books about characters mentioned in this one on my website:

<http://alinajacobs.com/books.html>

SYNOPSIS

I'm twenty-three years old. I can't be some billionaire's ward.

Even if he is hot.

It's a bad day when your boyfriend leaves you for someone with boobs and a butt faker than her Instagram pictures.

It's an even worse day when a hot guy in a suit shows up in your bedroom and tells you that you're his ward.

And it's a complete disaster when your ex sues you and threatens to take your dog.

I have no alternatives—I have to throw myself to Carl Svensson's mercy like a wretched Victorian romance heroine in order to save my dog.

I wish all I had to do was lounge around a haunted mansion in a pretty dress. Instead, Carl is forcing me to run outside in the morning, clean my apartment, and finally do something about my credit card debt. Yes, I am side-eyeing all of this.

Carl's in for a shock of his own, though. I'm a free-spirited, art-loving girl with tattoos, multicolored hair, and piercings. *Everywhere*. *Wink emoji!*

An uptight, suit-wearing investment banker is not going to change me. But it's a battle of wills that will determine whether he makes me a respectable person or not.

Carl is going down!

But not down on me...except for that one time...

This is a stand-alone, full-length, laugh-out-loud romantic comedy, complete with your new book bestie, a hot guy with a bad attitude and a heart of gold, and a happily ever after better than a glass of wine at eleven a.m.! Get your smelling salts ready, because this book is STEAMY!

To my Roomba that refuses to work and has completely given up on 2022 and is going to try again next year.

LIBBY

Was eleven a.m. too early to start drinking?

My corgi rolled over and grunted as I climbed out of bed and headed to the kitchen. I pulled out a box of leftover pizza and a bottle of wine. Then I climbed back into bed to continue my three-day wallowing session.

I scrolled through Instagram. Pictures of my old life taunted me—cool parties, gallery openings, and a boyfriend. The screen paused on a picture of my now-ex. He was a budding social media influencer. His hobbies included lifting weights and sleeping around with Instagrammers who had Brazilian butt lifts and breast implants.

We were supposed to be the next social media power couple. Instead, I had just been used.

“After all I did for him!” I yelled at my phone screen. Not only had I propped up Trenton’s ego—I had also pimped him out to my followers. Granted, I didn’t have all that many of them, but I’d had more than my ex.

I took a swig of wine and navigated to his Instagram profile against my better judgment. “Ugh, he’s still with her.” I took an angry bite of pizza.

Trenton's smug face stared up at me from his latest Instagram post. He was with that home-wrecker. My ex had promised me that she was just a fellow fitness influencer. *Right.* She was doing a lot more than lifting weights when I had walked into his gym to surprise him last week.

I chugged the rest of the bottle of wine.

The heartbreak was still raw. I had thought Trenton and I were forever. We had talked about getting married in the city sculpture garden.

I screenshotted the image and opened up a new post on my phone. *Bad enough to get cheated on, but did he have to do it with someone shilling oat milk lattes? Guess his promises of "I'll love you forever" are as fake as his abs and as fake as her butt.*

"Screw you," I slurred to my ex's picture in my Instagram post as the likes started trickling in. "And screw the rest of the men in my life. Including my godfather."

CARL

It was supposed to be easy money. My mother's great-uncle was the godfather to some poor indigent girl, and all I had to do was take her under my protection. In exchange, I would be given control of a prime piece of real estate in one of the hottest areas in Manhattan.

Done.

My brothers and I were already taking care of my younger half sisters. Libby would have fit right in with them.

Except that Libby was not a little girl like the feeble, elderly lawyer had made her sound. No, she was a grown woman—a *fully* grown woman—with tattoos, piercings, bright-green hair... and tits.

“She is your ward.”

I rubbed my jaw as I studied her Instagram feed. Along with random pictures of corgi-themed art, it was filled with pictures of her corgi and pictures of her with her corgi and pictures of her wearing clothes made out of trash that I supposed were meant to be some sort of corgi costume but really just made her look deranged.

I had gone to business school. I was not an artist. And I certainly didn't waste my life on social media like Libby

apparently did.

Scrolling through her feed, it was clear the woman was unhinged. There was a whole set of posts from yesterday about cheaters.

“Aww, did Carl find a girlfriend?”

“Go away, Liam,” I said as my brother pushed his way into my office.

Our older brother, Walker, was close behind him.

“Are you finally trying to make yourself more attractive to women?” Walker snickered.

Older brothers were the worst.

“I am already attractive to them.”

“Yeah, that bot that you were chatting with last night sure seemed real excited,” Liam said with a laugh, trying to grab my phone.

“Get out of my office,” I snapped at him.

“It’s adorable when he tries to act like Greg.” Walker elbowed Liam. “You need to try a little harder, little bro. You don’t quite have that ball-shriveling tone down.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I still have the photos of you from the weekend when everyone thought you were kidnapped but you were just tied up in a hotel room by some crazy woman who wanted her credit card bills paid off.” I lowered my voice to a soft snarl. “So if you don’t want those all over Reddit, I suggest you back the fuck off.”

“Jeez, man,” Walker complained. “Never mind. I take it back. You’re just as much of an asshole as Greg.”

“And to think we came over to help you shop for your new ward.” Liam shook his head.

I scowled.

“Come on, Libby can’t be as bad as Kiki,” Liam said, moving my papers aside so that he could sit on my desk. “She was trying to do a reenactment of the Salem Witch Trials and almost burned down my kitchen.”

I ran a hand over the back of my neck. “Libby is a twenty-three-year-old woman.”

My brothers were silent for a moment then exclaimed, “Holy shit!”

“Dude,” Walker said, shaking his head. “See, this is why none of us wanted to get mixed up in Mom’s family drama. It’s not worth it for a hunk of junk.”

“It’s prime real estate and a historic building. When I turn it into luxury apartments, it will be an asset in our portfolio. The best part is I won’t have to pay a cent to buy the building. Mom’s great-uncle’s estate will simply hand it to me. You’ll see,” I told them, standing up. “This is going to be one of Svensson Investment’s most profitable deals.”

But first, I needed to inform Libby that she was now my ward and things were going to start changing in her life.

LIBBY

“It is three in the afternoon. Why in God’s name are you still in bed?” I pushed myself up from the nest of blankets and clean clothes left over from doing laundry last week and peered around blearily.

Was I hallucinating from my post-breakup wallow, or was there a man in my apartment?

He made a noise of disgust and opened up my curtains, which were just old sheets that I had tacked up over the large windows in the bedroom.

“Oh my god, there’s a man in my room.”

He was young. Wearing a suit. *Hot.*

No. Not hot. I didn’t go for guys like him. Ever. I was an alternative, artsy girl who read tarot cards and made collages. I dated men with tattoos who made their own kombucha, not corporate finance types. Gross.

Oh my god, is he from the student loan company? The panic started to burn away the hangover. I hadn’t made a student loan payment in a year. Was I going to be arrested?

“Intruder! Stranger danger!” I grabbed a pillow and threw it at the man.

I was an artist, not a sportswoman, and the pillow landed harmlessly at his feet. The commotion roused Doug, my corgi, and he snorted then hauled himself out of the nest of blankets, took one look at the man standing in the middle of my messy bedroom, and hurtled off the bed at him.

“Untrained dog,” the man said, elegantly stepping back away from Doug’s clumsy attempts to cosplay a German shepherd. “Lives in filth. Sleeps all day. I can see why your godfather was concerned.”

“My what? He’s dead. That’s not any of your business,” I snapped. “It’s not filthy. I have a system of organization.”

His lip curled. He pointed to a pile in the corner. “That is not organization. That is trash.”

“That is art,” I countered, crossing my arms.

Cold gray eyes met mine. He adjusted his cuffs—French, of course—and walked toward me, placing his custom Italian leather shoes carefully so as not to step on the clutter on my floor that I was totally going to clean today.

“Also, how dare you come into my apartment?”

“My apartment,” the man corrected. He stopped in front of me.

I swallowed. He was tall. Like, really tall.

“No,” I croaked. “This is mine. I live here.”

“Yes, in a building that is soon to be under my management.”

“You can’t have this building. It belonged to my godfather...”

The man smirked. “Yes. Past tense.”

“That rat bastard! Seems like this week, I’m getting screwed by all the men in my life.”

Doug barked.

“Not you, baby!” I cooed to the corgi as he yapped at the handsome blond man’s heels.

“Your godfather was only looking after your best interests,” the man said in an annoyingly self-important tone. “He found your life situation very concerning. In his last will and testament, he left you to me as my ward.”

“I’m sorry—this is the twenty-first century, *sir*, not Victorian England. I am not your ward. I don’t need a guardian. I am a grown woman.” Was I drunk? Because it felt like I was still drunk.

“On the contrary, you are in desperate need of guidance.”

“Get out,” I demanded, pointing to the door. “Or I’m calling the police.”

He didn’t need to know that the police tended to steer clear of this particular building. No, not because it was a high-crime area; it was just that all the elderly women that had set up shop in this dilapidated apartment building had a habit of painting *au naturel* and got very excited when a police officer showed up in uniform.

“The will states—”

“I don’t care what the will states,” I said bitterly. “My godfather didn’t leave me squat. If he thinks I’m going to play along with his posthumous sexist bullshit, he can keep right on spinning in his grave. Evict me, I don’t care. I’ll move to an art commune in Vermont. Doug, make him leave.”

The corgi did his best to herd the blond man to the door. The man was not intimidated by the corgi.

Should have gotten a German shepherd or a mastiff.

“Fine. I’ll do it myself.”

I grabbed my mug of wine from the nightstand and hauled myself out of bed, stuck my feet in my fuzzy corgi slippers, and promptly tripped over some trash on the floor, arms flailing.

“Oof!”

Two strong arms caught me before I could face-plant on the floor.

“Your life is a disaster,” my nonguardian said, setting me upright. He turned on his heel.

“I don’t come into your house and harass you,” I insisted, hurrying after him.

Then I crashed into his very firm back.

“Ow!” I rubbed my nose.

“Blessed be!” Gardenia, my elderly roommate, greeted me. “Your Instagram account has been looking a bit basic, so I got you a little something to jazz it up.” She gestured grandly to the pink-and-white sculpture of a vagina that had caused the blond man to freeze in the living room.

“And who might you be, handsome?” Gardenia asked, switching gears.

“Carl Svensson,” he said, looking up to the ceiling to avoid looking at Gardenia’s very bare chest.

“Don’t mind me,” she said, grabbing his hand, “Just freshening up my henna tattoos. I’m attending a big

recommitment ceremony in a few days. It's going to be bangin'!"

"I just need to talk to Libby," Carl said, still staring at the ceiling.

Gardenia nodded sagely. "Is he your new nude model?"

"What? No! I don't do that!" I said, flailing my hands.

"Might do you some good. You need to spice up your Insta account." Gardenia waved a finger at me.

"People like the pictures of Doug eating watermelon," I protested, trying very hard not to think of Carl nude in my living room.

He's not hot. Not at all. So just get it together. I took a gulp of wine.

The corgi padded around in a circle and sniffed the giant plaster vagina.

"This is going to be a cute post and feature a two-hundred-thousand-dollar sculpture and be sex positive," Gardenia said, snapping a picture.

I inhaled the wine I was sipping. "You're trying to sell that thing for how much?"

Carl swore under his breath.

"What man doesn't want a vagina big enough he can stick his head in?" Gardenia demanded.

"I'm sure there's someone out there who doesn't want that," Carl murmured while I yelled, "Doug, no!"

My corgi had stuck his head in the, er, birth canal, for lack of a better word. He jerked his head back and yelped,

struggling. The large sculpture slid across the floor with a screech.

“Doug!” The corgi waddled backward, dragging the large pink vagina sculpture around the room.

“Now, this is quality viral content,” Gardenia said as I chased Doug around the room, trying to catch him.

“Doug, stop moving!”

He backed into Carl and yelped. Those gray eyes flicked from me to Doug to the large plaster vagina Doug was still attempting to struggle out of.

“Don’t act like you’ve never seen a vagina, a good-looking, strapping young man like you,” Gardenia said, slapping Carl on the thigh and making him jump.

“You can’t just do that, Gardenia,” I chastised as I reached down to pry the vagina off Doug’s head. I stood up, balancing the art piece on my hip.

The expression on Carl’s handsome face seemed apprehensive as he eyed the vagina.

“I wouldn’t put your head in this if I were you,” I told him. “You might get stuck.”

“Unless that’s your fantasy,” Gardenia crowed and elbowed him. “By the way, you are welcome to break in and surprise me in my bedroom any time.”

He tilted his head and regarded me. “Libby is the one who needs me.”

Uh. Is this, like, a sex thing? Please let this be a sex thing.

I set down the sculpture to try to get it together. *You cannot be attracted to him. Look at how his hair is parted. Not only*

that, he's clean-shaven. He is not your type at all.

“Your life is a mess. Do you even have a job?”

“I work,” I sputtered, waving to the living room that doubled as an art studio.

Carl scowled. “You need a job and better clothes.”

I perked up. “You want to take me shopping? I mean, I can always go shopping. I want this vintage eighties purple fur coat—”

Carl’s lip curled up. “Absolutely not. I am here to make you into someone respectable, not enable your bad habits.”

I ground my teeth in annoyance. It was the same argument I had had with my godfather.

I suddenly felt a little choked up. Even if he had disapproved of my life choices, Herbert had been the closest thing I had to family. Shit, my mom hadn’t even come to his funeral after dumping me on his doorstep when I was a toddler.

Maybe Carl would be like a family member. Maybe this could be a good thing?

But there was no sympathy in his cold gray eyes. Instead, disapproval wafted off him.

“You know what?” I said, hardening myself and crossing my arms. “Doug and I are fine. So thanks but no thanks, Carl. Now, if you don’t mind, get out of my life.”

Before he could lob a retort, someone banged on the front door of the apartment.

“I hope that’s the pizza guy with wine and a pepperoni pie,” I said.

“Your pizza guy delivers wine?” Carl was appalled.

“Only if you tip him,” I said, shoving past Carl and refusing to acknowledge his hard body as I wrenched open the door.

Instead of pizza, there was yet another man in a suit. Unlike Carl, though, he didn’t fill out his clothes. Their fabric hung off him, and his hair was less Ivy League preppy and more used-car-salesman greasy.

“Libby Gilbert,” he said, extending a manila envelope to me. “You’re being sued by Trenton Desoto for damages resulting from the slander posted on your social media accounts.”

CARL

““**O**h my god!” Libby said in disbelief, hands shaking as she untied the string around the envelope. “I’m being sued. I can’t be sued. I can’t do this! I don’t have any money to hire a lawyer. I don’t have any money to pay my credit card bill. Oh my god, Doug, what are we going to do?”

“You’ll flee to Canada,” Gardenia insisted and pulled out a suitcase covered in what looked like shellacked gummy worms.

What the fuck? This woman is absolutely insane.

“You,” I said, cutting through her hysterics, “are a disaster.”

Libby froze and turned to face me.

“As well as disorganized,” I said, ticking off the adjectives with my fingers, “you are ill-prepared and impulsive. I would say that it’s a wonder how you’ve made it this far in life, but looking around, it’s clear that you haven’t made it far at all.”

“I have a dog and an apartment,” she shot at me.

“And a swell roommate,” Gardenia added.

I focused my gaze on Libby so I wouldn't have to stare at the elderly woman's naked torso.

"You have nothing," I told Libby, "and what's worse is that you can't even seem to acknowledge the fact."

"Oh, so you want me to stand here and thank you for gracing me with your presence and offering to be a finance-bro version of Marie Kondo?" Libby said hotly. "As if. I like my life the way it is. I don't need you."

"The fact that you just got sued proves my point. You should be on your knees begging for me to help you get your life together. Instead, you're sitting here arguing with me while what is left of your miserable little existence goes up in flames around you."

"Screw you!" Libby shouted, waving the envelope at me. "You come in here with your suit and your briefcase and your money and you think that you're superior to me."

"Yes," I said, "I am, if only for the fact that I didn't just have to pull my overweight corgi out of a shoddily made sculpture of female genitalia."

"This is a two-hundred-thousand-dollar art piece," Libby insisted.

"I'll give you a discount though, Carl," Gardenia offered, "because you're hot."

"He's not hot," Libby hissed at the elderly woman.

"Yes, he is," Gardenia stage-whispered. "You should bang him." The elderly woman cupped one bony hand to her mouth. "Libby has piercings in her—"

Libby clapped a hand over the elderly woman's mouth.

“You’re not wanted here, Carl, so get out. I have to deal with this lawsuit.”

“If you were my ward, I’d deal with it for you,” I said.

She wavered slightly.

Maybe the property could still be mine.

But Libby set her head stubbornly. “I’d rather stick my head in this vagina sculpture.” She stuck her tongue out.

It was pierced.

I wonder how that would feel against your...

Don’t. Your brothers were right. She is not worth the trouble.

“You know what?” I said to Libby. “Fine. Exist in your own filth and inadequacy. Don’t come crying to me for help when you inevitably crash and burn. When I see you living in a box on the street, I’ll be sure to toss you a dollar. Now, if you’ll excuse me. I have other messes to clean up.”

LIBBY

““**O**h my god, I can’t believe that jerk-face sued you!” Brea, my best and only friend from art college, poured bourbon on two large bowls of ice cream. My friend liked sweets. And booze.

She sprayed a dollop of whipped cream from a can on top of each bowl and added unicorn sprinkles. Because things couldn’t be so bad if there were unicorn sprinkles, right?

“He’s just mad because you called him out for cheating on you with Ms. Butt Lift.”

I felt like I was dissociating as I ate my ice cream and scrolled slowly through Trenton’s Instagram feed. My ex and Ms. Brazilian Butt Lift were all over social media, talking about how I was jealous of their success. They even had the audacity to paint me as a crazy ex-lover, not a girlfriend, not someone who Trenton had said he was going to marry. Just some booty call who didn’t know her place.

“I hate him,” I seethed.

“You’re going to win the lawsuit,” Brea declared. “What you said was true. He did cheat on you. His abs are fake. He uses makeup to make them look that defined, and her butt is big, and oat milk is nasty.”

Brea petted the bowl of ice cream. “Nothing is better than dairy, isn’t that right?”

“What if I don’t win?” I wailed.

“Think positive,” Brea said firmly. She jumped up and went to my closet. “You’re going to go in there like a boss babe. Platform heels. Miniskirt. Push those boobs up.” She threw an armful of clothes on my bed. “Where are your heels?”

“I have Doc Martins,” I said uncertainly. “They have a pretty thick sole.”

Brea came out of the closet, combat boots in hand. “Guess they’ll have to do.” She then returned to the closet and pulled out a fake-leather dress.

Though I had tattoos, I didn’t particularly like letting everyone see all of them, and that dress was pretty revealing.

“We’re fighting back,” she insisted, shoving the dress at me.

I slowly put it on. It was a little snug. I had been hitting the pizza and wine pretty hard lately. And ice cream, of course. Not to mention pleather was not the most forgiving material.

“Tits up,” Brea instructed, snapping pictures. “Give me your best warrior roar.”

I growled—or tried to.

“You sounded like a kitten. Be a tiger! You’re going to strut into that lawyer’s office tomorrow and tell them that you’re not going to budge a single inch. Demand an apology from Trenton and a payout for emotional distress!”

Brea showed me the pictures. “See? You look badass.”

I did look like a boss bitch who was about to strut in there and get shit done.

“We’re posting this,” Brea said, grabbing my phone, “so that all your adoring fans can see that you’re not going to be intimidated.”

“You mean my meager few thousand followers.” I tugged up the top of the dress.

“Don’t be down on yourself,” Brea instructed. “This is the start of a juggernaut powerhouse social media fan base. They all love your pictures.”

“They like pictures of Doug,” I corrected.

“You keep pimping that corgi out!” Brea pumped a fist. “You’re out here making money.”

“Eh, sort of.”

“Be the girl boss. Let me hear you!”

“I am a boss.”

“Louder!”

“I am hot, and I am a boss!”

“Yas, girl!” Brea hugged me. “Don’t let those boys boss you around.”

“You’re right,” I said, determined. “No one is the boss of me, especially not Carl.”

“Ooh, is Carl the hot guy who’s in charge of your life now?”

“He’s not in charge of my life,” I said, annoyed.

Thinking about Carl, with his arrogance and his stupid suit, made me furious. I was tired of being jerked around by men

who thought they were better than me.

“I’m putting on my dark lipstick and all the eyeliner. They’re not going to know what hit them.”



FOR ALL MY PREPARATIONS, I was the one who felt intimidated when I walked into the conference room at the slick Manhattan law firm.

I felt out of place in my combat boots and big hair. My pleather dress kept riding up as I walked, and I pulled it down as I slid into one of the high-end French chairs at the long wooden table.

“Ms. Gilbert. Chester.” One of the lawyers, a pudgy, balding man, offered his hand to shake.

The chairs next to me were empty. Across from me was Trenton, glaring at me, arms crossed.

I can't believe I ever wanted to get married to this joker.

“Is your legal counsel on their way?” Chester asked.

My palms were sweaty, and I wiped them on the pleather. “I don’t have legal counsel. I’m representing myself.”

The lawyer glanced at his cocounsel, his eyebrow quirking slightly.

I'm not an idiot. I'm in the right, I reminded myself. I crossed my arms and leaned forward, hoping the tattoo sleeve made me look more intimidating than I felt.

“Let’s begin with our demands,” Chester said, sliding a sheet of paper over to me. “Trenton is asking for half a million dollars for damages to his reputation as a fitness instructor. He

lost out on a large deal with a household sports brand because of your allegations that his abs were fake.”

“They are fake,” I insisted. “He had me do the makeup on his abs.”

“There is no proof,” he said. “All his pictures look perfectly natural.”

“Of course they do. Because I’m a very good artist, if I do say so myself. I’ll get on the stand and testify.”

“They won’t believe you. We’ll make the jury think you’re a jealous ex,” another lawyer piped up.

“I’m not jealous! Trenton is a cheater; he was sleeping around.”

“You two were never in a relationship,” Chester said.

I was shocked. “Yes, we were. I posted about it.”

“She’s a stalker. I barely knew her,” Trenton declared.

His lawyer shushed him, took the paper back from me, and crossed out the number and wrote a smaller one.

“We’ll make you a better deal,” he offered. “In addition to the reduced settlement, you must post a public apology on your account and sign this nondisclosure statement pertaining to Trenton’s activities as an Instagram influencer.”

“I’m not signing that.” I scowled. “How about instead, Trenton posts a public apology to me and gives me a big payout?”

“I told you not to try and negotiate with her!” Trenton jumped out of his seat and pounded his fist on the table. “She’s mental.”

“I must be, for ever being in a relationship with you!” I shrieked.

“I’ll see you in court,” he yelled at me while his lawyers tried very hard not to roll their eyes.

“Fine,” I shot at him. “Because I’m going to win.”

“You’re not going to win,” Chester told me simply, with that total corporate-sociopath vibe that made me hate any man wearing a suit. “You can’t even afford a lawyer. We can make a fairly solid case that Trenton lost several sponsorships due to your social media post. You will lose and have to pay damages and lawyer fees. Take the plea bargain.”

I shook my head.

“Look,” the lawyer said with a sigh. “We’ll even reduce it to you having to make a heartfelt public apology and pay lawyer fees. How about that?”

“Fuck that,” I said hotly. “Go ahead and take me to court. You can’t squeeze blood from a stone. I’m up to my tits in debt. So sure, take my student loans and my credit card bills.”

Trenton was shocked. “What about your godfather’s money?”

“Didn’t leave me a dime.” I leaned back in my chair, glad for the first time since he’d died that my godfather hadn’t believed I was worth leaving an inheritance to.

See, the universe works in mysterious ways.

I smirked at all the men with their fancy watches and corporate titles who were probably wondering how they were going to be paid. “Guess law school can’t beat poverty.”

“She has assets,” Trenton insisted.

“What? My crappy fifteen-year-old MacBook that you have to hold the charger in place for or it shuts off? Be my guest.”

“No.” Trenton said slowly, “She has the dog. A corgi.” He gave me an evil smile.

I never hated anyone as much as I did my ex at that moment.

“You cannot take my dog. He’s a family member.”

“He’s property and an asset,” the lawyer said. “Corgis run several thousand.”

I couldn’t lose Doug. He was all I had left. I didn’t care what it took.

I blinked back tears. “Okay,” I said. “Okay, I’ll write your stupid apology. And—” My voice cracked. “Maybe there’s a payment plan?”

“I think we can—” the lawyer began.

“No,” Trenton snarled. “We’re going to court. I’m taking your stupid dog.”

“You can’t take Doug,” I cried.

“You’re going to pay for what you did to me.”

It was too much. I had to get out of there. I was going to break down sobbing, and I did not want to cry in front of all these men in suits.

I pushed back my chair, grabbed my bag, and rushed out, trying to find a bathroom.

I was going to lose Doug. I saw the writing on the wall. All those lawyers who didn’t care about the lives they ruined, who just wanted to win—they were going to ruin me.

I couldn't find a bathroom; instead, I stumbled into the lobby and collapsed behind a large potted fern. Doug was my only family member. Doug was always there for me, with his wagging little corgi butt and cold dog kisses in the morning.

I'm going to have to flee the country, I decided.

But with what money? Maybe I could steal a car. Then Doug and I could flee to Mexico.

But what if I was hunted down? I wasn't going to survive in prison, and Doug wasn't going to survive in doggy prison.

Maybe I could elaborately fake his death?

I wish. I could not fake Trenton's death.

That fucking asshole. Last time I got into a relationship.

I sniffled. I needed wine and a binge session of romantic comedies.

Also a lawyer.

But I didn't have money to pay a lawyer. I barely had money to pay my rent. Lawyers were, like, hundreds of dollars an hour. *Guess you should have listened to your godfather after all and earned a law degree. Also probably should have listened to him about Trenton.*

My godfather had not approved of Trenton, but then, he had never approved of anything I had done.

Who cares what he thinks? You have bigger problems.

I slowly gathered my things and peered around the plant to see if the coast was clear.

It wasn't.

Important Italian leather shoes made sharp clicks on the marble floor as a handsome man in a suit crossed toward the

reception desk.

Is that...

“Carl Svensson, here to see Chester. He’s handling the Aiken case.” There was that same imperious tone.

“And you are?” the receptionist asked.

Carl gave her a cold smile. “Tell Chester I’m here to shut down his case.”

Chester, the head lawyer from Trenton’s case, huffed out into the lobby a few moments later.

Carl’s eyes were an unyielding steel.

“We’re not dealing with your brother’s company outside of scheduled meetings,” Chester blustered.

Carl blinked and inclined his head slightly to look down his straight nose at the smaller man.

Chester’s voice trailed off.

“Done?” Carl asked quietly. “Good.” He opened up his briefcase and handed Chester a manila folder. “Tell your client to drop the case, or these pictures of him will be released soon as part of a documentary about the frankly un-family-friendly behavior of your client.”

“This is blackmail,” Chester sputtered.

“It’s hardly blackmail to have journalists produce a docuseries about a publicly traded company that manufactures some of America’s most popular children’s toys,” Carl said. “If that information also ruins the client’s marriage and impacts his ability to have custody of the children he’s already neglecting, then let the chips fall where they may.”

“This is illegal and unethical.”

“Get off your high horse. We both know that Aiken’s original lawsuit was bullshit and funded because he was jealous that my brother rejected his sister’s advances,” Carl said calmly.

“My client will not stand for this threat.”

“Tell him to have fun while his stock collapses and his marriage implodes.” Carl turned on his heel. I caught a whiff of masculine scent, like desert air on a cold night.

“Wait!” Chester ran after Carl.

The taller man paused and looked over his shoulder. He was like a Greek statue, except clothed. Because I totally did not want to see him unclothed. Nope, not at all.

“Let me just...” Chester waved his phone.

Carl was aloof and impassive, not at all acting like he had just threatened a man with personal ruin.

Chester paced around the lobby, talking in a frantic whisper while Carl waited.

“All right,” Chester said. “He’s dropping the case.”

Carl gave him another cold smile. “I’ll let our lawyers know to expect a letter with the good news.”

Normally, I would hate that type of underhanded knife-in-the-back manipulation.

Except that was exactly what I needed to save Doug.

CARL

I was about to step onto the elevator when I felt someone grab my suit jacket sleeve.

I looked down, expecting to see one of the lawyers, probably come to snivel and beg for the photos on behalf of their client.

I loved to win—loved to have the upper hand, loved the checkmate, loved seeing the realization on the faces of people who wanted to take down my family as they realized I was fully in control of the situation, and I was calling the shots.

Instead, there was Libby.

“Are you my new stalker?” I asked her lightly. Then I noticed her tear-streaked face and her disheveled appearance.

A possessive rage rose in me. Why? I had no idea. I didn’t even like her. “What happened?” I asked softly.

Libby shrank back from my harsh tone.

I grabbed her before she could run off.

“I, um...” She wiped at her eyes, smearing her eyeliner. “They’re going to take Doug.”

“Who is Doug?”

“You met him,” she said. “The corgi. My ex is going to sue me for Doug.”

“I see,” I said, releasing her. So she hadn’t been attacked. “You two weren’t even married. No judge is going to give some random person your own property for no reason.”

Libby scuffed the toe of her boot on the marble floor.

“He’s suing me for slander because I *might* have made a post about him, but it was all totally true!”

“Ah,” I said, clasping my hands behind my back. “So you made an unwise, immature, impulsive action and now are facing the consequences. Might I suggest a lawyer?”

“I can’t afford a lawyer.”

“That is just too bad,” I said in a slightly mocking tone.

“I don’t need a lawyer. I need you. Please,” she begged, “I saw you in there. You were amazing! That lawyer rolled right over. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“You’re right. I am amazing,” I said smugly.

“So you’ll help me?”

“Let me think about that.” I looked up at the ceiling for a moment then back at her. “Thought about it, and no.”

She glared at me. “Has anyone ever told you you’re a dick?”

“Has anyone ever told you your life is a disaster and you might want to consider, I don’t know, allowing someone with more experience at having their shit together offer a little guidance? Oh, right.” I tapped the side of my head. “I did. In fact, I think you told me to go fuck myself.”

I leaned over her. “Unfortunately for you, I’m not interested in helping you or your little corgi.”



“HONESTLY,” I muttered as I walked down the hallways to the large conference room at Svensson Investment. “As if I’m going to drop everything and help her after she refused to even consider being my ward.”

Maybe you should find a new name for that. “Ward” sounds like you are going to end up betrothed in a few months then have to ask the King of England permission to marry.

I did feel the slightest, barest hint of guilt. Maybe. Or I could just be hungry.

Libby had looked so sad, crying about that stupid little corgi. The possessive, protective part of me had wanted to turn around and confront the lawyers and her ex, to flay them then and there and be the hero.

You can’t save people from themselves, I reminded myself as I walked into the conference room where my older brothers were arguing about whether they should invest money into a Svensson space program. The minute you start bailing people out, they take it as a license to do something even stupider the next time.

Case in point? My older brothers.

Oh, they all liked to think that they were big bad billionaires, that the world was their oyster just because of their sheer awesomeness.

Not.

The only reason the lot of them weren’t in jail or chained to shady gold diggers was because of yours truly. I was the

Svensson brother that made all this possible. When the next youngest, Liam, had drunk-posted a racy photo of himself on his Instagram, I had spun it in the media and turned it into a call to action for body positivity. When the next oldest, Walker, had accidentally driven his car into the garage door of the girl he had just dumped after hooking up with, I had had the damages fixed and upgraded her living situation. While those two were the worst offenders of the Manhattan Svenssons, Mike and Beck, the next oldest, had had their share of issues, mainly stemming from their lack of tact and the fact that they had no issue insulting people whose intelligence they thought was beneath theirs—or in Beck’s case, flying off the handle and firing his employees. Yeah, I’d had to do quite a lot of damage control to save them both from being canceled.

My brothers were all morons, except for Greg, who was an asshole. And the oldest.

“I don’t want any of you going to the moon,” Greg snapped.

“We could put Belle’s name on a moon crater,” Liam offered. “I bet she’d totally forgive you then.”

“You puked in my car last week,” Beck reminded Liam. “You shouldn’t be trusted in a multimillion-dollar spaceship.”

“No one is starting a space program,” Greg snarled.

“Fine,” Liam said, “I’ll strap a thousand helium balloons onto a lawn chair and make my own spaceship.”

Greg sucked in a breath.

“Kidding, kidding,” Liam said.

“I say let them go for it,” I told Greg. “There are more Svenssons where they came from.”

My father, the leader of a polygamist doomsday cult, had had a number of wives and football teams' worth of sons. All my half brothers now lived in the small New York town of Harrogate, while our younger sisters lived here in Manhattan.

"You'd miss me." Liam wrapped his arms around me. "Poor baby Carl."

"I am not a baby."

Walker made a heart shape with his hands. "I'll always remember how you used to be so small I could stuff you in a pillowcase and swing you around."

My fucking older brothers.

"And I'll always remember the time I spent five hours carefully removing the superglue that one of your slighted girlfriends put in your hair after hooking up with you," I told Walker.

"Okay, so see, one, that was supposed to stay between us," Walker said, making a *What the fuck?* gesture. "And two, she wasn't my girlfriend. She was one of the many women I had on rotation. I told her that."

"Well, she obviously didn't get the memo," I told him.

Walker patted his hair. "To be fair, my hair has had a lot more volume since that incident."

"Are you all done?" Greg said, scowling.

"Change your mind about the space station?" Mike asked.

Greg's lip curled back. "We have more important matters to attend to. Carl," he barked at me. "Pull up the Instagram account."

I tried to keep my expression neutral as I pulled up Artemis Investment's Instagram on the large screen at the front of the conference room. There was a photo of Belle and her other female cofounders.

For all of the trouble my brothers got into, nothing was going to be as bad as that ticking time bomb right there. Belle and Greg had been circling each other, engaged in a cold war after Greg had, well, acted like Greg, and Belle rightfully wasn't going to take it.

When they finally did each other in, I hoped I was in another city.

"She is trying to earn the Women in Finance award," Greg said. "Belle wants the accolade so that people think their firm is cutting-edge because they're able to attract female candidates."

"To be fair," Walker said, "they are all female."

"We're going to make Svensson Investment more attractive to women in finance," Greg declared. "We're going to hire more than they would be able to absorb. As an added bonus, we're going to snatch the best candidates before Artemis can hire them."

"The Tech Biz awards are in six weeks," I said, navigating to the magazine's website.

They named a number of firms in various "best of" categories. The Tech Biz rankings were prestigious. Investors used them when looking for a firm to manage their money.

While Svensson Investment had good returns, we didn't have as many women working at our firm as we really should have.

“Too bad you ruined it with Belle,” Beck said. “If you had played your cards right, you could have had her come work here.”

A chill settled over the conference table. Belle wasn't just a sore point with Greg—she was the detonate button on his nuclear bomb.

“Speaking of dating,” Mike said loudly before Greg went off on Beck, “Carl, you haven't slept with your ward yet, have you?”

“God help me,” Greg said.

“She's not my ward,” I said in annoyance.

“Dang, was she another fake girlfriend?” Liam fell against Walker, laughing.

“Leave Carl alone,” Beck said. “He can't help it that he can't tell the difference between a bot and a real girl.”

Fuck my brothers.

“Guess I haven't had the luck you had in the dating department, because I'm not dating my fucking employees,” I shot at Beck.

“Fuck you,” Beck snarled.

I jumped out of my seat when he came after me.

“Sit down,” Greg roared.

Beck glared at me.

“Carl, did you blow this deal?” Greg asked.

“He insulted me, and you're worried about your deal?” Beck demanded.

“Yes, Beck,” Greg said slowly, like he was talking to an idiot, “because I care about money more than your hurt feelings. Did you lose that endowment, Carl?”

“No, there was just the property.” I frowned. “It needs a lot of work, and it’s infested by nudist artists.”

“Funny,” Greg said, “because the Weatly law firm just couriered over paperwork for a large endowment that our mother’s great-uncle set up for Harvard. All cash. And it needs a manager.”

“Shit.”

My brain spun. That endowment would be a huge win for me and for Svensson Investment. Dammit, I should have just taken Libby up on her offer to save her stupid little dog. Now it was probably too late. She would question my motives.

“Carl done fucked up,” Liam said.

“Does anyone competent want to try and salvage the situation?” Greg asked my brothers.

“Libby is not going to be cooperative,” I said in a rush. I did not want one of my brothers to swoop in and grab that money. Or grab her. “None of you would have the finesse to deal with Libby and her insanity. She’d probably tase you.” I smirked at the thought. “Though I’d pay to see that.”

“You better get me that contract,” Greg spat. “I have several line items I want to use no-strings-attached money on.”

“Of course,” I said, though I had no idea how.

I stood up.

“Are you going to go get my money?” Greg asked pointedly.

“I have a date tonight,” I informed him.

“With a real human girl?” Mike asked, prompting guffaws from my older brothers.

“Yes. She has an Instagram and everything, and there are YouTube videos of her.”



AS I HEADED across town to the restaurant, Libby occupied my thoughts, not my date.

I needed to figure out a way to tell her I wanted to help her without setting off her alarm bells.

Though I wanted the money, I loathed the thought of Libby back in my life. She was a disaster. And I already had enough of those in my life.

Surely, it couldn't be that difficult right? She was just one girl...

LIBBY

“**B**reathe,” Brea coached when I got back to her office in the Brookview Hotel building. She worked with Weddings in the City, making high-end gowns for the elite brides of Manhattan. She was also my go-to corgi sitter for Doug.

He made a snuffling noise as I clutched him to my chest.

“They’re going to take my baby.” I cried into Doug’s fur.

“You can’t let Trenton win,” Brea said, handing me a glass of champagne left over from a bridal meeting. “Drink that then sit over here. We’re going to read your horoscope. You need some motivation.”

I wiped my eyes and petted Doug as I sipped the champagne. It was a little flat, but hey, it was alcohol, and wasn’t that the most important thing?

Brea opened up her laptop.

“Your horoscope for today... oh, wow, this horoscope is so on point,” she said, snacking on a bowl of leftover salt-and-vinegar popcorn. “It says that events in your life are causing you depression.”

“Check,” I said dully.

Brea pushed the popcorn toward me. “It says that though you may want to run from obstacles in your path, the day ahead is a good way to test your individual potential and reach emotional success.” She turned to me and pressed her palms together. “You need to go out and seize the moment.”

“I want to go home and go to bed. Maybe it’s a lost cause.”

“Nope,” Brea said. “You can’t let these boys jerk you around. Get mad, then get even!”

I poured myself more champagne. The alcohol was starting to boost my mood. Maybe the horoscope was right. Screw my ex, and for that matter, screw Carl. I wasn’t just going to roll over. Carl was dead to me, and my ex was about to be dead as soon as I found enough evidence to bury Trenton. He wanted to come after my dog? I was going to show up in court with all the receipts.

“Let’s get him,” I said, picking up the champagne bottle and taking a swig.

“That’s my girl!” Brea whooped.

Doug barked, and I pulled out my phone.

“What are you going to do?”

“Find him and stalk him and gather proof that he’s a liar and a cheater.”

“Oh!” Brea exclaimed, clapping her hands in excitement. “You need a *Harriet the Spy* outfit!” She opened another bottle of champagne then fished around in the large bridal supply closet in their office.

“Yellow coat,” she said, handing it to me, “and you’re already wearing jeans and Vans. You just need the finishing touch. A fanny pack.”

I wrinkled my nose.

“Oh, come on, these are totally back in style,” Brea said, buckling it around my waist.

“I look like I’m three months pregnant.” I inspected myself in the large mirror in Brea’s office. I did not look like a chic, modern version of Harriet. Instead, I looked like a homeless woman.

“This is good,” Brea said as she tried to smooth down my frizzy hair. I needed to re-dye it. My roots were atrocious.

“You can blend in with the streetscape as you stalk Trenton.”

As Brea and I searched through various social media accounts to see if anyone had tagged him at a restaurant or bar where I could show up and stalk him, I fumed about Carl. Of all the men in my life, he was the worst. He couldn’t have even tried to help me? After showing up at my apartment uninvited then he just, what? Decided I wasn’t worth it?

Isn’t that what your parents did? Maybe they were onto something.

No, I told myself forcefully. You are worth being treated like a human being. Carl’s a monster, just like Trenton.

I hated that for someone I’d only seen twice in my life, he was occupying an unfair amount of my headspace.

This weekend, I’m burning sage and exorcising him from my life.

“There he is,” Brea said.

For a moment, my heart leapt, and I thought it was Carl. But she was showing me a picture of Trenton instead.

“This is that new bar that opened up a few blocks from here,” Brea told me. She gave me a crafty grin. “I think you should go pay your ex a little visit.”

“I think you’re right.”

CARL

I adjusted my cuff links before opening the door to the bar.

There was a lot riding on this date. The TechBiz was hosting the awards ceremony in conjunction with a Woman in Finance charity, and they were hosting a big ball. My brothers would all have their girlfriends there or would at least have a woman they were seeing on their arm.

I didn't want to suffer through yet another night of my older brothers making digs at me for not having a girlfriend or giving me their useless dating advice which, when followed, usually ended in a mess I then had to clean up.

Could I use one of the high-end matchmaking services? Sure, but the women on those sites only wanted rich husbands; they didn't care about anything else. Also, they all seemed to be a certain type of fake. My brothers had dated a few women from those pools, and whenever I had met them they all seemed a little too perfect, a little too interested in being the next Mrs. Svensson and enjoying all the perks that came with being a billionaire's wife. I wanted someone real and down-to-earth, who wanted to build a future together and who wasn't after me for clout or money or because she wanted a huge

wedding and a baby that she was only going to interact with for Instagram photos.

That's why I had stuck to more generic dating sites or trying to meet in person, but I had been trying and failing. All those online dating sites were mainly bots, and anytime I went out to a bar or club, I seemed to only attract the fake type of girls that I was trying to avoid.

Maybe it was New York. Manhattan seemed to house nothing but fake people.

Libby was pretty real, my mind unhelpfully reminded me.

Yes, Libby was a bit too real. I needed someone a little less real.

Chrishelle seemed to fit the bill. She was bubbly, and her wavy honey-colored hair was thrown over her shoulder in a slightly messy ponytail.

"Hi!" she cooed when she saw me walk in. She slid off the barstool and gave me a one-armed hug.

"Did you run into traffic?" I asked her, returning the hug. She picked up her clutch, and I slid onto the stool across the table from her.

"No," she said, giving me a nice smile, "I took the train. I know a lot of girls don't like the train, but I think it's such an authentic New York experience, and besides, I love seeing all the different people. There was a girl with a corgi in a backpack just last week." She giggled. "Isn't that wild? It was the cutest thing."

A girl with a corgi in a backpack? It sounded just like a picture I had seen on Libby's Instagram account of her riding the train with Doug, snoring, tongue hanging out, in a ratty backpack with patches all over it.

It can't be. Also, stop thinking about Libby on your date.

“I’m going to run to the little girls’ room,” Chrishelle said, grabbing her clutch. “Order me a drink?”

“What would you like?”

“Hmm, surprise me!” She blew me a kiss and strutted off to a far corner of the bar.

I cataloged her with a clinical eye.

She was wearing a short powder-blue checkered dress and white stilettos, a far cry from the black miniskirt and combat boots Libby had been wearing earlier that day. Also, Chrishelle had one singular, tasteful tattoo on the inside of her wrist, not the full sleeves of tattoos Libby had.

Who cares what Libby has? She's out of your life. The lawyer can find some other sucker to be her guardian.

I forced my attention back to the drink menu.

What would Chrishelle like? She seemed pretty but fairly down-to-earth and low-maintenance. Maybe a tequila and watermelon. Seemed unfussy but still fun, like her.

I leaned back in my seat after I ordered that and a scotch from the server. Maybe Chrishelle was my happily ever after. Maybe she would be the one.

My date smiled at me as she approached the table then screamed as a woman with green hair and a bright-yellow raincoat came flying out of the bathroom behind her.

“Don’t do it!” Libby screamed. “She’s ovulating!”

LIBBY

The champagne wore off right as I arrived at the restaurant.

I slowed down my pace to try to see if Trenton was still there. The windows were small, and I couldn't get a good view inside without looking like a homeless creep.

Should I go in? Call it off?

Libby: I don't think he's here.

Brea: Are you just standing across the street?

Libby:... No.

Brea: Did you even go inside the bar???

Libby: I have not drunk enough for this.

Brea: *Heart eyes emoji* I believe in you!

I tugged at my large yellow jacket. "We're doing this for Doug." I wrenched the door open and did a quick survey of the restaurant.

Young parents on date nights, a group of girls meeting for happy-hour drinks, and awkward first dates. I didn't see

Trenton, but there was a feature wall behind the bar that blocked several tables from view.

My eyes darted around. Maybe I could wander through and pretend I was meeting someone. My mouth felt dry. There was a reason I had never tried to become an actress.

“Did you want to sit at the bar?” the hostess chirped at me.

“Uh...” I looked toward the bar then almost fell when I saw Carl sitting at a tall table nearby.

Shoot, did he see me? He was studying the menu intently. *Fuck, fuck, fuckity-fuck!* I pulled up my coat to try to hide my face.

“I’m just waiting for a date,” I whispered, hoping Carl didn’t notice I was there.

Fuck my life. Literally fuck it.

“Oh, okay,” the hostess said loudly. Why was she shouting? Why was everyone trying to draw attention to me? Would it be weird if I crawled on my hands and knees to the bathroom?

Yeah, of course it would be weird. “I’ll just pop into the restroom,” I said, quiet as a mouse.

She gestured across the restaurant.

I didn’t even have the wherewithal to check for Trenton. All I could think about was getting to safety.

I threw myself into the bathroom, trying to calm my breathing. *You should have just left*, I berated myself. *Now you’re trapped in here. You’ll have to spend the next three hours in here while Carl does—well, what exactly is he doing here? Is he meeting a client?*

Of course not, my mind said. He's probably on a date.

A date? What kind of woman was he dating?

We don't know. He could be meeting a friend. Also, literally not the most important thing right now. Carl is dead to you. Eyes on the prize. I went to the mirror and pretended to fix my makeup.

Beside me at the vanity was a young woman in a pretty, feminine dress with nice honey-colored hair in an elegant yet casual ponytail cascading down her shoulder in a way I had always wished I could get my own unmanageable hair to. She was bragging to a girl at the other sink.

“He’s a billionaire,” she was saying, “and fucking hot. I’m so tired of working, and I’m so freaking tired of dating.”

“Ugh, totally!”

“I’ve downloaded the ovulation app,” the girl with the good hair said, scrolling through her phone. “I’ve got the charm turned all the way up. He’s such an idiot! He’s completely buying my fun-girl vibe.” She gave a mean laugh. “I’m leading him around by the nose, and then I’m going to lead him back to my apartment tonight. I told my roommate to get lost, because your girl is about to be pregnant.”

Jeez, I thought as I pretended to dab on mascara. There really are some cutthroat bitches in this city. I felt sorry for the guy who was about to go home with her.

“Your baby is going to have the best features,” the other girl said.

“I know!” Good-hair girl bragged. “I hope the baby gets his gray eyes.”

I almost stabbed my eye out in shock with my mascara brush.

Gray eyes. Oh no.

Carl.

“He’s totally infatuated with me. I’m going to have a cute baby and a big monthly paycheck.”

“Score!”

They high-fived, and the girl, Carl’s date, left.

Oh. My. God.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror. Compared to Carl’s date, I was pale, and my eyes were still red from the crying and the overindulgence in the leftover champagne earlier that afternoon. *Don’t get involved*, the rational part of me argued. *Carl refused to help you; why should you help him? In fact, this is karma. He’s going to get what he deserves.*

I glanced at the door. She was probably out there right now, turning on the charm. Carl was an idiot. Those corporate types always were blinded by their own egos. But still. I felt awful thinking about him getting trapped with *that* for the next eighteen years.

He’s not going to listen to you if you try to tell him. Guys like him refuse to listen to women like you. He was probably already caught in the web. There really wasn’t anything I could do. I had my own problems.

“Yes,” I whispered to myself, “but you need good karma right now. What if saving Carl tips the scales of justice in your favor? Also, think of the poor, innocent baby. They can’t be born out of lies and a hole poked in a condom by an entitled skank. Just go over there, calmly ask to speak to him privately,

then lay out all the facts. He can make his own decision. You'll have a clear conscience when this blows up like a gender-reveal party in his face."

I adjusted my rain jacket, tightened the bun on the back of my head, and marched out into the bar.

But Carl and his date weren't just chatting. She was leaning toward him, her fingers trailing up his arms. He looked completely besotted and—was she leaning in for a kiss?

Hell no.

"No!" I yelled to gasps from the restaurant patrons as I sprinted toward Carl. "Don't do it! She's ovulating! She wants you to get her pregnant!"

He jumped out of his seat to turn on me, gray eyes furious. "What is wrong with you?" he growled.

"Aside from the fact that you're leaving my poor dog to be kidnapped," I said, my voice sounding screechy, "I'm in a better state than you. You're about to become a father."

"You are unhinged. Call the cops, Chrishelle," he said to his date.

"No, call Judge Judy," I said stubbornly. "She's trying to baby-trap you. I heard her in the restroom."

"I would never!" Chrishelle cried, practically throwing herself into Carl's arms, making sure her fake boobs mashed up against his chest.

"She has a pregnancy app on her phone," I told him. The other diners were watching the scene. We were the free entertainment that evening. "She's been tracking her fertility cycle."

Carl looked like he wanted to crawl into a hole and die when I mentioned a fertility cycle. He shoved Chrishelle off him.

“You bitch,” she screeched at me. “You were eavesdropping on me.”

“It’s not eavesdropping if you’re relaying your sinister plan to every rando in the women’s restroom.”

“What happened to the sisterhood code?” Chrishelle demanded.

“What happened to the code of not being a complete asshole?” I said. *People really have lost it in this city.*

“Excuse me,” the hostess said forcefully. “You all are causing a scene. Get out of the bar, or we’re calling the police.”

“Yeah, call the police on her,” Chrishelle yelled, stabbing me with one of her fake nails.

“All three of you need to get out,” the hostess said. “And consider yourselves banned for life.”

CARL

““I was banned from a restaurant!” I exploded at Libby on the sidewalk.

“Small price to pay for not getting trapped in the world’s worst prison by this gold digger,” Libby said harshly, jerking her thumb at my date.

Chrishelle, who had been alternating between screaming at Libby, crying, and begging me to continue our date somewhere else, swung her handbag at Libby. “You ruined my life.”

“Yes, if it wasn’t for these meddling kids, you could have been a billionaire’s baby momma.” Libby shook her fist at the sky dramatically. “Foiled again! Guess you’re going to have to find some other sucker except, oh wait.” Libby took out her phone and snapped Chrishelle’s photo. “I’m going to do a public service announcement and make sure that everyone knows to steer clear of you.”

“Don’t you dare,” Chrishelle warned, swiping for Libby’s phone. “Delete that photo! I’m going to sue you.”

“Get in line!” Libby hollered, dancing away. She pulled off the ridiculous yellow raincoat and threw it at me then put her hands up in a boxer’s stance. Between the ripped jeans

spattered with paint, the piercings, and the tattoos all over her arms, if I had to bet money, I'd put it all on Libby.

"You're crazy. She's crazy," Chrishelle said, stabbing a finger at Libby. "If anyone here is going to try and baby-trap you, it's her, not me." She shot us both one more dirty look then flounced off.

"As if I would ever put his penis anywhere near me," Libby shouted after Chrishelle.

I took a deep breath and let it out as Libby turned back to me, dusting off her hands. I wordlessly handed her the coat and her phone.

She immediately started writing a social media post. "Gold digger zero, Libby one. And"—she snapped a photo of me—"I rescued a gentleman in distress."

"Did you just fucking post that?" I growled.

"Yeah, I just fucking posted that," Libby said, holding the phone to her chest. "This is good stuff. I'm going to get tons of likes on this post. I might even get a sponsor."

It took all my self-control not to grab her and pry the phone out of her hands. But that would not be a good look. If people saw me manhandling the much-smaller woman, it would take more than a well-placed threat to make that problem go away.

I turned on my heel and abruptly walked away from her, wishing I'd had the good sense not to bring Libby into my life in the first place.

"Hey," Libby called, her feet shuffling on the sidewalk as she trotted after me. "You're not even going to say thank you?"

I stopped short, and she ran into me then jumped back.

“Thank you?” I said with disgust.

“Yes,” she said stubbornly, the wind whipping her ridiculously colored hair around her face. She pulled a piece from her mouth.

“As if I’m going to thank you for making a scene in the restaurant.” I threw up my hands. “I don’t know why I was so concerned about you posting to social media, considering half of Manhattan has probably seen the video of you acting insane.”

“It was for a good cause. You should thank me, maybe buy me a drink.”

“I will never take you to a public place, ever,” I told her. “As I have said before, you clearly cannot handle polite society.”

“Me?” she said, pressing a hand to her chest. “You’re the one with no home training. I just saved your life—literally saved it—and you can’t even say thank you. In fact,” she added, “you should be begging to be *my* ward.”

“What? No. I don’t want anything to do with you.” I was horrified.

“I can help you with your dating game. You clearly need some hand-holding. Next time, you may not be so lucky. Next time could be some extra-crazy woman who collects naïve blond men and traps them in her spooky mansion.” She wagged her fingers at me.

My nostrils flared. “I’m not naïve.”

Libby tipped back her head and laughed. “Homegirl was this close to baby-trapping you and crushing you like a bug.”

She made a little pinching gesture with her fingers in my face.

“I don’t need your help,” I said, abruptly turning to continue to walk.

Libby jogged alongside me. “Think about it,” she said, sounding slightly out of breath. “This could be a good thing, you know, a little quid pro quo. I could help you get a date that’s a normal girl, and you can help me win my court case and save my dog!”

I stopped again.

“Oh, thank god.” Libby bent over, wheezing. “Your legs are really long, and you walk fast. Where’s your big fancy billionaire car?”

“Exercise is good for you.”

“Or you could just drink a lot of red wine.”

“That myth has been debunked.”

“Well, shoot.”

“And I don’t need your help, because I’m never dating again,” I lied. That’s what I told myself after every terrible date, then a week later, there we were.

Maybe Libby could help you with your dating game?

Not that I would ever admit it out loud, but Libby had saved me. I needed to be more careful. I absolutely would have gone home with Chrishelle. It had been a while since I’d gotten laid, and I hadn’t been thinking clearly. If Libby hadn’t run her off, I might have been a father by morning.

“You, Libby, are a mess. I don’t clean up messes for just anyone, and when I do, it certainly isn’t cheap.”

She looked down at her scuffed canvas sneakers.

“But,” I added, “there is something I want from you.” I tipped her chin up so she was looking at me. “I want you to be my willing ward.”

LIBBY

His willing ward?
Carl's words were bouncing around my head, and lower down, but we weren't going to acknowledge that.

Brea: So is he going to seduce you???

Brea: You better shave just in case.

Libby: I'm not shaving for a man I don't even like.

Brea: You don't want him to think you aren't trying to improve. Think of Doug.

I looked down at the corgi next to me on the bed. He was wearing a little Captain America outfit that Brea had made. It was part of my strategy to grow my social media following. I desperately needed sponsors. Even though Carl was now going to help me save Doug, I still had the rest of my life to fund. Rent wasn't going to pay itself, and all the emotional drinking and eating I'd been doing lately wasn't cheap.

When I first started my social media brand, I had had all these grand visions of creating an art-centric account where I

would be super creative and make all these art pieces and post about them and, more importantly, sell them and prove to everyone at my art college that I was a real artist.

Yet here I was, pimping out my corgi for social media likes.

I posted the pictures of Doug. Hopefully, Chris Evans would see and give me a shout-out.

If that didn't work, maybe I could pivot my account to calling out cheaters and gold diggers. Though I hadn't actually posted Carl's picture, because I couldn't afford to piss him off and lose Doug, my post about Chrishelle had gotten tons of likes. A publisher had even messaged me to ask if I would make a post in exchange for a free copy of a self-help book and a swag bag. *Yes, please!* I was moving up in the world of social media influencing.

Maybe one day, I could even afford to buy a nice condo. I wasn't thinking a big penthouse. Really, I just wanted a place that had a window and a nice tub I could take a hot bath in. The only bathroom in my current apartment had a cracked claw-foot bathtub that was currently being used to dye lingerie. I was not going to be able to shave in it.

"I can't believe I'm doing this." I looked at the sink, wondering if I had enough flexibility to hoist my leg up without breaking something.

"You should leave everything *au naturel*," Gardenia insisted, bustling into the bathroom.

Did she knock? No. Why? Because there was no door.

Like I said, I needed a new place to live.

She swirled the clothes around in the tub. The toxic, bright-colored water bubbled ominously as Gardenia pulled out

a bright-pink corset.

“We’re all meeting for a coupling under the moon,” she told me. “No one is shaving. One gal is doing very intricate beadwork on her—”

“I think I’m good,” I interrupted. Yup, I was definitely shaving.

Not that Carl was going to see anything, but you never knew.



“Ow!” I groaned in pain an hour and a half later as I limped from the bathroom to my bedroom. I was sure I had pulled something, and I was panting from the effort of contorting myself to shave in the tiny, cracked porcelain sink.

I was smooth and ready for my ward classes tomorrow, though I wasn’t sure what they would entail.

“Can’t be too bad. Maybe it’s, like, walking around with a book on your head.”

I poured myself more wine and gingerly lay down on the bed to check my latest social media posts. I was dejected when I saw that my corgi post hadn’t gotten as much activity as I had hoped.

“Maybe I need to get a real job,” I said to the ceiling. But I hadn’t finished my college degree, so there weren’t a ton of receptionist positions or other pink-collar jobs that I could get that would still allow me time for art and photography.

“There’s always waitressing. Or,” I reminded myself, “I could just start showing my tits on Instagram.” I poured myself another glass and scrolled through social media,

looking at the accounts of people I used to go to school with who were living amazing, perfect lives.

What the hell was I doing? Was Carl right? Was I a disaster? I flopped back on the mound of pillows on my bed. The room that I had painted with a multitude of colors of leftover paint I had found while dumpster diving spun around me.

“Where did it all go wrong?” I murmured to Doug as my eyes closed and I drifted off... only to be awakened by heavy footsteps, a painfully bright light in my face, and a man barking, “Wake up, failure!”

LIBBY

““**A**nd you think I’m the crazy one?” I shrieked at Carl. I fumbled for my phone. It was five thirty in the morning. “What the hell?”

Carl pulled the comforter off me, and I scrambled to grab hold of it.

“Wouldn’t a dating profile that made you look like a normal person be better than showing up at my apartment to harass me?”

Doug, who was a sound sleeper, finally snorted awake, sniffed, and then started barking at Carl. It probably would have been more intimidating if the fur on one side of his face wasn’t smooshed upward.

“You are a failure,” Carl said, his deep voice authoritative and patronizing. “Your godfather wanted you to have a job, get an education, be healthy, have good financial sense, and be a productive member of society—and dress like an adult. Today, we will start with the issue of your health.”

“I’m calling the police!” I shrieked.

“No, you’re not. This was our deal.”

I glared up at him. “You’re supposed to be a mentor, not a drill sergeant!”

I wrapped the comforter around me. I had had a long, unrealistically optimistic to-do list yesterday. The only thing I had managed was shaving. Laundry, cleaning, cooking? Nope. Didn't do it. And now I had no clothes and was wearing swimsuit bottoms and a T-shirt with a hole at the armpit. I had been planning on doing laundry before Carl showed up, but here he was, standing at the foot of my bed in a super-tight workout shirt that showed every rippling muscle and wearing pants that showed off a very nice ass.

I wiped at the drool on my mouth. "Just let me get some breakfast."

"You can eat after we work out." Carl walked around to the side of my bed.

I opened my mouth and closed it. "Excuse me... did you say work out? No, I don't work out. I'm not an exercise person. I don't even watch sports on TV. Can't we go for smoothies or something?" I asked desperately.

"Put on your workout clothes. We're going for a run."

"No." I crossed my arms.

Carl leaned over the bed and grabbed the collar of my T-shirt.

"You are supposed to be willing," he said with a soft growl that sent shivers down my body.

Well, color me willing and turn me on.

No. You are not fantasizing about this asshole.

He wants willing? I threw off the comforter and stood up.

Carl swore and covered his eyes. "Are you wearing a swimsuit?"

“I need to do laundry. The struggle is real.”

“Put on some clothes.”

“You’re the one who wanted me to get up,” I reminded him, going to one of the hanging bags where I stored my clothes. No, I didn’t have a dresser, because my building had no elevator and there was no way I was hauling a piece of furniture up five flights of stairs.

I pulled on the closest thing I had to exercise-wear, which was a sports bra under my T-shirt and a pair of shorts.

“Okay.” I power posed. “I’m ready to survive my first day as your ward.”

Carl gave me a critical look. “I doubt it.”



IT WAS STILL DARK OUTSIDE, and the morning air was chilly. I hadn’t even been running thirty seconds, and I already wanted to die.

Around us in the park, other early-morning exercise freaks ran sanguinely along the paths. They had perfect form and seemed like they were actually enjoying this torture. Some of them even managed to talk to each other, laughing as they ran.

“Move!” Carl barked at me over his shoulder.

I wheezed as I tried to keep up with his long legs and the grueling pace he had set. Even Doug with his little corgi legs was in better shape than I was, and his favorite pastime was lying on his back on the couch.

I tried to say, “I drank too much wine last night for this,” but I didn’t have the breath to form the words.

“We haven’t even made it a tenth of a mile, Libby,” Carl said, running back a few yards to where I was limping along.

Snot ran down my face. “Breather?” I begged, staggering over to a nearby bench and collapsing on it in a fetal position. “This is torture.”

Doug licked my face.

“You didn’t even run that far.” Carl gave me a disapproving look. “Or that fast.”

“This was a death march.”

He pointed upward at something, and I raised my head. If my arms didn’t feel like Jell-O, I could probably throw a rock and hit it—the entry sign to the park.

“God, take me,” I moaned.

Carl’s strong arms wrapped around my waist and hoisted me upright. I wobbled slightly as he set me on my feet. “You’re a disgrace,” he said and handed me a tissue so I could blow my nose.

“I think we’ve had enough exercise.”

“Absolutely not,” he said.

“I’m not going to make it. I’m going to be sore for a week,” I whined.

“You can walk the track while I run it,” Carl said, pointing with a knife hand down the long winding path.

“So we’re compromising,” I said. “That’s the start of a healthy relationship.”

“You need to be walking at a three-mile-per-hour pace,” Carl instructed.

I nodded, pretending like I knew what the hell he was talking about.

“What are you waiting for?” he barked. “Move.”

I started trudging along.

“Faster,” Carl snapped.

Fuck this guy. I increased my pace.

Carl walked beside me, criticizing my form because apparently, I had been walking incorrectly the last twenty-odd years of my life. Who knew?

Finally satisfied, he increased his pace to a run.

“You don’t want to walk and enjoy the scenery?” I called after him.

“No,” he growled.

I admired his body and his backside as he ran at a quick, effortless pace in front of me. His shoulders and hips moved in time, and his muscles rippled.

What I didn’t admire was the fact that in seemingly no time at all, I heard his familiar footsteps coming up the path behind me.

“This is a two-mile path,” I complained. “Are you cheating? You can’t have run it already.”

“It’s not that long,” Carl said. “And pick up your pace.”

I forced myself to walk faster. You might think that I would be able to move fast after living in New York City for years. You would be wrong.

The footsteps sounded from behind me again.

“Are you freaking kidding me?”

“You’re halfway there,” Carl said, passing me.

My leg was getting a cramp, there was a rock in my shoe, and I wanted pizza and a Coke.

Beside me, Doug whined.

“Do not,” I warned him. “I am not carrying you. I will leave you out here to fight with the pigeons for scraps. Come on, Doug, let’s go,” I urged, feeling slightly nauseous.

Behind me, Carl was fast approaching.

“This isn’t fair!” I shrieked.

“Why don’t you try to run the last bit?” Carl said with a slight smirk.

“Screw you,” I panted.

“Run, ward,” he shot back, doubling back to me. “Just run on the balls of your feet.”

“Like a T. rex?” I wheezed.

Carl snorted. “Sure, if that gets you moving.”

I tried running, pretending I was a dinosaur in Jurassic Park because I was secretly a five-year-old.

“There you go,” Carl said, matching my pace.

I wasn’t running as fast as he was, but I was doing it! I was running, and I didn’t feel like my lungs were about to explode. Even Doug was running along beside us, tongue hanging out and drooling everywhere. Sure, it probably wasn’t the most attractive picture, but we were doing it! I was self-improving.

“Nice,” Carl said when we made it back to the park entrance. He gave me a small smile.

This was it! I was feeling that mythical runner's high. The colors around me were super bright and all blue and green and purple and...

"I don't think this is right," I mumbled as my legs gave way, and I staggered then collapsed against Carl, groping him inappropriately as I tried to find a handhold before I sunk to the ground in an inelegant heap and blacked out.

CARL

““**Y**ou are a hopeless mess.”
Libby didn’t answer.

“Does she need an ambulance?” a concerned man asked, holding up his cell phone.

I shook my head. “She’s fine.”

I shooed Doug off of her. The corgi had decided that he, too, wanted to take a nap. I easily picked Libby up and began the walk back to her apartment. She fit perfectly in my arms.

If this were Victorian England and we were both dressed in those ridiculous outfits like the people in the movies my little sisters loved, this might be a classic ward-guardian moment. As it was, Libby was in a T-shirt, her colorful tattoos snaking out from under the sleeves. And I wouldn’t be caught dead in a top hat.

Libby struggled awake a block away from her apartment.

“What are you doing?” she mumbled.

“You passed out,” I informed her.

“You pushed me too hard,” she said, her eyes half-closed.

“You just haven’t had any exercise, ever. You’ll do better tomorrow,” I assured her as I pushed through the front door

that wasn't even latched, let alone locked. I climbed the stairs to her unit.

“Um...” She tried to struggle out of my arms, but I held her close. “I will never do that again. I think we can safely check off the exercise box. Done. I'm healthier.”

When we arrived at her apartment, I set her down on the couch. She leaned back on the pillows that were embroidered with psychedelic patterns.

I took her chin and looked into her eyes, trying to determine if she'd gotten a concussion. I hadn't seen her hit her head, but it never hurt to be careful.

Her brown eyes stared into mine, and I released her chin and poured her a glass of water. “Have you fainted before?” I asked, handing her the cup.

She sipped it. “No, never.” She wrinkled her nose. “I think I was just hungry.”

“I can get you something,” I offered.

Doug jumped up on the couch to sprawl in her lap.

She beamed at me. “Really? Okay, so I want three tacos with chips, guac, and sour cream, and a frappe from Starbucks, double chocolate chip, please.”

“Uh-huh.”



I RETURNED fifteen minutes later and handed her the cup.

Libby wrinkled her nose. “This does not look like a Double Chocolate Chip Crème Frappuccino.”

“It's a kale smoothie. With protein powder.”

“Where’s my taco?” she asked in shock. Even the corgi looked appalled.

“This is a healthy smoothie.”

She sipped it, and her face contorted. “I’m eating my leftover pizza.”

I shook my head. “You’re obviously fine. I should have made you walk.”

She stuck her tongue out at me. There was that piercing again.

“Don’t you want some pizza?” she said, pulling a box out of the fridge.

“It’s seven in the morning.”

“I know. It’s so early,” she said, taking a bite of a cold slice and tossing a piece of crust to Doug while she turned on the toaster oven.

“I’m going to a meeting. You and your emotional-support stuffed animal can wallow in your bad decisions.”



“THAT WAS A FUCKING DISASTER,” I fumed as I walked into the ancient brick building where Libby’s godfather’s lawyer practiced.

It was one of those old-school offices. The guy had been in business since the late forties, and it showed. The walls were covered in heavy wood paneling. The porcelain pendant lights cast a dim glow over the creaky wood furniture, and a metal fan slowly oscillated this way and that while an elderly secretary slowly typed on a typewriter.

I waited, trying not to seem impatient as she hit the return bar and the typewriter dinged.

She slowly pulled down her glasses and peered at me. “Can I help you?”

“I have a meeting with Mr. Weatly,” I informed her.

“Let me check the calendar.”

She opened up a large leather book and pulled out a ruler and slowly ran it down the page, looking for the meeting entry. My name was the only one there.

“Has Mr. Weatly been busy?” I asked, forcing myself not to point to my name under the ten o’clock slot on the page.

“We’re winding down,” she said.

“Mr. Svensson.” A large wood door to my left creaked open, and Mr. Weatly tottered out, balancing on his cane.

“So good of you to drop by. Come in, come in. Mrs. Manchigo, could you please bring us some coffee?”

“I’m quite all right,” I demurred.

“Nonsense.” The two elderly people moved like they were suspended in molasses, and I was horribly afraid one of them was going to fall and break a hip. “I don’t want to be any trouble.”

“You must have a coffee.”

He ushered me into his office. “You’re my last client. I stayed in business to manage Herbert’s affairs. The stubborn old coot stayed on this earth decades longer than he had any right to.”

“A hundred and three is quite an achievement,” I said, hovering over Mr. Weatly as he slowly lowered himself into

one of the low leather chairs in his office.

“He was so concerned about that girl,” Mr. Weatly continued.

“Yes. I can see why.” I frowned.

“She needs a firm hand. I’ve met her once, and I thought I was going to have a heart attack.” Mr. Weatly laughed then started wheezing and coughing.

Please don’t let him keel over, I begged silently.

“I’m hopeful that you can bring her to see the light,” he said as the door creaked open and Mrs. Manchigo tottered in, a tray of coffee shaking in her hands.

“Please allow me,” I said, jumping up and taking the tray from her.

“Such a nice boy.” She squeezed my arm. “Better than all five of my husbands.” She winked at me and slowly made her way out of the office.

I poured Mr. Weatly a cup of coffee.

“I thought about marrying her in my sixties, but all her husbands ended up dead.” He sighed. “Also, I did have to manage the account. Herbert never trusted anyone else to handle his affairs. He was a good friend, and I’m determined to do right by him.”

“I understand,” I said smoothly, trying to steer the conversation back to the matter of the property and the money. “I just came from Libby’s. She does seem to want to try to improve.”

“That’s more progress than Herbert was able to achieve.” The lawyer poured cream in his coffee.

“May I ask,” I said before taking a sip of the coffee that tasted like it had been sitting in a pot and cooking since the early two thousands. “What were the exact criteria that Herbert wanted Libby to meet? I have my own list, of course—an exercise regimen, waking up before sunrise, keeping her apartment clean, that sort of thing.”

“All that seems well and good. Herbert didn’t have criteria. He just wrote that she needed to be someone respectable, someone marriageable. As she is right now, no man is going to marry her. Libby has such a large inheritance that will need to be managed—he doesn’t want her attracting the wrong sort of man.”

What a lunatic. Sure no man was going to marry Libby, but this was the twenty-first century. Herbert should have been more concerned that his goddaughter was a functional adult, not that she got married.

“You mean the building?” I said, trying to keep the disdain off my face.

“Buildings,” Mr. Weatly corrected. “It’s been so long since I had to write up that will that I had to go back through Herbert’s affairs. It appears as if he owned a number of properties, not just the apartment building.”

Mr. Weatly handed me a large envelope stuffed with property deeds.

I flipped through them. I would have to map all of the addresses, but just at a glance this was a treasure trove of prime real estate.

“Then Libby’s dowry.” Mr. Weatly handed me another folder. “I’m not a finance person, so I’m hoping that you will be able to take over the management of these accounts.

Herbert had no children or immediate family, only Libby. He, of course, doesn't trust her with such matters."

"Of course," I murmured, scanning through the ancient yellowed stock certificates and typewritten pages. "This is an incredible amount of money. Does she know about this?"

"Of course not. That's why she's supposed to be your ward. You take control of these finances and make all the decisions. When you think she's ready, then you can tell her. Or," he added, "not tell her at all. Women don't need to concern themselves with financial matters. Just give her a shopping allowance."

I knew it was bullshit. Women could be lethally brilliant at finances, as evidenced by Artemis Investment trouncing my brother on more than one occasion. But if I wasn't legally required to tell Libby about this money, why not just slip it under the Svensson Investment management?

"Once I determine that you have successfully turned Libby into a respectable young woman, I'll sign off on having all the assets transferred to you," the elderly lawyer assured me.

It was wrong, and I knew it.

It's not forever, I tried to argue with myself. You can't tell her now because you don't have all the information. Who knows—maybe some of these stocks are worthless. Maybe there are liens against some of this property. You don't want to get her hopes up then dash them. That wouldn't be very nice. Right?

You're keeping this information from her to protect her.

LIBBY

““I need to get out of this deal,” I said then winced as Brea accidentally poked me with a pin.

“Think of Doug!”

The corgi barked.

“I don’t know if Carl’s even going to help. All he’s done is given me the nastiest smoothie of my entire life and tried to kill me on a criminally early morning run. What if he’s just jerking me around? I need to make money to either hire a lawyer or move to Mexico and live off the grid.”

“Your social media career isn’t making you money?” Brea asked.

“I get offers, but a lot of them are scams.”

“Spice it up a little bit,” Brea said, adjusting the sleeve on her latest fashion creation. While my friend made exquisite bridal gowns, she also liked to try more offbeat and sometimes, very... creative dresses for her more fashion-forward brides.

Those weren’t for everyone. In fact, they basically weren’t for anyone. But I knew that every once in a while, Brea liked to make something that wasn’t the standard mermaid, ball

gown, or A-line skirt. What I had on now could only be described as a jumpsuit–ballerina tutu hybrid.

I looked in the mirror. I knew what kind of sexy photos got likes. This outfit did not fit the bill.

“I can’t believe none of my brides want to wear this,” Brea said, admiring her creation.

I can.

“Make a sexy Kardashian face.”

I tried to manage something more flattering than a grimace as Brea snapped my picture.

“This one is great,” she said, showing me the photo. “You can really see the detail on the dress. You should post it.”

I really shouldn’t, but I didn’t have the heart to tell my friend it sucked. Brea had brought over wine and leftover wedding cake, after all.

It’s not like your influencer career is doing that well, I reminded myself as my friend happily posted the photo. Someone might as well get some enjoyment out of it.

“I’m reposting this on the Weddings in the City account too,” Brea chirped. “That should give you some traffic.”

“Thanks,” I said, attempting to be grateful.

“Now, you did a lot of exercise today, so do you want to do Indian or Chinese tonight?”

Before I could answer, my phone went off then went off again.

Carl: What is wrong with you?

Carl: Did you wear that out in public?

Carl: That is not the type of outfit a respectable young woman wears.

Carl: In fact, nothing you wear is decent.

Libby: I love all of my clothes, and at least my clothes have personality, unlike your suits.

Carl: I'm taking you shopping tomorrow.

Carl: Wear something nice. We're not going to a thrift store.



“THIS PLACE IS FILTHY.”

“Why are you here so early?” I mumbled, turning over and pulling the covers over my head. “I haven't recovered from yesterday.”

“It's noon,” Carl said, pulling the covers off me. “It occurred to me last night that there is no reason for me to take you shopping just so that you can bring your nice new respectable clothes back to this pigsty.”

“Corgi-sty is probably more accurate,” I said, yawning. I stretched and was rewarded when Carl sucked in a breath and turned away from me, clearly uncomfortable. I was not wearing a bra, though I had done laundry. Go me!

I studied Carl while I climbed out of bed. He was wearing casual clothes compared to his usual suit. They were clearly not cheap, though, and definitely of better quality than the clothes I had scrounged out of the various thrift shops I frequented.

“I'll leave you to get dressed,” he said abruptly. “Then we will clean.”

Carl was out in the kitchen, arranging a literal Walmart's worth of cleaning products on the counter when I came out.

There has to be a way to help Doug other than scouring my apartment with an arrogant billionaire. Also...

I put my hands on my hips and glared at him. "You're a billionaire. Can't you just hire someone to clean my apartment? Isn't this costing you, like, thousands of dollars to be here? Don't you—and I—have better things to do today?"

"I promised your godfather," Carl lectured, "that I was going to take over guardianship of you and turn you into someone that could be introduced into high society."

I narrowed my eyes. "Why, though?"

"Because you're clearly a mess. I got a staph infection just looking at this kitchen."

"No, I mean, my life isn't a mess. This is just the way I choose to live it. But why do you care if I'm 'respectable'—I used air quotes—"or not? What's in it for you? My godfather barely had any money. He lived in the penthouse unit of this building, and I do use that term loosely because he had to abandon one of the rooms due to a pigeon infestation and didn't have the money to get it fixed."

The corner of Carl's mouth twitched.

"Yeah, it was pretty dire. I finally grabbed a few feral cats and locked them in there. They took care of those pigeons. It was Armageddon. Then, of course, I had to put Doug in there to take care of the cats."

Carl was looking at me in horror.

"Anyway, why even bother? This building can't be worth your time. Not to mention, there's no inheritance money,

right?” I prodded, hoping that Carl would say, “Actually, no, I used my rich-man powers and found all this money! You can move somewhere nice and get massages weekly and pay for a lawyer for Doug.”

But instead, Carl looked out the window.

“Your godfather is my mother’s great-uncle.” He took a deep breath. “My mother and I had issues, to say the least. She abandoned me and my brothers after neglecting us in a compound in the middle of the desert with our horrible father. I’ve basically given up on her, but by proxy, that meant I never had contact with her side of the family.” He turned back to look at me. “Your godfather was a link to her, and I feel obligated to carry out his last wishes.”

“Oh,” I said, looking down at the dusty floor. “That’s very noble of you.”

He scowled.

“So,” I said after a moment. “Does that mean we are related?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Good,” I said, “because I was definitely checking out your ass earlier, and I don’t want to make this weird.”

CARL

She was checking me out.

S *Don't make this any worse than it already is,* I warned myself.

I felt almost bad that I had lied to Libby. Which was strange because that was the name of the game. Half-truths and whole lies had made me and my brothers rich and, more importantly, saved my brothers' hides.

Who cared if I had lied to Libby? Who cared if I never actually wanted to know my mother's family? There were billions of dollars on the line. And only a man with a strong will to do whatever it took to get that money was going to see it.

I set a bucket of soapy water on the floor and handed Libby some newspaper and Windex. "You can start on the windows."

Her eyes widened in horror. "We're going to be here all day!"

"You slept until noon, so I think you can manage." I opened up a trash bag and started throwing garbage into it.

"What are you doing?" Libby shrieked. "That's art!"

“This?” I held up an empty wine bottle with googly eyes glued to it. “This is not art; this is trash.”

“I’m going to sell that,” she said, grabbing the bottle back from me. “Five dollars. So don’t throw that away.”

I ground my teeth. The googly eyes on the empty wine bottle mocked me.

You should just hire someone to clean. But the point was that Libby was supposed to clean, and if I wasn’t here, she would just stand in a corner on her phone while everyone around her worked.

I swiped a soapy rag over the open shelving in the kitchen. “Have you ever dusted in here?” I demanded.

She looked up from where she was emptying a knock-off Roomba into a trash bag.

“Um, I think it might have been cleaned when I moved in?”

“God help me.”

“It’s not that bad!” She set the Roomba down and let it run.

I showed her the rag from dusting just one shelf.

“Oh, gross.” Libby wrinkled her nose then sneezed.

I continued to work on the kitchen while she filled another bucket with soapy water and went to work on the windows. There was one set of floor-to-ceiling windows that opened up like French doors onto a small balcony that didn’t look all that safe.

“Be careful,” I told her, wondering if I should make a call to the city and have the building condemned. *Wait until everything is officially signed over to you, then do it.*

Hopefully, by then, I would have upgraded Libby's living situation, because I was not going to move her in with me, especially not if she was bringing that dog with her.

The corgi, though his ancestors might have been shepherders, was not really getting the hang of it and was bouncing around the Roomba, barking and trying to herd it.

Probably good for him to get a little exercise.

Libby had music playing—some type of punk rock music with a woman singing in German. She sang along in a breathy voice while scrubbing at the windows that were covered in thirty years of grime.

While most people hated it, I loved cleaning. There was something satisfying about taking extreme disorder and beating it into submission.

At the compound, it had been chaos. Even though I had tried to keep my own space as clean as possible, because we had no air-conditioning, the windows to the dilapidated trailer where we lived were always open, and everything from our clothes to the makeshift beds to us kids was covered in dust and grime. There wasn't running water unless you pumped it out of a well by hand.

After my older brothers had rescued the first crop of us kids out of the compound and moved us to Harrogate, the first thing Greg had done was douse me in dish soap in a bucket outside and scrubbed me down.

Ever since then, I had been obsessive about ensuring that my life, my business, my home, and my person were as clean and orderly as possible. And it had worked, until I met Libby.

I opened up the cupboard under the sink and cursed at all the empty bottles with googly eyes.

“All of these can’t be art.”

“It’s my livelihood,” she insisted, coming into the kitchen.

“How much for the whole lot?” I argued.

“Five dollars a bottle,” she said stubbornly.

“There are”—I counted silently—“twenty-three here. I’ll give you twenty dollars for all of them.”

“No discounts. You’re not a friend or family.”

“You’re never going to sell these,” I insisted, shaking a bottle at her.

She glared at me. There was a smudge of dirt on her nose.

It was adorable.

“Thirty dollars,” she said finally.

I pulled three ten-dollar bills off the wad of cash in my pocket and handed them to her.

“Nice doing business with you.”

“Likewise,” I said, then loaded all the bottles into a trash bag.

“You can’t!” She grabbed the bag from me.

“I bought them, so they’re mine now,” I said, scooping up more bottles.

Doug was barking at our arguing.

“You’re upsetting Doug,” she said, grabbing the trash bag.
“I renege on our deal.”

“No take-backs.” I grabbed the bag back from her.

The corgi barked louder.

“Aw, Doug, are you upset?” Libby called, walking around the counter. “Poor—oh, no, Doug, no!”

I looked over just in time to see the corgi, who had finally gotten the hang of herding, herd the Roomba through the open French doors then off the balcony.

I held my breath then cringed when there was a loud crash. A car alarm blared.

Libby crept onto the balcony and peered over the side.

“So, I have good news and bad news,” she said, blocking me from coming out onto the balcony. “Good news is that no one was hurt. Bad news... you might need a new car.”



“DOUG, I can’t believe you killed Carl’s car,” Libby scolded the corgi, who was flopped on his back in her arms while we stood on the sidewalk and surveyed the damage.

“You can buff that out, right?” she asked uncertainly.

The windshield was shattered, and the hood was crumpled. Smoke wafted out from the ruined engine.

“No, I can’t buff this out. It’s totaled,” I said, incredulous.

“I’m sorry,” she said meekly. “Doug didn’t mean it.”

“Of course, he didn’t mean it; neither of you mean anything. That’s why your life is such a disaster,” I roared.

Libby shrank under my anger.

Cool it, I reminded myself. You need her to cooperate so you can secure those funds. You can just buy a new car.

But this one was a limited-edition carbon-fiber sports car. I’d had to wait a year to buy it, and they were not making any more of them.

“I’m sure you can take it back to the fancy car place and have them fix it, right?” she asked hesitantly.

“Sure,” I said, forcing myself to relax my shoulders. “I’ll just spend the millions to have it fixed.”

“Millions?” she squeaked.

There was a hissing noise. The smoke turned black, then an inferno engulfed the car.

I grabbed Libby and pushed her inside a nearby doorway as the fireball erupted and singed the brick.

“Oh my god!” she exclaimed when I released her.

The corgi sneezed as we surveyed the damage. In the distance, sirens blared.

Libby let out a noisy breath and shifted Doug to her hip. “Okay, I don’t think that we’re going to be able to buff that out.”

LIBBY

““**W**ow, this place is spotless,” Gardenia said, traipsing into the living room. I was laying on the floor—yes, the floor, because it was clean enough to eat off of—now that Carl and I—well, mainly Carl—had spent the entire day and some of the night cleaning.

Carl had even turned off the water, disassembled the toilet, and cleaned that.

“Color me impressed! You’ve been a busy bee.”

“I’m so sore,” I complained.

“You must be giving good head if you convinced a man to clean,” Gardenia said, setting down her bags.

My eye twitched as a little piece of grass fell onto the spotless floor. I had a closet full of new cleaning supplies and a new nonautomatic vacuum, courtesy of Carl. As soon as Gardenia’s stuff was out of the living room, I was going to vacuum.

“I should get me one of those tongue rings. That shit’s magic.”

Gardenia came to lie down on the floor next to me. She was quite a bit sprier than me. “Doing a little *Savasana*?” she

asked, stretching out.

“Doing a little dying.”

Gardenia flexed her back into a supported Fish Pose. “Nothing like yoga after a hard day.” She slowly rolled over to transition to a plank. “What do you think your handsome billionaire is going to get you once he experiences your labia piercing?”

My face went hot. “We’re not... it’s not like that. He’s my guardian. We’re not... no way. I don’t even like him.”

Gardenia transitioned to a Cobra Pose. My back ached just watching the elderly woman.

“Nothing wrong with sleeping with a handsome man. Embrace your sexuality. And you can put that labia piercing to good use. I’m thinking about getting one myself.”

That piercing, like the other ones, had been part of my bid to make myself unique when I was in college. I’d had a roommate who was everything I wasn’t—pretty, with good hair, from a nice, respectable, normal family. She had always been slightly appalled by me and liked to talk shit about me to her friends whenever they came over to our dorm. The piercings and the tattoos had been a way to make her cringe. Also, they had had the added effect of making her high school-sweetheart boyfriend at the time start to look in my direction.

Not like I wanted him. He was so gross. Bitsy—she had told everyone that he was going to propose to her and they were going to get married and live happily ever after. And I certainly hadn’t known that her boyfriend was on the couch when I walked in and announced to Bitsy and her little stuck-

up high-society friends that I had just gotten my nipples pierced.

Her boyfriend had literally licked his lips and asked if he could see them. It was at that moment where Bitsy's life goal changed from marriage, babies, and a big house, to destroying me by any means necessary.

Of course, I would never flirt with, let alone sleep with, someone else's boyfriend, no matter how much I hated a bitch. There were lines you didn't cross. But Bitsy's boyfriend apparently didn't have the same morals and would drop by unexpectedly to try to catch me alone. Bitsy had found out, blamed me, and called me a slut to the whole school.

Yep, first semester of freshman year was pretty bad, and it all went downhill from there. Then it had kept on rolling downhill even after I dropped out of school to crash into the brick wall known as Carl.

I wondered what he would say when he found out I had all these piercings. *He's not going to know. How would he know?*

Well, we were going clothes shopping tomorrow. *There are dressing rooms. There's no plausible scenario where Carl sees all of your piercings.*

Was it bad that I kind of wanted to see his reaction?

"Word to the wise," I told my roommate. "Stay away from piercings in sensitive places. It hurts like a bitch."

"Even during sex?" Gardenia asked.

"Well," I said, my brain coming up with creative scenarios in which Carl's tongue would be on the piercings, "no, not during sex."

~

I FIDDLED with my eyebrow piercing as I waited at the front door of the locked boutique the next morning. Doug was in his little backpack, head tipped back, snoring. I wished I was in bed.

Now that my apartment was clean, I actually had the desire to start sketching again. It was like now that all the clutter was gone from my home, the clutter in my mind had been cleared too. Of course, instead of making sellable art, I had just made sketches of Doug and, inexplicably, of Carl, so I was still broke.

I ran my fingers through my hair—I still hadn't had the energy to dye it, and my roots were not attractive. Where were the shopworkers? I banged on the glass and yelled, "Hello?"

The door opened a crack, and a young woman with a perfect blond blowout frowned at me.

"This shop is closed for a private shopping experience," she said, "but the charity clothing shop down the street is open. They have social workers there too."

And this was why I hadn't made it through that fancy art school, because of women like this one. She was judging me and clearly finding me lacking.

"I'm supposed to be here," I said forcefully.

"And she's early. It seems spending time around me has been a positive influence after all." Carl's tone was smug as he walked up behind me.

The sales associate froze with her hand on the doorknob as she stared in awe at the droolworthy maleness of Carl in all his billionaire-suited glory.

Not that I found it attractive, of course, but basic girls like her sure did.

“See,” I said. “I’m meeting someone.”

Carl placed his large hand on the small of my back. I suppressed a shiver. “May we come in?”

“I—yes.” The sales associate was flustered.

I walked inside feeling like a million bucks. This was my Julia Roberts *Pretty Woman* moment. Except that Julia Roberts was tall and willowy and had fantastic hair and a great body, while I was, let’s say, maybe not the target client for this boutique.

I set the backpack down and tugged at the hem of my motorcycle jacket that was covered in patches.

“We’ll show you our options,” the sales associate said sourly, “and pull items that might be good for your new look.”

I gazed around at all the clothes, wondering if they were going to look right on me. I tended toward ripped jeans, black tights, and a generally punk aesthetic. You could hide a lot with an oversized T-shirt.

These clothes were very fitted. I didn’t see a lot of spandex. I liked my clothes roomy so I could breathe. All the outfits hanging on the walls in the minimalist boutique seemed stiff and uncomfortable.

We’re doing this for Doug.

Doug had tumbled out of my backpack and was pawing at Carl, who was seated in one of the designer German chairs by the window.

“Do you need some new clothes, too, Doug?” Carl said to the dog in a soft tone. He picked him up and let him sit on his

lap.

For some reason, my ovaries were starting to go into overdrive, watching Carl sit there and absently pet Doug while he answered emails on his tablet.

“Why don’t you try these on?” the sales associate said, shoving a handful of garments at me.

“She needs underwear too,” Carl called out. “She’s been wearing swimsuits.”

“I did laundry, dude,” I shot back at him.

After I was prodded and measured and handed a bra that was way too high-maintenance, I was led to a dressing room that was nicer than my bedroom with enough space to lie down in. Inside were a plush bench and large mirrors with mahogany-and-brass frames on three sides of the room.

I hung the clothes up on the array of hooks and stripped off my clothes. I hated wearing a bra. I liked to be free. I couldn’t think when I was all constrained.

I fanned myself and flipped through the clothing selections. They looked like exactly the sorts of clothes that Bitsy had always worn and that my godfather always wanted me to dress in. The first option was a black pencil skirt with a white silk blouse that I was going to sweat through immediately. It had a black pussy bow at the neckline. Low black pumps finished off the look.

“I’m going to look like someone’s secretary that they’re banging every day at one p.m. after lunch,” I muttered, holding up the outfit to me.

My phone beeped as I was struggling to undo all the little buttons on the shirt and disentangle the bra from its mini hanger that it was attached to like an octopus. I tapped the

screen and read the message that had been sent to my Instagram account. Someone wanted to hire me as an influencer. My hands shook from excitement.

This was it; this was my big break!

I read through the message. It was a little vague about what it was I was supposed to be promoting. Until I hit the link.

“Wow, those are a lot of very creative dildos,” I remarked, scrolling through the web page.

Did I really want to sell sex toys? It wasn't like I was selling art, which was what I had originally intended to use my Instagram account for, so what did it matter if there were a few sex toys scattered among the random posts and corgi photos?

Libby: I'm definitely interested.

Libby: What are the specs?

SparkleAmanza: Come to the address at this pin and I'll provide you a box of product.

SparkleAmanza: Feel free to get creative with it.

SparkleAmanza: Payment is twenty dollars a post.

Libby: Creative is what I do best!

“Oh my god, yes, yes!” Even if I only made five posts, that was still a hundred dollars, and this could lead to other sponsorship opportunities.

I was jumping up and down, imagining my soon-to-be amazing future as a successful Instagrammer when there was a knock on the door, which then opened.

“We have some other options that Mr. Svensson wanted you to try on,” the sales associate said, then screamed when she saw me half-dressed.

“My bad,” I said, covering my boobs.

“Do you have...” The sales associate grimaced at me in distaste. “Nipple piercings?”

“Yes, and they feel great when a guy sucks on your boob,” I said with a straight face.

The sales associate practically threw the next outfit at me and slammed the door shut.

It was yet another black-and-white combo. I sighed as I inspected the black pinstripe skirt suit. It was this or the pencil skirt.

I pulled on the pencil skirt and the white blouse then slipped on the pumps while I tried to make my hair not look like I had given myself bangs when I was drunk one night.

I walked out to the main sales floor, where the sales associate was flirting with Carl. The audacity of some women.

But Carl was single, I supposed. He certainly wasn't with me. So what if he wanted a shallow, vapid girlfriend?

I coughed loudly.

Carl stood up and slowly walked around me, eyeing me critically. “You look—” he said and paused. “Serviceable.”

“For sex or something else?”

The sales associate made a noise of alarm.

“Serviceable,” Carl said, adjusting my collar, “for a real job.”

I reached up to make his tie crooked in retaliation. “I have a job. I’m an influencer and a failed artist,” I quipped, trying not to let the self-pity creep into my tone.

Carl tilted his head. “Oh, no,” he told me. “You’re going to be quitting Instagram and finding a real career.”

CARL

As if to give me a giant middle finger, after I had bought Libby thousands of dollars of professional attire, she had proceeded to spend the next twenty-four hours furiously posting insipid content on Instagram.

“Honestly,” I said to myself as I sat in my office and scrolled through her various social media feeds. “Does she really think being an influencer is ever going to be a real career?”

The photos were all over the place and included the various pieces of garbage art in her apartment, her dog, and selfies.

I peered at the photos. One of them was her modeling some of the clothes I’d just bought her. Libby had added a pair of ridiculous fake cat-eye glasses to the ensemble. The top button of the sheer white blouse was undone, and with the way the shot was lit, I could make out the outline of her tits.

I slammed the phone facedown on my desk. “Don’t stare at her.” But it was all my brain could think about.

I picked up the phone and took a long look at the photo, then my breath caught. Were those piercings? Surely, Libby didn’t have her nipples pierced. Who did that?

“It’s probably just your imagination,” I said, forcing myself to turn off the phone display. “It’s probably decoration on her bra. They put all sorts of jewelry and stuff on them nowadays, right?”

Fuck, I sounded like a ninety-year-old.

I jumped out of my office chair. I was supposed to be sorting through the assets that would come under my management once the lawyer signed off that Libby was reformed and respectable. But all I could think about was her.

“Think about your date,” I urged myself as I paced around in front of the large window. “Libby is not the type of woman you want to date. She’s messy, disorganized, and has piercings.”

I pulled up the dating app on my phone. I had been chatting with a local woman, Amanza, who seemed nice from her social media accounts. I’d sent her flowers, and we were planning on potentially going to a new bar that she said had opened up near her apartment.

“I wonder if she has piercings.”

“Who has piercings?” Mike stuck his head into my office. “It better not be one of our sisters.”

“No one,” I said in a rush.

“You’re not chatting with another bot, are you?” my older brother asked, sauntering in like this was his office and sitting in my seat.

“Get out.”

“No,” Mike said.

My brothers were the worst.

“I need the list of properties we’re going to be taking over from the Gilbert account.” The way he said it was so cold, it raised my hackles. Libby was a person, not an account.

She is a person, an annoying person. Also, why do you care?

“I haven’t finished going through them,” I said in a clipped tone.

“Jeez,” Mike said, standing up out of my chair and buttoning his suit jacket. “I don’t know why you’re so offended by the bot comment. All the women you’ve ever dated have been frauds in some shape or form.”

“Not this one.” And not Libby.

No, Libby is not the one you’re dating. That is a never-going-to-happen situation.

Mike raised an eyebrow.

I pulled up Amanza’s Instagram account and showed him. “See?” I said. “She’s perfectly nice. She even lives nearby.”

“I bet money there’s some scheme going on. You need to hire a high-end matchmaker to vet some of these women,” Mike said as he casually flipped through the yellowed property deeds spread out on my desk.

“I am perfectly capable of vetting them,” I snapped at my brother while slapping his hands away. “I sent flowers to her address, and they were signed for and accepted.”

“Uh-huh.” Mike wasn’t convinced.

Fuck my brothers.

“Let me know when you have the property list,” Mike said, turning to leave. “I need to finish the five-year plan on

my hotel expansions.”

I pulled the spreadsheet of properties back up and tried to work.

But I couldn't.

I pulled out my phone and navigated not to Amanza's account, but to Libby's. I stared at the picture again.

“You need to get it together,” I scolded myself, grabbing my coat.

I would surprise Amanza. She had said drop by anytime when she had thanked me for the flowers. And it wasn't like I was going to her house. I was stopping by her office.

On the way to Amanza's office, I stopped by to buy a large bouquet of flowers. I would surprise her, maybe take her to lunch. She was going to be a very nice person, and my brothers would finally shut up about my dating life.

Amanza's office was in a converted warehouse. My footsteps echoed off the polished concrete floors. I adjusted the flowers as I approached the office suite.

But there was someone there already knocking on the door.

“Libby?”

LIBBY

““T his is my livelihood he’s ruining,” I raged to Brea. “I just got a big job.”

“You did?” Brea said in excitement. “Champagne!”

“Well,” I amended as she popped the cork, “it’s big for me. I’m getting paid twenty dollars a post to review sex toys.”

“You have to start somewhere. No shame in the hustle,” she said, pouring me a glass of bubbly.

I sipped it and scrolled through the photos I’d just posted. Okay, so I wasn’t getting a whole lot of engagement, but hey, it was enough that someone wanted to pay me to post, right?

“Surely, Carl can’t make you delete your Instagram account, right? Don’t you have a constitutional right to have an Instagram account?”

I grimaced. “If I’m not a willing participant, then he could just drop me, and I’d never get his help saving Doug. It’s not like twenty dollars for a sex-toy post is going to pay for a lawyer.”

“Maybe,” Brea said gently, “you could try posting some of your art?”

“I don’t know.” I stared down into the glass. “What if I’m not a great artist? I haven’t been able to create lately.”

“You said you were sketching last night,” Brea reminded me.

I took a long sip of my champagne. “Yeah, just Doug and Carl for some reason, that rat-faced bastard.”

“I think his face is more chiseled out of marble.” Brea giggled.

“Fine, that handsome-faced bastard. He hasn’t done a thing to help Doug yet. I’m not posting his face on Instagram.”

“People like art. There are lots of webcomics making money on the internet. You might get a book deal,” Brea coaxed.

“It’s probably wishful thinking at this point.” My dream after dropping out of college was that I was going to make it big as the next new it-artist. Then Bitsy and all those people who were horrible to me would be jealous and want to try and be my friends, and I would pretend like I didn’t remember them when I was at my big gallery opening or book launch party.

As if that was ever going to happen.

“Maybe Carl is right,” I said, pouring more champagne. “Maybe I do need to get a real job.”

“Don’t give up,” Brea said. “Go out there and seize the day! As long as today is better than yesterday, you’re doing okay!”

My phone chimed. It was SparkleAmanza confirming that I could stop by and pick up the sex-toy box in an hour.

Brea was right. I needed a better attitude.

“Today is the first day of the rest of my career as an influencer!”



BUT WHEN I arrived at the address Amanza had sent me, it just felt like I was stuck in a time loop.

“Carl?” I was in shock, my hand still hovering in front of the door, about to knock. I looked down at the large, expensive bouquet of pillowy blush-colored roses and lisianthus flowers. “Are you on a date?” I blurted while Doug wiggled his chubby corgi butt in excitement at seeing Carl.

“That’s not any of your business. Are you stalking me?” he demanded.

“What? No! I have better things to do with my time. Besides, I already see enough of you. I don’t want to spend any more time than necessary in your presence. You’re the one stalking me. I’m here trying to work.”

“Working at what?” Carl asked.

Before I could think of an appropriate way to explain that I was going to be shilling sex toys, the door to the office opened and a short, slightly pudgy man poked his head out.

“Is Amanza in?” I asked.

His watery eyes darted from me to Doug then finally to Carl and the flowers. He shrieked then tried to slam the door shut.

But Carl threw his shoulder into it before the door could latch.

“What are you doing?” I yelled, grabbing at his suit jacket. “Where’s Amanza?”

“I’m Amanza. Please don’t kill me,” the pudgy man begged as the door slammed against the back wall.

I followed Carl into the small, cluttered office.

“I was going to explain, Libby,” non-Amanza begged, his hands in front of his face.

“I can’t believe you fell for this shit, Libby,” Carl snarled at me. “This is why you’re deleting all your social media and are going to quit being an influencer. You can’t be trusted not to be taken advantage of.”

“I was going to pay you, Libby.” Non-Amanza started babbling. “I run a very lucrative company. There was no funny business. You just take the sex toy and post the picture, and then I Venmo you the money. Honest.”

I looked around in shock at the office. There were sex toys all right, plus sex posters and life-sized sex dolls with creepy plastic faces.

There was also a large bouquet similar to the one Carl had thrown on the ground that said, *To Amanza from Carl*.

“Oh lord.” I picked up the card from the bouquet and waved it at the billionaire. “I can’t believe *you* fell for this,” I said with a smirk, pointing to Carl’s name on the card.

A tempest brewed in his gray eyes. I finally had the upper hand.

“*You* clearly can’t be trusted to date,” I said. “You didn’t even do a background check on this creeper.”

“I was doing the checking right now,” Carl hissed out through his teeth, his jaw clenched so tight I thought he was going to fracture it.

“Uh-huh.”

“For what it’s worth, I just got carried away a little bit,” the pudgy man squeaked. “Didn’t mean for it to go this far. Have a sex doll on the house?”

“Stay the fuck away from her,” Carl snarled at the man. He grabbed my arm and marched me out of the sex-toy-themed office.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Carl thundered at me when we were outside in the small courtyard of the building. “You went to some strange man’s office by yourself. You could have been killed.”

“Why do you care?” I shot back.

“Because you’re my ward. I’m responsible for you.”

God, I could punch him! “I’m a grown-ass adult woman,” I shrieked at him.

“Who makes terrible choices, like this photo.” He pulled out his phone and stuck it in my face. There was the picture of me in the sheer blouse, no bra.

“I thought that was a great picture. Look at all the likes I’m getting,” I told him.

“Delete it,” he growled.

“Why?” I crossed my arms. “Is it too arousing for you?”

Now there was a hurricane in his eyes, and I was about to be swept away.

Carl reached out and put his large hand against my neck, his thumb and index finger pressing on my jaw. “Delete it,” he growled softly.

Yeah, there was definitely arousal happening in this situation, but I wasn’t sure it was on his end. My skin felt

tingly, and all I wanted him to do was lean in and kiss me and then rip my clothes off and make me come.

I swallowed.

His other hand reached into my pants pocket and pulled out my phone. I tried not to whimper at his hand being that close to my zipper.

Carl released me and handed me the device.

I scrolled through the app, trying to focus on my cracked screen and not the fact that he was two inches away from me, that I could feel the heat and sexual aggression wafting off his body.

“There,” I croaked, deleting the picture and holding up the phone. “Happy?”

He grabbed my wrist and inspected the confirmation message. “Not really.” He stepped back, and I could finally breathe again.

The spell broken, I started to get angry. “So, that’s it?” I said.

He paused and pinned me with his gray gaze.

I straightened my back. “You get to come here and be all masculine and snarly, and I just have to submit?”

Bad choice of words!

He tilted his chin up slightly. “Yes.”

“No,” I said, shaking my finger at him. “You got catfished. If you get to dictate what I do with my social media career—”

“That is not the proper use of that word,” he interjected.

“My *career*,” I said stubbornly, “then I get to dictate your dating life. If you can’t even handle not falling for photos of

fake boobs pretending to be a real girl, then why am I trusting you to save Doug?”

Carl sneered. “Saving your dog is child’s play.”

“Then why haven’t you done it?”

“I’ve been busy.”

“So get unbusy. Maybe you could put the brakes on dating and focus on things that matter, like corgis.”

The corners of Carl’s mouth twitched. “So you’re jealous and you don’t want me to date. I see.”

“No,” I snapped, feeling my face grow hot. “I’m not jealous. Never in a million years would I date someone like you. You’re uptight and corporate, and you wear a suit.”

A suit he looks amazing in.

“I just hate seeing you embarrass yourself.” I crossed my arms. “Because it’s embarrassing me by association.”

“Good,” Carl said, “because I’d never date someone like you either. You embarrass me.”

“Good,” I said haughtily. “So that’s settled. I’m going to help get you a girlfriend.”

“What? No.”

CARL

That woman was infuriating. The whole situation was infuriating.

What's worse was my brothers were going to give me so much shit when they found out. I began thinking maybe I should take a break from dating and focus exclusively on work.

Would I be alone forever, though? My brothers were already starting to get married, and some of them even had children. Was I going to be the odd man out forever?

Better to be alone than be shackled with someone you can't stand. Speaking of...

"So," Libby said as she trotted beside me out of the office building, "are we going to your place or mine?"

"We are not going anywhere," I said, "I'm going to work. And you should go look for a job."

"But I already have the most important job in the world," she said. "Helping you find a girlfriend."

"I don't need a girlfriend."

"Yes you do; you clearly want one, and it's making you all irrational. I'll find you a nice girl," she said in a Russian

grandmother's accent.

"Trust me," she said, her voice sounding normal again. "I'll find you the love of your life. At the very least, I can make your dating profiles not look like a hot mess."

"They aren't bad," I protested.

She held out her hand, palm up. "Phone." She made a *gimme* gesture.

I unlocked it and set it in her palm. She opened up my dating apps and recoiled dramatically. "This photo of you!"

I peered over her shoulder. "I look fine in this photo."

"You look like a robot."

"I thought it was nice." I crossed my arms.

"Where's the pizzazz? Where's the sex appeal?" She handed the phone back to me. "This is an emergency situation. You better clear your schedule this afternoon. We have a lot of work to do."



"I'M SHOCKED that you managed to keep this place clean," I remarked.

"It's been a struggle," Libby said, hanging her coat up on a rack by the door as Doug ran to his water dish and started slurping.

Before I could say something, Libby mopped up the spilled water with a towel. Then she pulled out a ton of camera equipment and lights and began setting up a photo studio in her living room.

"Why should I spend this much effort on a dating profile?" I asked while she fussed with the lights.

“Normally, I would say that you should just delete the dating profiles and meet people in real-life situations, but you’re off-putting, so maybe online is better, because then I can control who you’re talking to and what you’re saying,” she responded.

“You’re going to be in my dating profile?” I scowled.

“Uh. Yeah. Otherwise, I’m probably going to find you wandering around pantless with no socks in the middle of New Jersey after an online date gone wrong. Sit on the couch.”

She tapped her jaw, thinking. “No, actually, sit on the back of the couch—yeah, there, and relax your hand on the armrest. No, no.”

She hurried over and started undoing my jacket.

“Hey!” I jerked away from her.

“You look like you’re trying to sell a car,” she said, wrestling the jacket off of me. She undid my cufflinks and rolled up the sleeves of the white shirt and combed her fingers through my hair. “Okay, now pose. Flex your arms a little bit.” She adjusted the lighting, competent and professional, her eyes critically taking in the scene as she made minor adjustments then snapped a few photos. She had a whole professional setup where the photos immediately synced to her laptop so she could view them.

“Don’t move,” she said authoritatively. I shifted on the back of the couch.

I couldn’t help but watch her as she worked. She was so clearly in her element, so unlike the flailing young woman I had thought she was upon first impression.

“I think we’ve got it,” she said finally, motioning me over.

I stood to look at the pictures over her shoulder.

“This is the picture you showed me on your dating profile. I think Doug could have taken a better photo of you.”

“My little sister took it,” I admitted.

“At least it’s in focus,” Libby said diplomatically. “And here’s the one I did.”

It was clear to see that the photo was far and above the one my sister had taken. Shoot, it was even better than the professional headshot that we had made for the Svensson Investment website. I looked powerful yet approachable, and though I didn’t know much about art or photography, the way she had lit the photograph made the whole scene look like a painting.

“That’s really good,” I said in admiration.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Libby replied, fussing with the cables on her computer. “It’s just a few basic techniques I learned in art school.”

“Why don’t you do photography full time?” I asked, lightly resting two fingers on her wrist.

“I don’t know.” She sighed. “I don’t really know what I want to do with my life. But,” she said brightly, “I do know what I want to do with your dating profile. Do you need water before your next shoot?”

“You already have a nice photo,” I countered.

“You need multiple photos.” She pulled out a wool blanket and spread it on the floor. “Sit here with Doug. You want women to think you’re a normal, approachable person who likes dogs. Currently, you’re attracting all those fake, plastic Barbie-doll types. If you want a normal, no-drama woman,

then you have to seem no-drama and not like one of those rich finance guys who just want an expensive accessory they can bang on occasion. Normal women like guys who like dogs. So pretend you like Doug.”

I did not like Doug.

But Doug seemed to like me. He was excited to see me sitting on the floor. He was excited to hop in my lap and get fur all over my pants, and he was excited to lick my face and stick his tongue in my ear.

“So adorable,” Libby cooed while I tried to keep from getting slobbered on.

“Did you get it?” I asked, standing up and picking Doug up with me. He had flopped over on his back, and his tongue lolled out. “Doug’s tired.”

“I got it!” Libby sang.

I set Doug down on the couch and looked at the photo.

“We’re totally using this one.” She showed me the photo she had just taken with Doug in my arms. I wore a small smile. It was strange. I’d always thought I looked like my father, but right there in that photo, I looked a little like my mother.

I shook my head to clear the thought. “Are we done?”

“Nope, one more.” She pushed a large leather chair into the light.

I was feeling antsy, like I wanted to go on a run or a swim in a cold river.

Libby dusted the dog hair off of my pants. Her touch was electrifying and made me feel even jumpier.

“Sit in the chair.”

I sat.

“No,” she instructed, “sprawl in the chair. This is your sex-appeal photo. We have one photo making you look like a good provider, one making you look like a good dad, and this one will make you look good in bed. Take off your tie.”

I undid it and tossed it to the couch.

Libby snapped a few pictures.

“Um, not to be awkward, but take off your shirt.”

“No.”

“What?” she walked over to me and reached for the buttons. “Take it off,” she teased. “I’m sure you already have a beach body under there. You want all the girls to like you, right?”

Being half-undressed near her was going to be too much. “I’m fine.”

“He’s so modest,” she joked, then suddenly she was straddling me and undoing the buttons on my shirt.

I grunted as her weight settled on my lap. Her tits brushed against my chest as she undid the buttons. *If she were wearing a skirt, I could fuck her just like this.*

“I have to go,” I snapped, picking her up and swinging her off me. I stood up, rebuttoned my shirt, and then looked for my jacket.

“You don’t like a woman taking charge?” Libby asked, trailing me as I fastened my cuff links.

My nerve endings were fried. Part of me wanted to push her down on the couch and fuck her, and the other wanted to

get in my car and drive until I ran out of gas. I clenched my jaw.

Her taking charge, pushing me back on the couch, taking off her top, letting me see if she really did have piercings where I thought she did, riding my cock like she owned it—

“No,” I lied. “No man wants a woman like that.”

LIBBY

“**N**o man wants a woman who takes charge,” I repeated to Doug after Carl left.

I felt a little nauseous as his words bounced around in my head. That was what my godfather had said, that’s what Bitsy had always complained about, and my mom and even Trenton and now Carl—that I was too much, too large, too loud, too opinionated.

Who did Carl think he was, my godfather? Herbert had always been so judgmental. Always reminding me to act more like a lady, that my mom might have actually wanted to be around me rather than start a new family if I could just get rid of the piercings, cover up the tattoos, wear a chignon.

Though I wasn’t happy that he was dead, because to be fair, he had been the only person that had ever given... maybe not two shits about me but at least half a shit, I had been hoping I could finally have a little breathing room.

“Why am I even staying in this city?” I wondered as I started packing away my lights. “Maybe I need to move to a commune. Except I like running water and pizza.”

I should probably have kept the lights out and taken some photos, but what was the point? I had lost my sponsorship

thanks to Carl.

I flipped through the photos on my laptop, selecting the best ones for his dating profiles. “I should just write about what a dick he is,” I told Doug.

Only one picture from my third shoot was serviceable. Carl was staring at the camera, unbuttoning his shirt. It was definitely spank material. Well, it would be for anyone other than me.

“He is so unfairly hot,” I complained.

I studied the photos of my corgi with Carl. Doug looked way too excited to be sitting on his lap.

Carl clearly hadn’t been excited to have me sit on his lap. I frowned. To be fair, it had been unprofessional. Maybe Carl was right, and I needed to grow up. “Whatever. I don’t like him anyway.”

I selected the photos, uploaded them to his dating profile, then wrote a few witty lines in his bio. Carl’s original bio read like a blurb on a corporate website. I made Carl sound fun and flirty and down for a good time, which he most certainly was not. He was tightly wound and had zero capacity for change.

“I feel so sorry for whoever is going to marry that disaster,” I said, hitting the save button and sending Carl’s spiffy new profile into the online dating ether.

Job well done, I settled on the couch, grabbed my sketchbook, and started to doodle Doug.

God, Carl had been so furious when Doug had herded the Roomba off the balcony. “Serves him right.” I snickered as I drew a little six-panel comic of the scene. After spending several nights doing nothing but sketching him and Doug, it

was easy to draw them both into a cute comic about Doug destroying Carl's car and Carl being upset.

Then I snapped a picture and posted it.

LibbyLovesArt: Getting back into sketching.

What do you think?

My heart was thumping for some reason. "I should delete it." I studied the sketch. Did it suck? It probably sucked.

Brea: I'm so glad you're posting some art!

Brea: Also Carl looks hot in that drawing lol!

Brea: You should start drawing porn if this sex-toy thing doesn't work out *wink emoji*

Carl did look hot in that comic, and a ton of other people seemed to think so too. "Oh my god," I groaned and curled up into a ball on the couch as the likes poured in. Doug jumped on top of me and licked my face. What if Carl saw it? He was clearly stalking my Instagram account, looking for postings he could complain about.

My phone chimed with an incoming message. "Bet that's him."

But it wasn't. Instead, it was Trenton's lawyers with more demands. "They want copies of all my social media information for discovery in the lawsuit? Hard pass. And no, I don't care if that's the law. They can go fuck themselves."

The lawsuit was making me anxious again. I paced around. Between the thought of losing Doug, Carl's bad attitude, and

the general travesty that was my life, I was feeling super overwhelmed. Not to mention that Carl's dating profile was pinging nonstop.

"He has two hundred women who want to be with him?" I said in shock, scrolling on his profile. "God, look at these messages! So inappropriate. Deny, deny, block, block. Flagging this to send to the police."

The dating app didn't use Carl's last name, so the women were reacting purely to his description and the pictures.

"Anyone who sends an eggplant emoji is getting blocked," I muttered as I clicked on my laptop. "Also, anyone who uses poor grammar is blacklisted." I wondered if Carl would actually like any of these women. I didn't really like them.

"So what?" I declared angrily. "Who cares? Just find someone who's not a gold-digging lizard in human skin and set him up with a happily ever after. It's not like you want to be his friend, let alone date him, right?"

CARL

I tried to calm down as I rode the elevator up to my brother's condo.

Libby had me completely on edge. I'd had too much together time with her, too much touching, too much sitting there, feeling her eyes on me. I smoothed down my hair. I could still feel her phantom touch on my scalp.

As aggravated as I was by the large family get-togethers my brother forced us to engage in ever since my sisters had been rescued, today, I welcomed the distraction from Libby. But when I walked into the chaos of my older brother's condo, there on the large TV in the open kitchen-living area were Libby and Doug.

"Don't you think they've had enough screen time?" I said to my brothers in a clipped tone.

My little sister Enola rolled her eyes. "This is quality programming, Carl."

Libby was poking Doug in the stomach on the video and making him fart "The Star-Spangled Banner." "I need to stop feeding him cheese," Libby said to the camera, then the video looped again.

I will never escape her.

“That’s Carl’s ward,” Liam told our sisters in an exaggerated tone and wagged his eyebrows.

The girls all giggled and made exaggerated “ooh” noises.

“Turn that off.”

“You’re going to miss your big moment, Carl,” Mike said with a smirk.

“My what?”

My sisters giggled as they scrolled to a black-and-white comic of a dog herding a Roomba off a balcony... and onto a car.

I glowered.

“You must really be making a big impression on Libby.”

“Something must have caused him to update his dating profile,” Beck said and huffed out a laugh.

“Do none of you do any real work?”

“No,” Greg replied, portioning salad into bowls, “they do not.”

“Aw, Carl,” Walker said, shoving his shoulder against me. “You and Greg can be dating buddies.”

“You need to get out there, Greg,” Beck warned, “Belle’s dating profile is up on all the sites.”

“I’ll never let her get far with any of those men,” my brother said in a lofty tone.

“See, Carl, that’s the kind of energy you need when you date.” Mike slapped me on the back. “You and Greg should go double date so he can show you how it’s done.”

“It’s not a fair competition. Greg would just go home with both women,” Liam said. My older brothers doubled over in laughter.

They were literally the worst.

But no matter. I smiled. I was simply going to bribe my little sisters to hide slime in their beds.



I SANK into my leather chair in the home office of my condo after that dinner. My ears were still ringing. Greg insisted that we all live in the same building. I would never escape my brothers. Not that I didn’t love them—I’d do anything for them. But god, they were infuriating.

I was doing what I usually did in the few spare moments I had between doing my job, working out, cleaning up after my brothers’ terrible decisions, and spending time with my family. I scrolled through a dating app.

I wasn’t sure what I was looking for.

Maybe you’re turning into your father, the dark part of my mind suggested.

My father had always been looking for the next wife, the next pretty young woman he could manipulate. When he would find her, he would declare that he was in love, that she was the one to make everything right in his world. Except she never was. The new wives would invariably become disappointed with life in the compound, with him, with all of us unruly children, and so the cycle would begin again.

Maybe you’re just like him—doomed to wander from one unfulfilling relationship to the next, leaving a trail of destruction in your wake.

Just delete the apps. Make a fresh start of it.

I opened the app to navigate to the delete-profile option but paused when I saw incoming messages in the chat section. When I opened one conversation, someone was conversing with a potential date.

“What the fuck? I’m going to kill my brothers.” Then I remembered Libby.

Carl: Are you on my dating app?

Libby: You’re welcome. I found a very nice girl. She has all her teeth and no children.

Carl: You can’t pretend to be me on a dating app. That’s fraud.

Libby: You’re talking to the person that makes their living on social media. Your ethics mean nothing to me.

Carl: Making a living is a stretch.

Libby: So is you having a real girlfriend, but here we are.

Libby: You’re lucky you have me. Look, she even wants to meet up with you tomorrow for a date.

I scanned through the chat as Libby’s messages came in in a flirtatious flurry.

Damn, she was good. Juniper, the prospective girlfriend Libby was chatting with, seemed super excited and willing to meet me for a date the next evening.

Libby: I gave her your cell number.

Libby: Don't fuck this up!

I scanned through Juniper's dating profile while I waited for her to text me. She was pretty with big doe eyes and wore soft, lacy white dresses and tunics with her hair flowing around her. She liked plants, children, pottery making, and traveling to exotic places.

I sat back.

Carl: You really did find the perfect woman.

Juniper texted me, and we continued to chat about where she'd like to meet. Though texting with her was fun, a part of me kept waiting for Libby to respond.

But she never did.

LIBBY

So, Carl had a date. Not just a date but the perfect woman.

Of course he had a date, as if he wasn't going to have a date. Any woman would love to have Carl Svensson as her boyfriend. But not me. No ma'am. Juniper, her plants, and her good hair could have Carl. See if I cared.

Brea: Are you sure you want her with Carl?

Brea: Let me tell you, I don't like to judge, but I've seen Juniper's type before come into bridal appointments.

Brea: They start off by swearing up and down that they don't like drama, that they just want women to support other women, and that they are going to be the chilliest bride you have ever met. Then bam! Three appointments in, they turn into a King Kong-level bridezilla.

Brea: Trust me, that innocent ethereal vibe is all fake.

Libby: It's not like she's going to be in my life at all. Carl can date her, and marry her or not. All I need is for him to rescue Doug.

Brea: You're going to have to hear him talk about her. He'll show up at your apartment for your ward classes or whatever you're doing, and you'll know from his dopey smile that he just banged her a couple hours before.

My stomach churned.

Libby: I don't even like Carl.

Brea: You should at least have banged him before handing him off to some other girl.

Brea: He's superhot and sex is self-care.

Libby: He said he'd never want to be with someone like me sooo...

Brea: I bet if you gave him a blow job preview he'd change his mind.

I doubted it. Carl had seemed pretty disgusted the last time I had gotten too close to him.

Maybe you smelled.

Did I smell? I sniffed myself cautiously. I didn't think I smelled that bad, but then, who knew? Maybe Carl was being polite.

Or maybe he just doesn't like you.

I pushed aside the hurt that I felt and forced my attention back to my inbox. I was searching for a job—not because Carl wanted me to get a job but because rent was due and Doug and I could not live on pizza alone.

“Yes!” I pumped my fist as I read the email. “Fifty bucks to substitute teach a pottery class in Brooklyn. Score! We are putting positive thoughts out in the universe. Maybe if the owners of the art studio like me, I’ll be able to come teach other classes.”

Shoot, my little webcomic of Doug and Carl now officially had more likes than the video of Doug tooting the national anthem. Maybe I could do a comic on the web and teach a graphic arts class. I might be able to afford an apartment upgrade. I just needed to keep pushing myself to greatness.



I HAD SPENT the afternoon prepping for teaching the pottery class. It had been a minute since I’d done pottery, so I watched a few videos and read through my notes from college.

Thinking about my disastrous time in college had, of course, caused a mini existential crisis, and I’d had a little bit too much wine to try to cope. But I was here now at the converted historic warehouse where the studio was, ready to teach. I opened up my backpack and let Doug out to sniff at the new smells.

People were chatting with each other. Some of them seemed to be friend groups out for a night of wine and art, and others were singletons looking to mingle.

And one couple was there on a date.

Are you fucking kidding me?

There was Carl and Juniper at one of the pottery wheels, gazing into each other's eyes like they were already madly in love.

I felt crushed.

Why did I care that Carl was happy on his date? That was the point, right?

But somewhere along the line of him forcing his way into my life, his early-morning surprises, and the fact that I knew the way he would catch his lip in his teeth and flick his eyes up at the ceiling when he was trying not to laugh at a comment I'd made, it had started to feel like Carl was, well, mine.

He's not yours. He doesn't even like you.

Of course, because he liked girls like Juniper.

Didn't all men? Juniper was like if almond milk were a person. She was the type of artsy girl I wanted to be in school, but I didn't have the rich parents, the hair, or the leisure time to pull it off.

I suddenly couldn't be there.

It's not like the class knew who I was. I could just pretend to be a student there for the wrong lesson. I could just walk out and leave. But I wasn't going to get paid if I didn't stay to teach, and I'd get blacklisted. Also, I'd put the subway fare on my credit card, and I needed to pay that off.

Maybe they'll be too busy gazing into each other's eyes to notice it's me.

Damn, I wish I had some wine. But the wine was for the students.

There will be leftovers. Just make it through the night.

I took a few deep breaths. “Good evening, class,” I said over the murmur of conversation.

Carl’s attention snapped up then to me. His gray eyes widened slightly when he recognized me. Gosh, his eyes were gorgeous. I felt as if I was gazing out into the sea from the top of a lighthouse in Maine, waiting for my lover to return.

But then those same eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Ugh, I bet he thinks I’m stalking him.

I debated about going over to explain while I helped several middle-aged women shape their pottery bowls. They’d had a lot of wine between them, and they were probably three glasses too deep to make a nonwobbly vase.

“It looks like a dildo,” one woman snorted, poking the lump of clay that had formed a tube and was flopping around on the turntable, splattering wet brown clay into my hair.

“Just keep trying,” I told her and moved to help the next student.

“Hi,” I heard Juniper coo. “Did you come over to say hello, little guy? What a cutie!”

I pretended to help a young man with his pot, while really, I was watching Carl and Juniper. She had clearly done pottery before because her pot had an elegant flared top. The wheel was still spinning, and she was blowing kisses to Doug, who was wagging his tail and trying to jump in Carl’s lap.

Traitor.

Should I go over there and be awkward and keep Juniper away from my dog?

Nope. Doug was going to get sacrificed. There was no way I was going to talk to her. I was staying far away from those

two.

“Excuse me? Excuse me?” A confused-looking elderly woman waved at me from the table next to Carl and Juniper. Her vase had collapsed into itself. “I just don’t know what I’m doing wrong,” she fretted.

I tried to help her fix her vase and use the proper technique to shape the wet clay, but the entire time, I had one eye on Carl and Juniper. She was all over him, flirty and giggly, wrapping her hands around his while she tried to help him make a pot.

“You’re really good with your hands.” She let out that obnoxious giggle. “You know, I took this amazing sculpture class in Boulder,” she continued, drawing out the vowels in a way that made my teeth grate. “It was an amazing experience, very spiritual.”

“Sounds like you had a nice time, did some networking,” Carl said.

I kicked him. Networking on a date? Even though I could not stand Juniper, Carl needed to get it together. I could not let that one slide.

Carl elbowed me.

Juniper frowned at our interaction. “It would have been perfect, except a couple of the other girls there were clearly jealous of me.”

They probably just didn’t like your attitude.

“I just felt like it was a very spiritual experience, you know, making pottery with these women. Then a few of them just had to bring in drama.”

Ugh, Carl was a fucking idiot. Was he really falling for this?

“I just can’t stand drama. It’s why I really don’t have any female friends. I’m like, way closer with guys, you know?” She batted her eyelashes at him.

Damn, Brea was good. She had called it.

Carl, of course, was eating that shit up. It was infuriating. Why did guys always do that?

Yes, I knew Carl wasn’t attracted to me at all. Yes, I knew he was entitled to make his own decisions about his own love life, but my god. Men.

And yes, I included Doug in that as well. The corgi was practically glued to Juniper, looking up at her and Carl adoringly.

She steals my dog and my—well, not my boyfriend.

Juniper finished with her perfect pot, wiped her hands, then wiped a smudge of clay off of Carl’s cheek.

“Miss Teacher,” she said to me in a fun, bubbly tone that I recognized as a hundred percent fake. “I’m done with my pot. Where are these being fired?”

“They’re fired in-house,” I told her, trying to make myself sound professional. “You can place it over there on the shelf.”

“Okay,” she said. I was getting weird vibes from her.

I turned to Carl. “Are you going to finish that, or are you making a dildo like the red hat club over there?”

He let out a hesitant grunt.

“Yeah,” Juniper said loudly, “this is why I am not friends with girls, because they just bring unnecessary drama.”

Da fuck?

“What drama?” I asked before I could stop myself. *Just walk away; just walk away.*

She rolled her eyes then said to Carl, “This is why I usually don’t date guys that have had previous girlfriends, because they just get so jealous. Some girls are just so immature.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “I don’t have time for toxic exes in my life. I don’t want that type of negative energy. Carl doesn’t want anything to do with you, so back off.”

The whole class was gaping at me. Clearly witnessing your very own reality TV show was way more interesting than making pottery.

“Excuse me?” I said to her, “You’re the one bringing the fake negative energy.”

“*Libby, stop it,*” Carl hissed at me, grabbing my arm.

Why was he coming to her defense instead of mine? *Because he clearly can’t stand you. Because you’re nothing like her.*

“I need to go get some more clay,” I muttered and hurried off.

CARL

This always happened. Why could I never just date a normal woman?

“It’s honestly just so pathetic,” Juniper said snidely. “I feel sorry for her.”

“You don’t even know her,” I snapped.

Juniper huffed. “Oh my god, are you still sleeping with her? Jerk.”

“She’s not my ex. I’m not sleeping with her at all. We’re just—” How to explain that I was technically Libby’s guardian and there was no sexual tension, because I was only going to screw her over for money, not actually screw her?

The whole pottery class’s focus was on us.

“We just know each other,” I finished lamely.

“Liar. You two are obviously hung up on each other,” Juniper accused. She wiped off her hands and grabbed her purse to leave.

I started to follow her.

“Stay away from me, creep.”

What the fuck? I should have just stayed home. I needed to catch up on work. I was spending too much time with Libby,

and now she was sucking up even more of my time.

I found her in a back room, measuring out clay. I stood there for a moment while she ignored me.

What in the world was wrong with her? If I didn't know Libby, I would say that she was jealous, but of what? She was the one who had wanted me to date Juniper in the first place. She was the one who wanted to help my dating game.

Maybe she actually likes you.

I wasn't so sure. She clearly couldn't stand me.

Only one way to find out. Kiss her.

Now, there was a terrible idea.

"Do you have anything to say?" I finally asked her.

"Oh, fuck you," she snapped, throwing down the lump of clay. "You're not the boss of me. You're not in charge of me. You're such a monster. You just like strong-arming me and lording your power over me. Yet you still haven't lifted a finger to help Doug. You're just like all the other douches in the city in a suit."

What the hell?

"Juniper was right," I growled at Libby. "You are crazy."

"No, I'm not!" Libby said, sounding unhinged.

"I'm never ever dating anyone ever again. I'm going to adopt a ferret instead. Maybe find a time-consuming hobby."

"Now you sound crazy!" She stabbed a clay-covered finger at me.

My neck felt tight. "Yeah, I must be, for thinking I could ever take a mess like you and make you into something respectable."

“I don’t need you to change me.” She was shaking in anger.

“Yes, you do,” I said coldly. “You’re a disaster and a disgrace.” I turned on my heel then said over my shoulder, “I’ll see you at my office at eight tomorrow. Come prepared.”

LIBBY

Brea was waiting for me with suitcases of clothes when I hauled myself up the final flight of stairs and down the hallway to my apartment.

“I hope there’s pizza in there.”

“You have to fit in your corporate-chic outfits,” Brea reminded me as I unlocked the apartment door.

Not only was I covered in dried clay, but I was also still spinning from the confrontation with Carl. He had just been so arrogant, so high-and-mighty.

To be fair, I hadn’t been acting like the most stable person, but I had to do everything in my power to keep him from thinking I liked him.

Which I didn’t.

Except that I did. I wanted him, and I wanted him to want me.

You’re just tired and stressed out.

Brea laid out my outfit choices for my advanced corporate interrogation session with Carl in the morning while I rinsed the clay out of my hair. I felt better after the shower.

“Here is option number one,” Brea said, gesturing with a flourish to one of the outfits Carl had bought me that she’d added a little flair to. I refused to have a completely soulless black-and-white wardrobe. “I added all this embroidery to the skirt,” Brea explained as I marveled at the detailed needlepoint work.

“Oh my god, they’re corgis!” I squealed.

“I know—aren’t they cute?”

The basic black skirt had way more texture with the subtle black-on-black pattern, and if you looked closely, you could see all the happy pups. “I’m totally wearing this one.”

“Of course,” Brea said. “And so that Carl doesn’t give you too hard of a time, I modified this shirt. He’s going to be good and distracted.”

The shirt was a peplum top that flared out at the waist. When Carl had bought it, it had had a modest neckline. Brea had modified it to have a lunging split down the front.

“Here is some lingerie for you. A bride ordered it then lost too much weight and couldn’t fit in it, so I had to just make her a new piece,” Brea said, pulling at my towel.

“I feel like we may have gotten a little too close,” I told her as she laced me into the corset with a built-in push-up bra.

“You used to edit all my celebrity fan fiction that I would write in college,” Brea reminded me. “You know my darkest fantasies. We are basically the same person now.” She adjusted my boobs then stuffed me into the top.

“Don’t breathe too deeply,” Brea warned as I admired myself in the mirror. Then she fastened a narrow belt around my waist.

“My tits look fantastic in this outfit. Too bad about my hair.”

Brea pulled out a box of pink hair dye and waved it at me. “Carl’s not going to know what hit him.”



I DIDN'T FEEL as confident early the next morning when I walked into the lobby of the Svensson Investment tower. Brea had made me a little capelet, but it was made to be cute, not warm, and I was shivering slightly, either from nerves or the cold.

To try to distract myself, I took a picture of myself and Doug in the lobby. The corgi was also wearing his corporate best. “You look hot,” I told myself as I posted the picture. “Boobs out, back straight. Don’t let Carl intimidate you.”

But I was intimidated. Carl had a whole skyscraper with his name on it. And what did I have, besides a very adorable corgi, of course? Nothing. Well, less than nothing because of all my student loan debt and credit card debt.

Doug’s nails and my heels clattered on the polished white terrazzo floor as we slowly approached the receptionist’s desk in the center of the grand lobby. I just wanted to turn around and go back home.

You are wearing literal custom clothes. Screw them.

I tried to stand up tall even though my feet were killing me in the high heels. I wished I had my boots. Doug, excited about the new location and new smells, was winding around my feet.

“Doug, watch it!” I cursed as I tripped over him. He yelped.

The women at the reception desk looked at me like I was a piece of sentient trash.

“I’m here to see Carl Svensson,” I told them.

The receptionist took a sip of her coffee then sighed. “Do you have an appointment?”

“He just said to be here at eight in the morning.”

She handed me a temporary badge. “Eightieth floor.”

I tried to ignore my nerves so that I wouldn’t sweat out my shirt while Doug and I took the express elevator up to the top of the glass skyscraper. I froze as soon as I stepped off the elevator at the Svensson Investment offices.

I had known Carl was rich and powerful—I had seen the suits, experienced the arrogance, watched him get into a fancy sports car—but it was another thing to see him completely in his element. The financial analysts and other workers at Svensson Investment were sitting at their desks in their expensive but conservative suits while Carl walked through the office, talking to people, answering questions, and asking for updates on this or that project.

He wasn’t yelling or being mean. Instead, he had a quiet authority that his employees seemed to respect.

Probably easy to be authoritative when your name’s on the freaking building.

Doug barked and wagged his tail when he saw Carl then raced over to him. Carl bent down to pet Doug, who immediately rolled over for the handsome billionaire.

“Oh my god!” one woman squealed. “He’s so cute, and he’s wearing a little vest and tie.”

“Carl, is that your dog?” another man asked him, spinning around in his office chair.

“No, this is—”

“My dog,” I said loudly. I wanted to get credit for something. I walked across the office and fielded amazed looks from Carl’s employees.

Just project confidence. But I was mentally cataloging my outfit and comparing it to what everyone else was wearing. Mine might have been just a tad bit—okay, quite a lot—over the top. I did not look like I was there to work on financials.

I’m an artist; I can dress a little creatively.

An artist who doesn’t sell things.

Carl’s face was perfectly neutral as he stood up.

“You made it on time, I see,” he said as I followed him back to his glass-enclosed office with a million-dollar view of the New York City skyline.

“So, what’s on the adulting list for today?” I asked, unfastening my capelet and tossing it onto the couch in the office. It might have been a carefree and slightly sexy gesture if Doug didn’t take the opportunity to race to the couch, jump up, and start humping the fur garment.

“No!” I said in horror, running to grab the dog and tripping out of one of my shoes. I grabbed the capelet from the corgi, and he sneezed at me. I dusted it off, hung it up on a coatrack, then limped back to grab the shoe that had fallen off.

“I hope it’s not a day at the salon,” I said, patting my hair, “because I just had my hair done.”

“It’s very pink,” Carl remarked.

I thought it looked pretty cute. I had done it up into a lot of little twists to disguise the fact that I had tried and failed to cut it myself.

“This morning,” Carl said, typing something on his computer, “we will be reviewing your financial situation.”

Oof. My financial situation was dire, to put it mildly. And I had not had any breakfast this morning and did not have the wherewithal to sit there and have Carl berate my poor life choices.

I perched on the edge of his desk in what I hoped was a sexy fashion. *Just keep him distracted.* I did my best to try to shove my boobs in his face.

He studiously ignored them. “I have pulled the information from your accounts and your credit reports,” Carl said, pointing at his monitor.

“What’s all that red?” I asked nervously.

Carl glanced up at me. For once, I wanted a guy to look at my tits and not my eyes.

“This is all of your debt. You bring in only a few hundred dollars a month of income, and you have thousands, plural, of dollars a month in debt payments. How did you ever think your life was financially sustainable?”

I gulped.

I knew I was in bad shape, but to be honest, I had sort of stuck my head in the sand. My rent was only a few hundred a month because I was subletting a room in a small apartment in an already dilapidated building. Not to mention, Gardenia wasn’t all that on top of rent collection anyway, so I thought I was doing pretty well. Clearly, I wasn’t.

“This is an appalling amount of credit card debt,” Carl continued, pointing to one bright, angry red line on the chart. “It’s astounding that you were able to rack up that amount of debt, considering the terrible quality of the items you own.”

“I have very nice photography lights,” I protested.

“You bought thirty thousand dollars’ worth of lights?” Carl asked solemnly.

“I—maybe. I don’t know.” I was starting to panic. The corset was extremely tight, and my underboob sweat was pooling in the push-up bra.

“Not to mention a car loan.” Carl tapped the screen then looked up back at me with his flat gray gaze. “You don’t own a car. Do you even have a driver’s license?”

“Of course, I have a driver’s license,” I scoffed.

He gave me a questioning look.

“I bought a car because I was going to live in it, then a bus crashed into it.”

“Did you sue the bus company?”

“It may or may not have been my fault,” I admitted, “because I was driving in the bus lane. I didn’t know it was a bus lane! Driving in New York is extremely tricky.”

Carl let out a sigh then turned back to the screen.

“While egregious, the auto loan for a car you don’t even have anymore is not the worst thing I see in your financial breakdown.” He pointed to a large piece of a very red pie chart. “Student loans make up the bulk of the money you owe, which is saying a lot, considering the amount of credit card debt you have.”

“Just trying to make sure all my bills have other bills to keep them company,” I joked.

Carl didn’t laugh. “Your godfather didn’t pay for your schooling?”

I deflated. “He didn’t want me to go to school for art. Said it wasn’t going to help me find a husband or get me a decent job,” I said, trying not to let self-pity infect the words. But I did feel bad. My godfather had always made me feel bad.

“Maybe he was correct,” Carl said, swiveling in his chair to face me, “considering you didn’t even finish your degree.”

“Yeah.” I stared out the window, not wanting to go back to that headspace I had been in during my last semester when I had tried and failed to drag myself to the finish line of graduation.

“You only needed one more art studio class to get your diploma.” He tapped his pen on the mahogany desk. “This is one of your main problems, Libby,” Carl lectured. “You have no follow-through. Don’t roll your eyes; you know I’m right. You can’t pick a career path, you can’t commit to a certain brand for your social media to make you an effective influencer, and you can’t even commit to a hair color.”

I jumped off his desk. I wasn’t going to sit here and listen to this. I should have just worn a hoodie and jeans if Carl wasn’t even going to be distracted by my outfit.

“Which is why,” Carl continued. “I have enrolled you back in your art degree program. You start tomorrow.”

CARL

Libby whirled around to face me, enraged. She grabbed the lapels of my suit jacket.

“No. No way. I am not going back there. You understand? You can’t try and control my life.” She shook me slightly. That motion made her boobs, which were pushed up practically to her chin, jiggle enticingly.

I had been on edge all morning with her perched there on my desk, her tits practically falling out of that skintight top. It had been all I could do to keep it together, keep it professional, and here she had those perfect tits nearly in my face.

I wanted her to straddle me again like she had during the photography session.

Suddenly, she released me and started pacing in front of me, angrier than I had ever seen her. Even when I had shown up in her apartment at five thirty to wake her up, she had not been this angry. Annoyance was about the worst it had gotten with her.

I started to get slightly concerned. Had I pushed Libby too far?

“You...you...” she spat out.

“Libby,” I said uncertainly, standing up. “Explain to me why you can’t go back and finish college. Please.” I reached for her. I took her in my arms. “Please, tell me what’s wrong.”

She shook her head and stepped away from me. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me,” I said.

But she grabbed her cape and her dog and hurried out.

I stood there wondering, *What the hell?*

LIBBY

“**B**reathe. We’re breathing in, and we’re breathing out, and we’re drinking wine,” Brea said while I hyperventilated in my living room.

“I can’t go back there; you know how bad it was.”

Brea shoved the wineglass to my lips, and I sucked down the cool liquid.

“All those people who were awful to you have graduated and gone,” Brea reminded me. “It’s been years. They have a whole new crop of bright-eyed idealistic artists. It’s going to be fine.”

“God, Carl is the worst!”

“To be fair,” Brea said, delicately, “maybe this will be a good thing. Once you have your college degree, you can apply for jobs as a receptionist or a secretary. It might not be a bad gig to be the personal assistant to a billionaire. A lot of them end up marrying their bosses. At the very least, you’d get a nice Christmas bonus. Also, those types of jobs have a lot of downtime, so you could work on your art. Your last web comic of Doug and Carl eating pizza got a lot of comments!

Sometimes, having a little more structure in our lives can help boost our creativity.”

“I have been waking up earlier,” I grumbled. “It is nice to sketch in the morning.”

“See,” Brea said, “change can be good.”

“Fight the power,” Gardenia said, shaking her fist as she came in from doing yoga on the balcony. “Fuck the system. You can’t learn art in a classroom. Show up there tomorrow with no bra, and don’t shave your pits.”

“Sounds like a way to make an already bad decision worse.”



I WAS glad I had actually gotten it together enough that night to shave my legs. I was wearing a plaid skirt and white blouse with a sweater along with my boots because, like Gardenia had said, fuck the system.

I was feeling very “sexy schoolgirl” in my outfit. And if I wasn’t crazy, it felt like Carl was into it too. He certainly took longer than was proper for someone to look at their ward but not too long as when someone was interested in another person.

He is not into you.

“Does my outfit meet your standards?” I asked him, striking a pose.

“It’s...” Carl searched for the words. “Serviceable.”

“He wants you to service him,” Gardenia cackled from the kitchen.

Carl was startled.

“It’s too early for all of that,” I shot back to her.

“Nothing like sex to greet the sunrise.”

“This is a madhouse,” Carl muttered while Doug jumped around him, going crazy.

I had put Doug in a little blue blazer that Brea had made him with my college crest on it.

“He’s a very handsome boy, isn’t he?”

“Looks like someone wants to bang behind the bleachers during study hall,” Gardenia said.

“I was talking about Doug,” I said. Just because I thought Carl was hot didn’t mean I needed to advertise that fact.

“So you don’t think I’m a handsome boy too?” Carl asked in that intoxicating deep voice that had been haunting my dreams lately.

“I mean, ‘boy’ is probably not what I’d use to describe you.” Oh my god, was he flirting with me?

No, I tried to tell myself. No way. He doesn’t like you, remember?

Gardenia closed the lid of the metal lunch box she was packing and handed it to me.

“There is a sunflower-spread-and-jackfruit sandwich on vegan bread,” she said, rattling off the lunch menu, “kale chips, baby carrots and almond butter, and a cucumber-and-bee-pollen salad.”

I suppressed a shudder. “Thanks.”

“Good luck at school!” She waved to me as Carl ushered me out the door.

“What ever happened to taking a Lunchables to school?” I complained once we were in his sports car and crawling through morning traffic to the posh art university uptown.

“And here I thought you were turning over a new leaf.”

“Not if it means I have to then eat the leaf,” I countered.

From the back seat, Doug snored.

I tried not to freak out about how I was going back to college. For most people, these were the best years of their lives. For me, they were the worst.

Carl pulled up at the school and slowed to an even-slower crawl. Around us, students in preppy clothes walked across the lush campus toward any one of the historic buildings, some of them built by donations from their family members.

I felt the old insecurities creep into my mind.

“You can just let me off here,” I said to Carl as we approached an old neoclassical building that housed the fine arts program.

You can do it, Libby, I pep-talked myself, and if you can't do it, then you can just hide out in the old telephone closet with a book.

“Um, you passed it,” I said as Carl kept driving into the parking deck entry.

He backed into a parking spot with practiced ease, very unlike my few attempts at parking a car, one of which had ended in a bashed-out taillight.

Carl pressed a button, shutting off the car, then looked at me. “I’m coming with you.”

Excuse me—he’s what?

Carl got out of the car, holding the door open so Doug could clamber out.

I sat in the front seat in stunned silence. Carl opened the passenger's-side door. "Come on. We don't want to be late for our first day."

Doug barked. My eye twitched.

"Um, no." I hauled myself out of the car with less elegance than Carl had. "You're not coming to school with me. You already have a college degree."

"Correct. Top of my class at Harvard," Carl said, pausing so I could match my pace to his.

"Well, aren't you special?" I muttered. "Why do you want to go back to college? Don't you have work to do?"

"This is one studio class, once a week," Carl said. "I need to be here to ensure that you aren't playing hooky."

Damn it.

"This is a senior-level class," I argued. "You can't just enroll in a class like that. There are prerequisites. There's a portfolio crit where they criticize apart your art right there in front of you."

"It's almost appalling," Carl said in a conversational tone as he opened the large, heavy wooden door that led into the lobby of the fine arts building, "how cheaply you can buy someone off. All I had to do was make a modest donation, and they let me audit whatever I wanted."

"Gosh, and he's so proud of himself, too."

"This could be a big bonding experience for us, Libby," Carl said lightly. He was slightly ahead of me, climbing up the

stairs. I was going more slowly because I was wearing heavy boots and a skirt and also because I wanted to ogle.

Yes, I could appreciate a nice ass on a man. And Carl definitely looked good in that suit.

This is not going to be that bad, I tried to tell myself as I directed Carl to the wing where the studio was going to be held. It's only a few months, then you can get your degree. It's once a week. You'll be fine.

Until I walked into the studio and saw just who the professor was going to be.

Oh my god. This is so not fine. This is a disaster.

LIBBY

Bitsy.
Bitsy was there. In my class. No, that wasn't accurate.

Bitsy was there, at the front of the class, teaching the class because she was going to be the professor, and oh my god, I was so freaking screwed!

“Welcome to your first day of senior art studio,” Bitsy announced.

I grabbed a table at the very back of the large studio space.

Carl, looking around in an interested sort of way, sat down next to me. Little did he know the shit that we had just stepped in.

I put my bag on the desk and tried to hide behind it. *Why is she here?* I fretted while Bitsy gave a rundown of the syllabus.

I had to get out of this class. I could not be in her class; she was the reason my college career had been so horrific. She was the reason I had ultimately dropped out. Yet here she was, in my life again.

I thought she was supposed to find a rich man and get married and live her life of boozy lunches, excessive shopping

trips on her husband's dime, and gossiping about the less fortunate. Why was she teaching, of all things?

I didn't know, and I didn't care. I just needed to find some way out.

"*Psst!*" I tried to get Carl's attention while I was hidden behind my bag. "*Psst!*" I poked him. "We need to get out of here."

"You're not quitting that easily," he hissed back.

"You don't understand..."

He made a *What the fuck?* gesture with his hands.

But how could I explain? How could I explain how toxic Bitsy was without making Carl hate me?

It was too late. I had been spotted. Bitsy was making her way over to us. To be more accurate, she was making her way over to Carl.

"If it isn't our celebrity student?" Bitsy said in her posh upper-class New England accent. "I just wanted to introduce myself. I'm Elizabeth, but you can call me Bitsy."

Barf.

"I'm here for moral support while Libby finishes up her degree," Carl said.

"Well." Distaste skittered across Bitsy's face as she stared at me. "Look what the corgi dragged in."

She turned to Carl. "You can move to a different seat if you'd like. Unfortunately, there are certain people that don't belong in art school, yet they're here anyway." She gave Carl a simpering smile. "Are you going to be at the charity function

for the Women in Finance fundraiser in a few weeks, by any chance?”

“Of course,” he said. “Svensson Investment is a proud sponsor.”

I almost gagged while the two of them flirted and talked about high-society charity functions.

Bitsy giggled—it was that same grating, obnoxious giggle I’d had to endure living with all freshman year then had to hear in class as she made some joke that the professors thought was *oh-so funny!* just because her family’s name was on the building.

“You know,” Bitsy added, “I’d love to catch up with you and pick your brain. While I’m an artsy girl myself—”

No, you’re not. Everything you’ve done is derivative.

“I became involved with this charity because I just feel like getting more women in finance is what this city needs.”

“I’m glad they brought younger people onto their board,” Carl said, because apparently that’s what you did when you were moneyed—you talked to other people with money about their board positions.

“We are so thankful to your company for all you’ve done.” She rested a hand on Carl’s arm. “I’ll see you at the charity ball. It will be nice to see a handsome face there.”

He smiled up at her.

It felt like the precariously cobbled-together pieces of my world were crashing down around me. Bitsy couldn’t date Carl. It just wasn’t fair. And it wasn’t fair that he was flirting with her and seemed interested in her and he wasn’t interested in me.

I never should have agreed to be his ward.

It's not him; it's you. You can't handle it. You can't keep your emotions in check. You don't actually like him; you just want a hot guy to validate your existence. Carl is a piece of work, and he clearly has a type. And poor taste. You don't want him in your life.

But part of me sort of did.

CARL

The car ride back to Libby's apartment was tense. She sat in the passenger's seat next to me, arms crossed.

I cleared my throat. "So, it wasn't as bad as you thought, was it?"

"Nope. It was way worse," she said in a clipped tone.

I didn't understand what was going on. Libby clearly was annoyed that the young professor had been flirting with me. But then, Libby had made it pretty clear that she despised me. Right? It wasn't like I could come right out and ask her if she was interested in me.

Not that it mattered. I wasn't interested in her.

Actually, correction—I couldn't be interested in her. Libby was my ward. There was a whole nest of conflicts of interest there.

But damn it if she didn't look hot in that plaid miniskirt and boots.

You just haven't gotten laid in a while.

But wouldn't it be great to sleep with Libby? Then I could find out if she actually had nipple piercings or not.

“You didn’t like being back in an art studio?” I prodded, turning onto her street. “The professor seems like she’s pretty knowledgeable.”

Libby turned to me, eyes flashing. “Knowledgeable? Bitsy is a hack. I can’t believe I’m paying this much money to be there and listen to her bullshit about art. The way she was lighting that scene was all wrong, by the way; it was too generic and flat.”

“Oh,” I said, joking, “I guess I’ll mention that to her on our next date.”

“A date?” Libby screeched.

I pulled up in front of her building and parked the car. Good timing because I thought Libby was going to jump through the sunroof she was so angry.

“You can’t date her, Carl.”

“Why not?” I asked, still messing with her. I had no intention of going on a date with Bitsy. “Isn’t that what you said? Date people you meet in normal locations, not on an app.”

Libby’s nostrils flared as she unbuckled her seat belt and gathered her bag and her dog. “I guess I did say that,” she spat. “In fact, I think you should go on a date with Bitsy.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling a little crushed. “Okay, I will.”

“Good.” She opened the car door then said, “I think you two are just perfect for each other.”

I jumped when she slammed the door and watched her storm off to the front door of the run-down apartment building.

My phone chimed with a text.

Unknown: I hope you don't mind! I got your number from the roster. This is Bitsy, by the way!

I stared at the phone then back at Libby's building. My ward had already disappeared inside.

She *had* said that I should go ahead and date Bitsy. *Bitsy is the type of woman who would make a good wife*, I tried to rationalize. *She's from a good family, is on boards, is employed.*

Carl: I was hoping to hear from you.

Carl: Would you like to grab a drink tonight?

As soon as I sent the message, I felt like I was making a mistake, like instead, I should have just run after Libby.

But you cannot date your ward, I reminded myself. *You simply cannot.* Not to mention, on the list of making Libby a respectable adult was finding her someone respectable to date. And her dating the man who was supposed to be her guardian was not respectable by any metric.

But the thought of her with another man? I wanted to punch out the windshield.

There were too many bad reasons not to date her.

But you could just hook up with her, I tried to rationalize.

That would be even worse. What if she got attached? I could lose out on billions just because I couldn't keep it in my pants.

Just go on this date. Maybe Bitsy will be the one. Maybe Libby's not jealous at all; maybe she's just angry because you haven't fixed her dog problem.

As if it was going to be difficult to fix.

My secretary handed me a boxed lunch when I walked into my office, and I ate the sandwich while I began working on destroying Trenton.

It didn't take long; I probably could have had my little sisters do it. Though Trenton had clearly been deleting his social media posts, I had been running a script for the past three years that was scraping social media posts to use for investment trends analysis, and I was able to find the videos he had deleted.

I studied them as I finished my lunch. I didn't know much about art or lighting, but I did work out, and I knew when someone was faking their muscles. These videos had been taken before he met Libby, because the makeup work was not as good. And it showed.

Score.

LIBBY

“Don’t overthink it. You just need a C to graduate,” I told myself as I tried to complete my art homework. The task was to take a picture of a rubber ducky. Everyone had the same object, and the objective was to light it to make the photo moving, evocative, and original.

But instead of trying to figure out the most compelling way to compose my photo, all I could think about was Carl. And Bitsy. And Carl and Bitsy together, getting a drink, making out in his car, hooking up in his condo, *getting married*.

“I’m not going to be able to make it.”

“Don’t let these corporate artists get you down,” Gardenia insisted. “You can’t learn art in school; art is a feeling, art is life. Throw off these shackles! You know where I find my inspiration?”

“I could guess, but they would all be R-rated.”

“Sex,” Gardenia said firmly. “Couple with a handsome man in the moonlight, and your well will be sprung with inspiration.”

I looked at the rubber duck. He looked at me. Both of us needed to make some life changes.

Doug, ears perked up, trotted around the table where I had the rubber duck displayed for the photo shoot. All he had wanted since Bitsy had passed out the ducks was one of his very own. I tossed it to him and watched him play with it while I scrolled online, looking for inspiration.

Inevitably, I found myself on Carl's dating profile, looking at the photos. Now, those were well-lit scenes. Of course, Carl was going to look amazing no matter what the lighting was. I admired the strong jaw, the planes of muscle rippling under the starched shirt. I wanted to kiss that mouth.

He doesn't want you. But that didn't do any good. I let my mind wander, wondering what it would be like if he really were my boyfriend. But after I had gotten through the stripping-all-his-clothes-off-and-having-my-way-with-him part of the relationship, what else would we have in common?

You're delusional, I told myself, feeling nauseous. *Just forget about him.*

But I couldn't forget about Carl so flippantly saying he would date Bitsy.

You don't actually want him, I reminded myself. *You just don't want him to date her.*

I navigated to the list of profiles that Carl had matched with on the dating app and picked a few that seemed halfway decent.

Then I composed a text message.

Libby: Your dating guru has found several suitable matches.

Libby: How do you feel about any of these women?

Carl:...

Carl: I already have a date tonight with Bitsy.

For fuck's sake, they hadn't even exchanged numbers in class that day. How? Why?

"Why is he dating her?" I dragged my fingers through my hair.

"You should have made your move," Gardenia said, handing me a cup of chia yogurt drink.

I sipped the bitter concoction, wishing it was a cocktail.

"What you need to do is go over to his condo and, as soon as he lets you in, strip and push him down on the couch. He'll forget all about that date."

I chewed on my lip. My hoo-ha was very on board with that plan.

Gardenia handed me a thong. "Go forth and get that dick."

Maybe it was something in the chia seed yogurt drink, but I was suddenly feeling very confident. I was going to do it. I was going to go bang Carl.



CARL SEEMED a little shocked to see me when I showed up outside the door of his swanky condo that evening.

I had been practicing what I was going to say, how I was going to rip off my clothes and let my inner sex goddess shine.

Of course, all that practice had needed a little—okay, a lot—of alcohol to keep myself from completely chickening out.

Except now that I was standing in his doorway, the rush of adrenaline made me feel stone-cold sober.

“How did you find me?” Carl asked, frowning.

“A gossip website,” I admitted.

Carl scowled. “This building is supposed to have security.”

“Yeah, turns out one of the old ladies who lives here recognized me from when she was at my apartment for an orgy.”

“You were in an orgy?” Carl snarled, exposing his teeth.

“What?” I waved a hand. “A girl gets a nipple piercing, and suddenly, rumors get started.”

Carl’s eyes widened. Was he shocked? Disgusted?

Guess you blew your chance, I told myself.

“What did you say?” he asked carefully.

Not in the mood to listen to Carl berate me about making immature choices, I pushed past him and into his condo. I could still feel his gaze on me.

“Why are you here, Libby?” he asked, his voice dropping an octave.

I rubbed my arms as I walked into the expansive main room with a droolworthy kitchen and a bright and airy living area that opened onto a balcony with plants and flowers and grass, because Carl’s window didn’t face an alleyway and a brick wall.

Now’s your big moment, I prodded myself.

But I chickened out. I turned around to face Carl, trying hard to ignore how delicious he looked leaning his hip up against the waterfall edge of the kitchen island.

“I came to help you get ready for your date,” I said, the lie tumbling out.

No! Now you'll never sleep with him!

It was for the best.

“I see,” Carl said and frowned. He pushed off the island. “I don’t need help.”

“Of course you do,” I said with false cheeriness. “You can’t just show up in a boring suit.”

“What’s wrong with a suit?” he countered while I picked a hall at random and headed down in what I hoped was the direction of the master bedroom.

What are you doing? Just go home. You’re going to embarrass yourself!

Carl trailed me.

In an alternate universe where I wasn’t such a scaredy-cat, we would be making our way to his bedroom to get it on. But here I was, playing wing-girl for a woman I couldn’t stand.

“Where’s your closet?”

“In here,” Carl said gruffly, ushering me into the huge master bedroom that was the size of my whole-ass apartment.

“What are we going to put you in?” I walked into his closet and almost fainted. It smelled exactly like him, that masculine smoky smell. It surrounded me. I wanted to pool all his clothes into a pile on the floor and burrow in them.

Keep it together. Don’t be creepy. That’s what got you screwed the last time.

“Let’s see,” I said, my voice sounding raspy. His closet was like a whole store. The shoes were neatly arranged on

wood shelves with hidden lighting. The suits hung in neat, identical rows on their hanging bars with matching wood hangers with brass monograms. Unlike my own closet, where I shoved all my possessions into one small musty enclave, Carl's clothes had room to breathe. They were more so displayed like an art exhibit than they were stored.

I pulled one of the heavy wooden hangers off the rack, running my nail over the brass monogram then my thumb over the soft wool of the collar. Then, unable to help it, I pressed my face to the suit jacket and inhaled.

"I don't have anything other than suits," Carl said from behind me.

I let out a strangled squawk, dropped the hanger, then cursed as I tried to grab it before the expensive suit hit the floor. I dusted it off and hung it back on the rack.

"You don't have any fancy prints?" I asked, trying to look anywhere other than at him. Though the closet was big, it wasn't *that* big, and it seemed even smaller with Carl and his huge body and broad shoulders and chest in there with me.

I would totally have sex with him in this closet.

"No," Carl said in a low voice. "My brother Liam is the one who likes to be more fashion-forward."

"Guess he and I would get along," I croaked.

He stepped closer to me. Was he going to kiss me?

Oh my god, I inwardly shrieked, he is going to kiss me!

But he reached around me to grab the suit I had just hung up and rotate it so that the hanger was facing in the same direction as the others.

I tried not to pant. I needed to get away from him before I combusted. I ducked around him and walked through the rest of his closet.

All of his clothes were nearly identical. Carl followed a step behind me as I opened the various drawers in his closet. It felt very intimate, being in his personal space. I kept expecting him to bark at me, to say something. But he didn't, so I pulled the most interesting articles of clothing I could—dove-gray slacks, cream-colored shirt, and a matching double-breasted vest and brown shoes. I also added a colorful tie.

“I’m not wearing that,” Carl complained as I carried my selections out into the bedroom.

“A little bit of blue won’t hurt you,” I countered, laying them out on the bed. “Too bad you don’t have a hat.”

Carl glared at the clothing choices.

“Just put it on,” I coaxed as Carl grumbled.

He started to unbutton his shirt then realized I was still there.

“I’ll just, um, wait outside,” I squeaked, escaping to the hallway.

Libby: Oh my god I was just in Carl’s bedroom.

Brea: Squeee!

Brea: Did you guys do it?

Libby: *Sigh* No, I’m helping him pick out clothes for his date with Bitsy.

Brea:...Girl...

Brea: You march right back in there and offer him a blow job.

Brea: Bitsy cannot have him! You're not going to be able to survive it.

Libby: *Sob* I know!

Libby: What is wrong with me?

Libby: I'm going to have to move somewhere with no internet access so I don't have to see them.

Brea: Seize the day. Take what you want and put that bitch in the ground!!!

The door opened.

"How's this?" Carl's deep voice asked.

Standing in the doorway, he looked like a male model. The overall effect was slightly softer than the aloof, corporate lines of his usual black or charcoal-gray suits. He looked kissable and fuckable.

I reached up, trying to control my breathing, and undid his tie.

Carl's breath caught as I unknotted it and slowly drew it from around his neck. His hand came down and rested on my hip. Our bodies were so close.

Carl leaned in, like he was drawn to me. "You want to undress me already?" His breath was slightly cool on my lips.

I wanted nothing more than for him to lean down, close the distance, and kiss me. My eyes flicked from his mouth to his

eyes to his chin. I slowly wound the fabric of his tie around my fingers.

Just grab his junk and tell him you want to fuck. But the fear stopped me—the same fear that had hampered me from growing my online art presence or finishing college. I didn't want to hear him say that I wasn't good enough.

It was safer not to try.

I swallowed, tangling the silk tie in my hands. Both of Carl's large hands were now resting on my hips. The thong I was wearing was soaking wet.

"Libby," he said. Our noses were practically touching. The scent of him was more intoxicating than the wine I'd had earlier.

I looped the tie around his neck and began tying it deftly.

"I just think you should use an Eldredge knot with this type of tie."

CARL

I felt off-balance when Libby finally stepped away from me.

We had been so close—I could have just leaned in a little further and kissed her.

She turned away from me, and all I wanted to do was grab her, throw her on the bed, and fuck her the rest of the night.

“Looks like you’re ready for your date,” she said.

I half wondered if I had made up her reaction. Just like I wondered if I had imagined her saying that she had her nipples pierced. I reeled. I thought she wanted me. She had been acting like it, hadn’t she? In a daze, I followed her to the front door.

Libby had her bag clutched to her like armor.

You could kiss her and find out.

Being in the elevator next to her was torture. My clothes felt too constricting, and my mind raced, debating the pros and cons of pushing her against the wall of the elevator and sliding my hands up her shirt, under her bra...

The elevator dinged. The doors opened.

Libby practically fled. “Have a nice time on your date.”

Except, the only person I wanted to go on a date with was her.



BITSY WAS WAITING at the bar when I showed up fifteen minutes later.

“Sorry I’m late,” I said politely.

Bitsy practically threw herself into my arms. “I’m going to give you a hug,” she gushed. “Have you been here before? A friend of mine started it with her husband. I just think it’s great when a relationship can be about love and partnership. That’s the type of marriage I want.”

And the type of marriage I wanted was one with Libby.

No, you just want to sleep with her, not marry her.

Bitsy is a great option to marry. Even Libby seems to think so since she was practically shoving you in Bitsy’s direction. If that’s not a vote of confidence, I don’t know what is.

“How did you get involved with the Women in Finance charity?” I asked after we had been seated and ordered. “Seems a little out of character for an artist.”

Bitsy giggled and batted her eyelashes at me. “My father works at Richmond Investment, and they are very involved with the charity. He recommended me for the job after I graduated. The other board members and I all really got along well, and I really believe in the mission.”

Translation for those who don’t speak upper class: her dad pulled strings to get her a six-figure job she was not at all qualified for because he was friends with all the other rich people on the board.

When my brothers and I had escaped from the compound, it wasn't long before my older brothers had thrown themselves headlong into the world of the moneyed elite of Manhattan. That had put us all in contact with the wealthy and their entitled children. I could never get over the handouts and the blatant nepotism. Did I really want to marry into this world?

Not really.

"How did you enjoy your first art class?" Bitsy asked me after the server had brought our drinks.

"Not as easy as you would think," I said.

"You know"—she trailed her fingers up my hand—"I could give you some private lessons if you need a little after-school help."

Maybe sleeping with her would help me forget about Libby. But I doubted it. Libby was a puzzle. I couldn't quite put her in a box and categorize her, and so she occupied my thoughts.

"I'm not trying to get better at art," I confessed. "I was just there to accompany Libby."

Bitsy wrinkled her nose. "You're not involved with her, are you?"

"Of course not." *I wish.*

"Good." She let out an exaggerated sigh. "She and I were roommates. She's the most unhinged person I've ever met."

"Really?" I asked, intrigued to know more about Libby, learn what made her tick.

She's probably just run-of-the-mill crazy, and you shouldn't stick your dick in that.

“Oh yeah,” Bitsy said, eyes wide. “She was the worst roommate ever—messy, disorganized.”

Check, check. Guess Bitsy’s telling the truth.

“She has this thing about stealing other people’s boyfriends. She spent her entire freshman year trying to reel in my boyfriend.” Bitsy wiped a tear from her eye. “Unfortunately, she did steal him.”

I sat back, concerned. I didn’t like cheaters. Is that what Libby was?

“Your boyfriend cheated on you with her?”

“She was all over him. She would walk around without her top on. She was constantly making sexually suggestive comments, and on several occasions, I came back from my student volunteer work to see him there with her alone. I don’t have photographic evidence, but I have my suspicions,” she said and sipped her wine.

“Honestly,” she added, “Libby was always crazy. She would do anything for male attention. All those piercings...”

My dick twitched.

Absolutely not. Clearly, her godfather was right, and she’s out of control.

But I just had one person’s opinion.

“Libby was all over the male professors, and in our last year in the program”—Bitsy lowered her voice and leaned towards me—“she tried to sleep with the head TA for a better grade.”

“Seriously?”

“I found out, and I reported her to the office of student affairs. I don’t stand for that type of behavior,” Bitsy said primly. She took another sip of the red wine. “Thankfully, she quit; otherwise, I would have had to have the dean give her a lifetime ban from the campus.”

“A lifetime ban,” I repeated, taking a sip of my own wine. I couldn’t square the Libby I knew with the person Bitsy was describing. Bitsy was making Libby sound like a calculating, manipulative, self-serving sociopath.

The Libby I knew could be impulsive, sure, but sleeping with someone for a better grade?

Maybe you don’t know her all that well after all.

Still.

“She’s absolutely dangerous,” Bitsy continued. “Even her own mother didn’t want her. She probably took one look at her and knew something was wrong and ditched her the first chance she got.”

“My mother ditched me the first chance she got,” I said sharply, the jab at Libby hitting close to home.

Bitsy was taken aback. “Your situation is different, of course,” she stammered. “You overcame trauma. Libby was damaged from the start.”

“I overcame it because I had my older brothers sacrificing for me. Libby didn’t have anyone there for her.”

Bitsy’s face screwed up in anger. “So she’s got you under her spell too.”

“No,” I said sharply, “she doesn’t. I’m just stating another viewpoint.”

“Too bad the facts don’t support your alternative view,” Bitsy said, her face turning to triumph, “seeing as she’s here to stalk you.”

I turned in my chair to see Libby standing there, holding a tray of drinks.

“Did someone order an iced tea?”

LIBBY

I hid behind the trash can at the bus stop while I watched Carl's sports car roar out of the garage and head to the fancy restaurant where he was going on a date with Bitsy. She would charm him with her lies, talk shit about me, and they would live happily ever after telling each other jokes at my expense.

"I'm glad I didn't make out with him," I said petulantly as I paced around the bus stop.

It was a little misty out, like it was trying to rain. My hair was limp and straggly in my face. I really should go back to my apartment. I could wallow and pet my corgi and try and fail to get my homework done because fuck me, I was twenty-three and still had homework.

I sighed and checked the bus app on my phone.

"Thirty minutes?" I said in shock. "This day just gets worse and worse. You shouldn't have even come out here. You could have stayed away, let Carl have his little upper-class romance of psychos. You could have looked for a job. You could have done some sketching."

I took a deep breath. "We are turning over a new leaf," I told myself. "We are going to stop bad decision-making. We

are going to be productive with our time.”

I huddled there, by the bent metal bus-stop sign—there wasn’t even a bench—and took out my sketchbook to attempt a new comic about Doug and Carl. They were by far my most popular social media posts.

“If you do a lot of them,” I told myself, “you could get a book deal. You could be famous.” But I couldn’t get a drawing out. I started to panic. Had my well run dry?

Libby: Maybe I’m not cut out to be an artist.

Brea: You’re a great artist. We had a bride come in today and show us your latest comic about Doug and Carl going to school.

I snickered. I had done that in class while trying to keep myself from going nuclear on Bitsy.

Libby: I can’t draw right now.

Brea: I bet you would be more relaxed if you had slept with Carl.

Libby: He’s all hung up on Bitsy.

Brea: You can’t just give up so easily. You can’t let her bully you. She did that your entire time in college, and you ran away instead of fighting. Now she’s trapped Carl in her clutches.

Libby: Carl’s a grown man.

Brea: Grown men are idiots.

Brea: I bet he's at the restaurant right now
literally eating out of her hand.

I looked in the direction Carl's car had gone. "Don't do it," I warned myself. But I couldn't help but torture myself.

"The bus is late anyways." It started to drizzle as I walked in the direction Carl's car had gone. "This way, you're going to get on the bus sooner. If we happen to see Carl, then we happen to see him; it's not like we're looking for him."

I walked for blocks. There was no bus. The rain started pouring down.

"Fuck it, I'm taking the train, even if it's way more expensive than the bus." I ran across the street to the subway entrance. That's when I saw them through the window of a high-end restaurant.

There was Bitsy, turning on all the charm, and Carl was eating it up.

"Just let him suffer the consequences of his own actions." But four years of Bitsy had made my life hell. And now she was going to marry Carl, and I was going to have to spend the rest of my life seeing her all over the tabloids, parading her billionaire husband around because I knew she was going to rub that in everyone's face as soon as she had a ring on it.

The same rage filled me that had inspired me to get those nipple piercings in freshman year—I just wanted to stick it to Bitsy. I slipped inside the restaurant. The hostess station was empty while the hostess took a couple to their table. I snuck by the bar and grabbed a tray of drinks off the counter. My heart was pounding.

What the hell are you doing? Just put the tray down and leave.

Put it down, Libby!

But I was in too deep.

I heard Bitsy's braying laugh and caught the words "Nipple piercings... pathetic."

That horrible bitch.

Then I saw Carl give a small smile. It was like a knife to my chest. He was *laughing* at me. They were both joking and laughing about me.

Screw them.

I marched over there with the tray of drinks, not really sure what I was going to do. Keep eavesdropping? Confront Bitsy on her lies?

Just go home, I ordered myself. You're finally starting to turn your life around. Don't let her control you.

A table right behind Carl was signaling to me. "I think those are our drinks," a woman said.

"Sure thing," I said, trying to maneuver the tray. I had never actually had a waitressing job, and the servers made it look a lot easier than it was to transfer the tray to one hand so I could pass out the overfull drink cups.

As I was shifting the tray slowly down, my palms sweaty, praying I didn't drop anything or that the actual restaurant workers didn't discover me, Bitsy yelled, "Oh my god, Libby, you're stalking him!"

I jerked in surprise, and that put my hand—and the tray—off-balance. In slow motion, the cold drinks tipped over,

sending the liquid and the tray into Carl's lap.

"What the hell, Libby?" Carl swore, jumping out of his seat, dripping in syrupy soft drinks and cocktails that were pooling all over the floor. He quickly unbuttoned his sopping-wet vest, but it was too late; he was drenched. "I didn't even do anything to you."

"I told you," Bitsy insisted. "I told you she was crazy."

I was right—they had been talking about me. Not that it mattered. I knew how crazy I looked. "I'll, uh, get you some more drinks," I stammered then ran out of the restaurant.

I clattered down the steps to the subway, praying a train was about to arrive. "Ugh, what is wrong with me?" I blinked back the tears. "I should have just stayed away. Now Carl thinks I'm insane."

Bitsy was probably telling him to call the cops on me or get a restraining order.

Just as a subway train clattered up to the platform, a man grabbed my wrists, jerking me around to face him. I winced when I saw the sticky red strawberry-soda stains on Carl's pants.

I took a shuddering breath. We stood there, looking at each other as the train doors closed, and the train rattled off. The puff of air blew my wet hair into my face.

"Guess it's a good thing I didn't let you wear your favorite black suit, because then you'd really be mad it was ruined, huh?"

Carl did not smile. "You are impulsive and irrational," he stated in a sharp tone. "Sneaking into a restaurant to pretend to be a server and then spilling a tray of drinks all over me?"

“Would it help to add that if I had better coordination, I’d have dumped them all over Bitsy?” I asked.

Carl’s nostrils flared.

“Guess you two really hit it off, huh?” I said bitterly. “Did you bond over how much you both couldn’t stand me?”

“It’s not that I can’t stand you,” Carl said, frustrated. “I just don’t understand you. The lying, the reckless behavior.”

The fury rose in me. That was my entire college career, my entire life with my godfather. Everyone constantly accusing me of lying. Even at the lawyers’ office, Trenton had blatantly accused me of lying.

“I’m not a liar, I said, forcing myself not to cry.” I pushed at Carl’s chest. “Everyone is making up things about me. I didn’t try to steal Bitsy’s boyfriend even though she sure thought so. He was coming on to me. He was the one who, whenever I was alone, would show up and try and hook up with me.”

There was a deep scowl on Carl’s face. He probably thought I was lying. Well, fuck him. I knew my truth.

“He would tell me that he was going to break up with Bitsy, that he wanted to have a real college experience. He was constantly trying to get me drunk and then would get mad when I would call him out on it. He stole Bitsy’s key and would show up and hide in the closet to surprise me when I was changing.”

“Where is he now?” Carl snarled.

I stepped back, a little apprehensive. Even though he was covered in dried soda, Carl looked terrifying, with his fists balled and the muscles on his neck in sharp relief.

“Um,” I said, twisting the sleeves of my shirt, “I’m not sure. He snuck into my bed one night after a brutal final-exams week and tried to feel me up, so I broke his nose.”

“Good,” Carl said.

I shrugged. “Apparently, it’s against the honor code to hit someone in the face with a metal colored-pencil case, sooo that didn’t work out all that well for me. I think his parents transferred him after he got his face reconstructed. Bitsy, of course, made sure everyone thought I had led him on then tried to frame me. She tried to petition having me expelled and everything. It was basically her full-time job to make my life miserable and drive me out of school. And she succeeded.”

I tucked my arms around myself.

“The TA?” Carl asked.

“Yep. He told me he was going to flunk me if I didn’t sleep with him. I told him to eat a bag of dicks, and Bitsy conspired with him to tell the administration that I was fishing for an A.” I looked down at the grubby floor of the subway station. “After all the lies she spread about me, my permanent record was just too thick, so they told me to leave.”

“You didn’t fight it?”

“Dude, I’m pretending to be your ward so that you’ll save my dog from a lawsuit. Clearly, I was not going to fight it.” I looked down the black train tunnel. “You can’t really fight people like that. They have all the power.”

“Your godfather had money. What’s a godfather for if not to bust kneecaps?”

“He said it must have been my fault. It was the final nail in the coffin for him as far as I was concerned. At least he set me

up with a halfway decent living situation. Rent's pretty good. We have hot water—sometimes—in the winter.”

Carl tucked one of the tangled locks of hair behind my ear.

“I believe you,” he said simply.

I looked up at the ceiling. They really needed to do a better job cleaning. “It doesn't matter.”

He cupped my face. “I believe you, Libby. I don't think you're crazy. I don't think you were trying to steal Bitsy's boyfriend, and I don't think you were trying to sleep with your TA for a good grade. Your godfather was wrong—he should have fought for you, and he should have believed you, and I believe you.”

Tears were rolling down my face, and I let out a sob. “I don't need you to believe me. I don't care what anyone thinks,” I said through the tears.

Carl didn't say anything, just wrapped me in his arms. I collapsed against his chest, letting it all out while he stroked my hair.

When I was done crying, he ran his thumb across my cheek and smiled at me. “I think I have something that will cheer you up.”

CARL

I absolutely believed Libby's story. I'd been to college; I'd seen the shit the guys I went to school with liked to pull. I'd also seen how horrible and manipulative my father and, honestly, also my mother, could be. The gaslighting, the lying, the manipulation—my mother had made the younger sister wives' lives miserable in the compound. And the lives of me and my brothers.

I couldn't believe Libby's godfather hadn't even tried to fight the school. What was the use of having all that money if you didn't protect the people you loved?

You don't love Libby.

I wanted to keep her safe, keep her with me forever and ever. My heart hurt just thinking about her. Was I falling for her?

You're a sucker for a sob story is all.

She was sniffing beside me on the car ride back to my condo. "Is it pizza?"

"Is what pizza?" I asked, glancing over at her in the dark.

"The surprise?"

“No,” I said. “You’ll see. It’s definitely going to cheer you up, though.”

“I hope you didn’t walk out on your check,” Libby said after a moment of silence.

I nudged her. “What kind of man do you think I am? I’m offended. Not only did I pay, but I also paid for all the drinks I’m wearing.”

She grimaced. “I am sorry; honestly, I didn’t mean to. Two of those were alcoholic, and you know I wouldn’t waste good booze like that on the floor.”

I smirked. “It’s probably better you dumped it on me, not Bitsy. You can’t afford to have someone else suing you.”

“Oh my god.” She hung her head.

I took her hand and squeezed it for a brief moment. It was warm and soft in my large one.

“So,” she asked tentatively, “are you going to continue your date with her?”

“I don’t think you could handle it.”

“If you want to date a hypocrite, I’m not going to stop you.”

“I’m probably going to take a break from dating,” I told her. “It’s turning into too big of a distraction.”

“Oh,” she said. She chewed on her lip.

“I need to focus on my business and my family. Someone has to keep my little sisters from going off the rails like—”

“Like me?” she asked bitterly.

“No,” I said, “like my brothers.”

I laughed at her expression. “I know I’ve been saying your life is a mess, but honestly, it’s nothing compared to the shit my brothers have gotten into.”

“Your brothers are all successful billionaires,” she reminded me.

“Yes, because I was right behind them, cleaning up their messes.”

“It cannot be that bad.”

“One of my brothers stole a thirty-million-dollar yacht then crashed it,” I told her.

“Ouch.”

“Yeah,” I said, rolling into the parking garage and into my spot next to all the other sports cars my brothers owned.

“It’s like being in a luxury car commercial,” Libby marveled.

“I dread the day my sisters start driving,” I admitted. “My brother Walker has already taken the older ones to a racetrack to drive around, and they are addicted.”

“With a fast car, who wouldn’t be?”

“No one drives my car, if that’s what you’re thinking,” I said.

“Hmm. I think part of being an adult is driving responsibly.”

“I’ll rent you an old car that goes, like, thirty miles an hour. You can drive that,” I joked as we stepped into the elevator cab.

“I’m a good driver,” she countered.

“Aren’t you paying a car payment on a car you totaled?”

“I think that the insurance company ripped me off. I bet I could have found someone to fix it.”

“Uh-huh,” I said as the elevator let us off on my floor. I unlocked the door.

“So, what’s the surprise?” she asked as I walked inside.

“You’re going to see in just a second,” I replied, then I ripped off my shirt.

LIBBY

O *h my freaking god.*

I clapped my hands over my mouth as Carl stood there, shirtless and glorious. Gosh, his chest was amazing—the bulging biceps, the pecs that I wanted to run my hands over, the washboard abs that led to the V of muscle that disappeared under his pants.

He slipped off his shoes then reached for his belt. I squeaked.

“Oh, shit,” Carl said.

“This is the surprise?”

“No,” he said, hastily gathering up the shirt. “I don’t want to track soda all over my condo. It will ruin the floors. You can go into the kitchen and grab a water. I’ll be right back.”

I forced myself to do the adult thing and not peek around the corner as I heard the clink of the buckle then the soft slither of leather as he took off the belt.

“I think I need a drink-drink.” I opened up the cupboards in Carl’s kitchen. There were thousands of dollars’ worth of high-end kitchen appliances and cookware that I was sure he hadn’t ever used.

I finally opened one door and found an entire wine cellar.

Was it wrong to steal Carl's wine? Yes, but I was feeling very hot and bothered from the impromptu striptease, and I needed something to calm my nerves.

I pulled out a bottle, poured myself a glass, and took a generous sip. It was divine.

I didn't recognize the wine label, and I googled it while I sipped, then choked on the wine when I saw how much a single bottle cost. "Holy shit, this is literally more than I make in a year," I squawked and coughed again.

"Shoot." I looked around wildly. Could you recork a bottle of wine? Was that a thing?

I tried to find a place to hide the bottle. Maybe I could just stick it in the fridge, and he might think that he had opened it during a night of sleep-drinking? Did he do that, or was that just me?

Probably just me.

Ugh, Carl had been nice to me, and then I just drank his thousand-dollar bottle of wine. I took another slug. It probably would have been better to dump the whole thing down the drain then hide the evidence, but I could not in good conscience waste good wine. The wine gods would come down and smite me for the transgression.

I was standing in the living room, taking swigs from the bottle and trying to decide if it was a better idea to bury it in the large potted fern or hide it behind the TV, when Carl walked into the room. He smelled amazing and looked even better in a black three-piece suit and sharply parted hair.

"I just found this bottle of wine in the fridge," I blurted out.

Carl smirked and took the bottle from me.

“Too bad you drank,” he said, “because I was going to let you drive. But I guess you can’t.”

“Damn it,” I said.

Carl handed me my bag.

The wine started to hit me once we were back in the car. “Where are we going, and is it pizza?” I asked.

Carl sighed loudly.

“There is a pizza place a couple blocks over,” I said pointedly. “They have really good slices, and they’re fast.”

“I guess you need something to soak up all that alcohol,” he said, taking the next right.

I hopped out of the car when he pulled up, trying not to smile at the amazed looks from other pizza lovers at Carl’s fancy ride. “I’ll take three peperoni,” I said to the girl behind the counter, who handed me the three hot, greasy slices on a paper plate.

“I hope you’re going to give that guy more than a slice of pizza,” she said. “With a car like that, you better nail that man down.”

I nervously chewed on the cheesy slice as I climbed back into Carl’s car.

“I brought you a slice,” I offered.

“No, thank you,” he said, putting the car into gear.

I sat there and nervously chewed the pizza. *Lock him down?* He wasn’t dating Bitsy. He said he didn’t want to date at all anymore.

But what about me?

You just opened a thousand-dollar wine bottle without asking and then tried to stuff it behind a couch cushion. I doubt he's going to break his new anti-dating resolution for you.

“Sorry, I forgot to ask if it was okay to eat in your car,” I said after finishing the first slice of pizza. I took a sip from the bottle of wine I’d brought along.

Carl gave me a slight smile. “It’s fine. My brother has spilled an entire Thanksgiving turkey in this car once.”

“How?”

“Don’t ask.”

I polished off the last of the pizza and immediately felt like I could throw it all up when we pulled up in front of a familiar building. “This is Trenton’s gym,” I said in shock. “He works out here. What are we doing here?”

“You wanted me to save Doug, so that’s what I’m doing,” Carl said, frowning. He put the car in park.

“No, I wanted you to show up at the lawyer’s office with all your big-dick energy and make them drop the case,” I said. I’d had too much wine, and I was now wiggling out. Were they going to get in a fight? What if the cops were called? “This is dangerous.”

“This is business,” he said simply. “This is how I operate. You asked for my help, and this is it. Or would you rather switch your college major to pre-law and throw yourself to the mercy of the courts?”

I wished I had more wine.

“Take a stand,” Carl said.

“You’re not going to get in a fight, are you?”

“If I do, I’ll win,” he replied, opening up the car door. He looked like an assassin in his black clothes, gray eyes flat as he strode up to the front door of the gym.

I hadn’t spent much time there, preferring the comfort of my bed, but I knew it well enough. Inside, Trenton and Ms. Brazilian Butt Lift were lifting weights in the Spartan space. Trenton scowled when he saw me.

“You have some nerve being here,” his cocheater snapped at me, dropping her weights, “after what you did to him.”

“After what I did to him?” I shrieked at her. “He’s trying to take my dog. He cheated on me.”

“Only because you were a terrible girlfriend,” she shot back. She was wearing those CrossFit booty shorts and a sports bra that barely contained her fake boobs.

I had pizza sauce on my shirt.

“Mr. Desoto,” Carl said coldly before Ms. Brazilian Butt Lift could kick my ass. I did have pepper spray and a Taser in my purse, so it might have evened the field somewhat.

“Who the fuck are you?” Trenton blustered.

Unlike me and Ms. Brazilian Butt Lift, Carl didn’t seem at all unsure about how he would come out in a fight with my ex. For one, he towered over him by at least eight inches.

Trenton tried to stand his ground as Carl approached him not slowly, not quickly, but with steady and unrelenting purpose.

Trenton seemed nervous as Carl came closer, like he was about to jump out of his skin.

At the last minute, Carl veered to a nearby table and set a black leather briefcase on top of it. He opened it with a snap.

“It has come to my attention,” Carl said, “that you want to force your relationship issues with Ms. Gilbert to a trial.”

“I’m going to take her stupid little dog and sell him to a puppy mill,” Trenton yelled at me.

“You piece of shit!” I rummaged in my purse for my Taser. “I’m not letting you touch Doug!”

“Mr. Desoto,” Carl said, his voice rumbling around the small gym space. “You are not here to deal with her. You are dealing with me.” Carl handed Trenton a manila folder.

“In this folder, you will find copies of images you posted that show clear evidence of the use of both makeup and digital editing to manipulate your physical form.”

“I didn’t do it,” Trenton shouted, “and if I did, it’s not a crime.”

“It is,” Carl said, handing him another folder, “in violation of the terms of your sponsorship agreement with the MuscleMilsch brand. False advertising opens them up to a lawsuit, for which I will be putting out a call for people to participate in as a class action suit. Have fun trying to fight Libby for her little corgi while you have a huge supplement conglomerate out for your blood.”

Trenton blanched. “You can’t do that. There’s a statute of limitations. You hacked my private account.”

“All of this information was available publicly.”

“You can’t tell anything from these pictures.”

“I just have to make a convincing case in the court of public opinion. Every YouTuber in America is going to be posting content trying to debunk your photos. Your influencer brand will be poison,” Carl stated.

“Why are you doing this?” Trenton asked, his voice cracking.

If he wasn't such a piece of shit, I'd almost feel sorry for him. “I don't have to, of course,” Carl said smoothly. “You can drop the lawsuit again Libby, and this will all just, poof, disappear.”

“I, uh—” Trenton looked around in shock. “Who are you?”

“It doesn't matter,” Carl said. “Are you going to cooperate or not?”

“I... yeah,” he said. “Where do I sign?”

“I don't do signatures,” Carl told him, taking back the folder and neatly packing the briefcase. “The next time you think about coming after Libby, just remember this knife hanging over your head.”

Carl turned and walked back to the exit.

“Come, Libby.” He wrapped an arm possessively around my waist.

I let him lead me outside. Through the glass, I could see my ex and Ms. Brazilian Butt Lift still standing there in shock.

Carl opened the door, and I sat down in the leather seat heavily. “So, that's it? It was that simple? You just walk in there with a suit and a two-foot-long dick and Trenton just rolls over?”

“I told you,” Carl said. “It was an easy fix.” He reversed the car then merged into traffic.

I studied his profile, the straight nose, the strong jaw. He was so self-assured as he cut through the evening traffic toward my apartment. Seeing him like that, so forceful and completely in his element and in control of the situation—he

was the type of man whose arms you just wanted to throw yourself into, have him sweep you up and take you to his bed to fuck your brains out. *I bet he's amazing in the sack.*

Carl turned onto my street.

“I feel like I got the raw end of the deal here,” I said. “All you did was show up and be awesome and intimidating, and here I am—I did a whole photo shoot for you, revamped your dating profile, had to get up early to exercise, and had to clean my entire apartment.”

Carl's laugh rumbled deep in his chest.

“To be fair,” he said, pulling up in front of my apartment building, “I did most of the cleaning, and I sacrificed a car for it.”

“I guess,” I grumbled, resting my hand on the door handle.

“Libby,” he said softly, leaning over to wrap his arm around my back.

“Yes?” I squeaked.

His hand slid up my body. I bit back a gasp.

The corner of his mouth twitched. His hand slid up to cup my jaw. He leaned in, his breath tickling my mouth.

Kiss me, kiss me, kiss me, I chanted internally.

“Libby.” Carl swallowed. “No matter what, I will always protect you. You understand?”

I nodded. *Now let's get on with fucking, please.*

But instead, Carl pulled away.

What?

CARL

It always felt so good when I had all the evidence lined up, the trap set, the trip line taut, then all I had to do was stick the knife in, twist it, and watch them squirm. Trenton hadn't put up a fight, not that I expected him to. He was going after Libby just because he could, because he sensed that she was vulnerable.

I was not vulnerable.

The whole car ride, she had been watching me, like she was intrigued and a little scared and a little turned on. It was like catnip. All I wanted to do was kiss her, to take her upstairs, fuck her, to feel her tongue with that ring on it on my cock.

Libby was warm and soft when I wrapped my arm around her. The noise she made—she was all I wanted.

Don't look at her, I told myself after I pulled back.

But I couldn't help it.

I glanced back over to her.

She was arched back in the seat, her eyes wide, her mouth parted, her legs spread enough that I could slip my hand between them and stroke her.

I wonder what she sounds like when she comes.

Her breath was coming out in little gasps.

“I think you should go; you have class in the morning.”

“I’m a big girl. I can stay up late,” she said.

I gripped the shift stick.

She laced her fingers on top of mine. “Why won’t you kiss me?” she asked softly.

“Because,” I lied, “I don’t want to.”

“Bullshit.” She grabbed the back of my seat and swung herself over. She straddled me, grabbed one of my hands, and rubbed it up her body to cup one of her round, full breasts through the thin fabric of her shirt.

I groaned, my hand grasping her chest.

“Kiss me,” she ordered, her mouth inches from mine.

“No,” I said through gritted teeth. But I let my hand linger on her tits. The other crept up her bare thigh. If she ground her hips against me, I was done for.

“You trying to see if the rumors are true and I have piercings there?” she whispered as I rubbed her tits.

She unbuttoned the top button on her blouse.

“All you have to do is kiss me,” she said softly, “and then you can find out.”

I inhaled the scent of her hair, sweet with a slight underlying sharpness from the pink dye.

“I’m not going to kiss you,” I said, my voice sounding harsh to my ears. I forced my hands down.

“Why?” she demanded, grabbing my shoulders and pushing me back into the seat.

All I wanted to do was grab her ass, push her panties to the side, and sink my cock into her.

But I held it together.

“Because,” I said, looking into her eyes through the dark. “You’re my ward. It wouldn’t be right. We can’t ever be together like that, Libby. You have to accept that.”

LIBBY

I was not going to survive class that day.

In fact, I had barely survived the night. I had alternated between getting hot and bothered from how it had felt to have Carl's hands on me, and feeling shock and disbelief that he had said point-blank that he wasn't going to kiss me let alone hook up because of the stupid ward situation.

I was groggy when my alarm went off that morning. Doug protested while I dragged myself out of bed. I yawned while I made instant coffee and daydreamed about the super-fancy coffee maker in Carl's perfect and unused kitchen.

Such a waste. It would have been amazing to wake up next to him then roll out of bed and make fancy café-quality espresso.

My instant coffee tasted bitter, and I poured it out after taking only a sip. "I'm not going to survive," I told Doug.

I pulled on brown corduroy high-waisted pants and a vintage T-shirt, which I knotted at the waist. Ignoring all of the fancy clothes Carl had bought me, I slipped on my boots and drew on heavy eyeliner then ran a comb through my hair.

When I let Carl into my apartment a few minutes later, he was stiff and formal. So we were just going to pretend like he

hadn't had his hands on my tits last night? Fine.

“Are you seriously bringing that dog to class?” he asked. He sounded irritated. Good. I hoped he had lain awake with a painful, raging erection.

“Where I go, Doug goes.”

Carl let out another annoyed breath. He was wearing a three-piece dark-charcoal-gray suit, the tie tight and collar starched to a crisp. “Your socks don't match,” Carl said when I strutted past him out the door.

“That was by design,” I said breezily. It wasn't, but I needed to do laundry, and that was what I had left in the grocery sack I used to hold my socks.

I fiddled with the radio as we drove. There was nothing on morning radio except for commercials and obnoxious talk shows. “Where's the music?” I complained as I flipped through the stations in rapid time.

Carl finally reached over to turn off the radio.

Our fingers grazed each other, and he snatched his hand back. “We're just going to sit in silence,” he said through gritted teeth.



“YOU DON'T HAVE to come to class,” I reminded him after he parked the car as we were walking across campus. Doug was trotting next to Carl, looking up at him adoringly.

“As if I'm going to let you off the hook to duck out and spend all day skipping class. You will graduate,” Carl said. He was walking a few paces ahead of me.

That was fine with me. I'd be back here, admiring the view.

“Oh my god!” Several freshmen girls squealed, running over to Carl and Doug. They were bright-eyed and uncynical, not yet having had their dreams smashed to pieces by the real world.

“Is that your dog?” they gushed to Carl.

“He’s so adorable.”

“I love corgis!”

“Are you, like, a celebrity?” one girl asked him. “Because you’re, like, really hot.”

What the hell? “He’s not a celebrity,” I snapped at them, shooing them away. “Stop chasing after men that are too old for you, jeez.”

Carl was smirking when I turned back to him.

“Doug sure is a babe magnet,” he said, sounding only slightly tongue-in-cheek. “Guess I’ll have to keep you around.” He grinned at the corgi.

I fumed silently as I marched into the building and up the stairs to the studio. When we arrived, I braced myself for Bitsy’s tirade. She looked like she was about to blow up when she saw us, but then all the other students in the class, especially the girls, started fawning over Carl and, of course, Doug.

Both of them were eating up the attention.

They are both dead to me. I set my stuff down at a table and tried to bribe myself with pizza to make it through the day.

“Man, what a dick.” A guy with a scruffy beard and an earring sat down next to me. On the roster of typical college kids, he would be the trustafarian. His type wandered around

the world, usually barefoot, preaching about alternative lifestyles while being fully funded by his grandparents.

“I can’t stand those suit types like him.”

“No kidding,” I replied, watching as Carl greeted his adoring public. “Sure must be great to have a pop-up fan club wherever you go.”

“I just can’t respect people like him,” the guy said. “All they care about is money. He should take his shoes off, feel the mud between his toes. I was backpacking through Australia this summer—such a fantastic experience. Have you been?”

As if I had the money to fuck off to Australia for a summer. I shook my head.

“You’re really missing out. Being out there in nature really expanded my horizons, you know?” He stuck his hand out to me. “Daniel, by the way, though everyone calls me Cedar.”

I introduced myself. Cedar took that as an opportunity to talk my ear off about how he was starting a guerrilla mushroom–farming nonprofit and wrote poetry about food production.

“Hey,” he said. “You seem pretty cool. Do you want to hang out tonight?”

I glanced at Carl and was immediately trapped in his gaze. He was staring at me intently.

“Yes,” I said slowly to Cedar, “yes, I would.”

“Fantastic. I can bring you my home-brewed kombucha.”

“That sounds healthy.”

“Who is that?” Carl hissed as he sat down next to me.

“That is Daniel,” I explained with a smirk, “but he likes to be called Cedar.”

What the fuck? Carl silently mouthed.

“He and I are going on a date.”

CARL

“No, you’re not,” I said automatically.
“Why?” she hissed at me.
“Because,” I said.

“Isn’t dating a respectable man part of being a fully-fledged adult? My godfather certainly liked to tell me I needed to find a man from a good family.”

“Someone named Cedar does not come from a good family,” I argued with her under my breath.

“Yes he does; he has a trust fund.”

“You don’t know that.”

She pulled out a phone and typed on it quickly then shoved it in my face. I grabbed her wrist and bit back a snide remark when I read the gossip bio about Cedar and his large trust fund.

“See?” Libby said. “He’s a good catch.”



I DID NOT WANT Libby out on a date with Cedar.

“Why do you care?” I asked myself as I paced around my office. “You shouldn’t care. You can’t date her.”

I mean, I could. I could very easily push her back against her bed and run my hands up her thighs, between her legs.

But I shouldn't. Doing so would compromise my getting control of the assets that her godfather left behind. And the most important thing was that money.

But still—the thought of her with another man made me want to hurl my chair through a window.

“This is probably for the best,” I told myself as I tried to calm down. “She needs to find a husband from a good family in order for you to get that money.”

I drummed my fingers on the desk. But what if Cedar wasn't a good person? What if he hurt Libby? Maybe I should go and scope it out. Just to make sure he was as good as she thought.

Was it stalking? Of course not. I was just doing what any man would.



AFTER TRAILING Libby outside her apartment, I snuck into the large warehouse that had been converted into a gallery. I meandered through the warehouse and out into a courtyard, where sofas and old chairs were set up around a firepit.

I kept to the shadows and watched as Libby sipped her drink while Cedar talked her ear off. She was sort of nodding along and every so often would roll her eyes when he wasn't looking.

I smiled to myself. So Cedar wasn't as great as he thought he was.

All around her were groups of artsy young people in funky clothes talking about some new exhibit in Berlin. When I was

in college, I hadn't spent a lot of time at parties—basically, none. My older brothers had made it very clear, under pain of death, that they were paying for my schooling and therefore, they expected results. When I wasn't in class or studying, I was working.

Cedar finally left Libby and wandered off to lecture someone else about the educational experience of taking a family-funded trip to New Zealand.

She drained the rest of her drink as I came up behind her. When I placed my hand on the small of her back, she jumped. I knew I shouldn't, knew I was going down a dangerous road, but I couldn't help myself. All I wanted to do was touch her, have her right next to me, be connected to her.

“Well, well, well,” she said. “My, how the tables have turned. Look who's stalking who on their date.”

“This is hardly a date. More of a performance of narcissism.”

“Says the person who works in a tower with his name on it,” she countered.

Cedar had pulled out his guitar and was strumming along and reciting his own poetry in a slightly off-key singing voice. Several tipsy girls snapped their fingers along with the music while everyone else studiously ignored him.

“I can't think of a single occasion when I was grateful someone busted out an acoustic guitar,” Libby remarked, shaking her head.

I bit back a grin. “Really? You're not moved to tears?”

“Just tears that I wasted a Friday night here.” She nudged me. “Now, you, I can't imagine why *you're* here on a Friday night. No hot dates?” she teased.

“Maybe I’ll pick up that guitar and take home one of the groupies.”

She pursed her lips in annoyance. It was cute.

“Guess that works out, then,” she said, “since I was going to hook up with Cedar tonight in his van.”

I ground my teeth. “In his van? Why would you do it in his van?”

“It’s actually a very nice van. His aunt had it custom-built,” she said. “It has a very big bed.”

“It is not as nice as my condo.”

“Yes,” she said, “but there’s no man in your penthouse who will let me ride his cock without having an existential crisis.”

I swallowed. My pants were starting to feel a little tight. “I told you. You’re my ward.”

“And I hear you, which is why I’m moving on,” she said simply.

And that was simply unacceptable.

I set my hands on her waist. “I don’t want you to,” I said in a low voice.

She grabbed my tie and pulled me down to her. “Too bad,” she said, “because I’m getting laid tonight, one way or another.”

“No,” I said, cupping my hand to the back of her head, “You’re not.”

Then I crushed our mouths together.

Her lips were soft under mine as I kissed her. She melted in my arms. The little moans she made as I slipped my tongue

into her mouth were intoxicating.

I'm taking her home with me now. Then the next thought.
Wait, what am I doing? This is a disaster.

I pushed her away and turned away.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

I turned away before Libby could say anything and left her stunned, standing there in the courtyard.

LIBBY

Was I a bad kisser? Who just makes out with a girl after having very aggressively sexual banter and then just walks away?

It was so unfair. The kiss with Carl had been amazing. I probably could have come right there. The way he had cupped my head possessively yet still been tender. How his hands had slowly traced over my body, promising more. I had been so sure Carl was about to take me back to his condo or at least his car and fuck me until I screamed.

I flopped over on my bed. My pussy ached. And my brain kept trying to get me to call him or show up at his apartment and beg for his cock.

Every time I moved, either the nipple piercings or the piercing down there rubbed against my sensitive skin, sending the nerve endings tingling and whacking my brain unhelpfully over the head with the image of Carl *there*, his mouth teasing me.

I briefly let my hand drift between my legs, and then I stopped myself. I was not going to rub one out thinking of Carl. If he didn't have the decency to stick around after making out, then he didn't deserve me thinking about him while I made myself come.

But he was all I could think about.

He haunted my dreams that night. I could feel his strong hands on me, pushing me into the bed, him teasing me with his cock but never actually fucking me.

I woke up early that morning with soaking-wet panties. A cold shower didn't help—not that I had taken it on purpose but because the hot water was out. Nor did eating the leftover seed salad that Gardenia had brought back from her latest hippie retreat.

I paced around the apartment, alternating between saying “screw Carl” and wanting to screw Carl. It wasn't fair! How dare you kiss a girl like that then just leave and say thanks, no thanks?

Brea: He clearly has some sort of disorder.

Brea: Cut your losses and find someone else to hook up with.

Libby: But I didn't want anyone else. I wanted him.

Libby: Ugh, I sound so pathetic.

Brea: You sound like someone addicted to a man.

Libby: Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm not sexy enough for him.

Brea: Did you show him all your piercings?

Libby: No, I was in a public place...

Brea: Just show up at his condo and ask him if he's ever fucked someone with a pussy ring.

Libby: Maybe he has, and that's the problem.

Brea: I doubt it if he's all about having someone that fits in that narrow little upper-class box.

Brea: You think Bitsy or any of those nematodes in her friend circle have anything more than pierced ears? Let alone a bunch of tattoos?

Libby: Probably not.

Brea: I work with rich people, not so much rich men, but from what little contact I do have with the billionaires my brides score, they're always looking for a new, unique experience.

Brea: What you have is a marketing problem. Just give Carl a little teaser, then he's going to want the whole experience.

Libby: And then what happens if he gets bored?

Brea: Oh, he'll definitely get bored. Those types always do.

I slumped against the counter. That was the problem. I didn't want Carl to get bored. I wanted him to choose me, over and over again.

"You have abandonment issues, and also you're sex starved. This is not a realistic scenario. It's like when you thought that being an influencer was a surefire way to make a bunch of money. Carl is not Prince Charming. He's not here to rescue you. You two have an agreement. You can either get a good lay out of it or not," I scolded myself.

I wasn't sure if I could handle it emotionally, sleeping with him, being so close to having that perfect life that I had always secretly wanted with the nice house and the handsome husband and the kids who I would spend all day doing craft projects with.

Girls like you do not have those types of happy endings. Maybe it was better that Carl had walked off before I made a complete fool out of myself.

But still I couldn't help but want him. All of him.

I sat on the couch then jumped back up. "You know what, Doug?" I said to the corgi who was napping in a patch of sunlight. "I think we should go on a run!"



"THIS WAS A TERRIBLE FUCKING IDEA," I wheezed as I hauled my tortured body down the running path, Doug lumbering beside me.

However, the pain in my lungs was preferable to the rawness of the ring on my pussy rubbing against my already sensitive skin whenever I walked. And so I ran. Ineffectively and in poor form.

"Oh my god," I groaned, finally giving in and collapsing in the grass near a small pond.

Doug flopped next to me.

I closed my eyes and tried to breathe. *At least the horniness is gone. In fact, if I die from exhaustion, all my problems with Carl may just, poof, disappear.*

"Miss?" Someone was standing over me, blocking the sunlight.

I opened my eyes and blinked. A small gray-eyed, blond-haired girl was looking down at me.

“Miss, are you dead?”

“I wish,” I groaned, rolling over.

Another large shadow cast over me. A pair of men’s boots appeared next to my face.

“Libby?”

Crap.

CARL

Trying to sleep that night was torture. Every time I moved and the fabric of the sheets brushed against my body, I felt her touch.

What is wrong with you? You should have just taken her back here and fucked her.

My cock ached thinking about her riding me. Thinking about reaching up, tugging at those nipple rings on her perfect round tits, making her moan... I jumped out of bed and practically ran to the home gym in my condo. I needed to take the edge off.

Everything in me wanted to grab a box of condoms, get in my car, and race to her apartment. I wouldn't even say anything when I walked in; I would just push her on the bed, pull her panties down, and fuck her perfect hot, wet pussy.

I loaded the weights onto the barbell with a clang and settled on the bench.

I wished I had brought her home with me. But I knew I couldn't, knew it was a terrible idea, knew it would cost me everything.

But it would have been so worth it.

You can't keep thinking with your dick.

Just find someone else. Anyone else. Well, not anyone, I decided, thinking of Chrishelle and her pregnancy app. There could be worse decisions than sleeping with Libby.

So then why not sleep with her?

It wasn't as if she was going to run to the lawyer and rat us out. It also wasn't as if I was going to turn around and propose marriage to her and have the *New York Times* write a front-page article about it in the Style section, which was apparently a thing, since my little sisters would always fight over that section of the newspaper.

No one would know, right?

But sleeping with her felt like a terrible decision that was going to blow up in my face. If it were one of my brothers, it would be a hard *hell no*. Yet somehow, I was trying to rationalize it to myself.

I racked the barbell and moved to the rowing machine, sinking into the ache of my muscles as I set a furious pace.

Could set a furious pace with Libby.

I gritted my teeth.

Was this going to be the rest of my life, constantly thinking about her, her haunting my every waking and sleeping moment until I slowly went insane?

“You just have to push through. You'll probably be over her in four to six months.”

I was not going to survive that long. So why not sleep with her once? Or maybe one night since, let's be honest, once was not going to be enough. Then, when she was out of my system, I could move on and focus on work.

I'd tell Libby to keep it under wraps. She wasn't one of those gold-digger types. There was no way that she was going to start to believe that this was step one in a happily ever after. It was just sex. I could make that clear. I could draw that boundary. I wasn't going to let her into my life. She wasn't going to meet my family or attend functions with me as my girlfriend. It was going to be strictly carnal pleasure.

Libby seemed like the type of woman who could handle a mutual-benefits sexual situation without completely losing it. It was risky, though, but then, without risk there was no reward, and I was sure being with her would be very rewarding.

She had been pretty explicit about wanting sex. It wasn't like she was dropping hints about taking her on nice dates and meeting her family and shopping for engagement rings. Being with her was simple and easy and relaxing, and I felt like I could be myself with her. No one had any pretensions. It felt like we could both just be.

Now that sounds like someone wanting a relationship.

Casual hookups were one thing, but an actual relationship would jeopardize everything and was not worth billions of dollars.

After finishing my workout, I walked into my kitchen and poured myself a protein shake, smiling at the memory of Libby racing around with the wine bottle in her hand, trying to hide it.

You're going to have to be satisfied with sleeping with her, not having her as a fixture in your life. But isn't she already a fixture in my life? I mused as I made a list of my work goals for that Saturday.

The rest of my week had been filled with meetings and dealing with Libby, and now I was behind on work.

I wrote my to-do list in neat capital letters. First, I needed to finish combing through the mountains of stock certificates and chase down which stocks were worth what. Many of them were so old that the companies had long since merged or been bought out; it was a complete nightmare. Not to mention the property deeds.

The way Libby had described her godfather, he sounded like a bit of a cheapskate, so it was no wonder that he would penny-pinch on keeping his finances in order.

I also needed to help make a plan for hiring more women at the company in financial analyst positions since Greg was hell-bent on winning that prize instead of Belle.

Maybe we could just poach workers from other companies like Holbrook Enterprises. But that meant we needed to offer something more, and Holbrook had women in high positions in their company, several in fact, and we had zero.

I started jotting down a list of ideas to quickly solve the problem. I tapped my pen as I sipped my drink. Were any of my sisters old enough to take a high position? No matter. After I took a shower, I would figure something out.

Ding-dong!

I frowned. I wasn't expecting anyone.

I peered at the screen displaying the doorbell-camera feed from the front door and swore. "Absolutely not." I turned off the kitchen light. My brothers were not going to distract me today.

"We're coming in!" Liam hollered as the front door opened.

“How do you have a key?” I yelled at him as all my little sisters tumbled into the foyer.

“What’s yours is mine,” Liam said sagely.

“Why are your lights off, Carl?” my sisters asked, bouncing around the kitchen.

“Do you have any donuts?”

“Have you ever seen me eat a donut, Kiki?” I asked the little girl.

Though my brothers annoyed me, I adored my sisters. Greg had insisted that each of my older brothers take one or two of them so that it didn’t turn into a situation like in Harrogate, where my two dozen little brothers moved like a horde of zombies through the estate.

My little sisters were certainly better behaved than my brothers—both older and younger.

Walker opened my fridge.

“There’s nothing to eat for lunch,” Ophelia told him reproachfully.

“I’m sure Carl will take you out,” he said, grabbing the last smoothie in the fridge and opening it. “Man, this is gross. How do you drink that?”

I snatched it back from him. “I didn’t ask you to come in here and insult my food.”

“Well,” Liam said, checking his phone then slipping it into his pocket. “There’s the simple fact that you can’t split that smoothie ten ways, so you’re going to have to do something.”

“Fair warning,” Walker said, “Ophelia’s going through a Jane Austen food phase, so she’s probably going to make a

special request at the restaurant for partridges. We'll be back tonight to pick them up."

"Tonight?" I raced after my brothers. "You can't dump them on me. Most of these girls aren't even your responsibility. Where's Beck? Where's Mike?"

"Shit rolls downhill, baby brother," Walker said, patting me on the head. "Beck dumped his sisters on Mike, who dumped them on me and Liam, and now we are dumping them on you as is right and proper."

"Have fun with Carl!" Liam called into the condo then sprinted to the elevator and smashed the door close button while Walker yelled at him to hurry up.

I was about to sprint into the elevator to wrestle them back out when there was an ungodly crash from the kitchen. "Guess they're more like my little brothers than I thought."

In the kitchen, two of the toddlers were surrounded by a mountain of high-end stainless-steel cookware that I had used only occasionally to boil eggs.

"Are you hurt?" I asked in concern.

The two little girls seemed fine, but as soon as they saw the worry on my face, they started wailing.

I picked them up then tried to nudge Ophelia out of the cupboard, where she was attempting to haul out a bright-red stand mixer.

"Why is that even in there? Put that back."

"I want to make French toast."

One of the toddlers shrieked in my ear. I felt a headache coming on.

“We’re going outside,” I told them over the din. Maybe that would help them get some energy out.



MY SISTERS TROOPED behind me as we walked through the park.

Two of the girls were singing a song from one of the multitude of Disney princess movies but only the first few lines, then the older one would get mad at her sister, tell her she was off-key; there would be squabbling, and then they would start the whole song over from the top.

By the time we stumbled across the dead body, I was perfectly willing to confess to murder because sitting in a prison cell would be preferable to listening to that song one more time.

“She’s alive!” my sisters cried when Libby rolled over.

“I think she’s going to puke,” Enola whispered.

“Don’t crowd her,” I said.

“Call a doctor,” Ophelia exclaimed dramatically.

“She doesn’t need a doctor,” I said as Doug jumped around, wagging his tail and giving doggy kisses to my sisters.

“No,” Ophelia said, pressing a hand to her forehead, “but I feel faint with all this excitement. Where are my smelling salts?”

I picked Libby up and carried her to a nearby park bench.

“You’re touching her.” Enola was horrified. “She could be diseased.”

“I know her,” I explained, “and she’s not diseased.”

“She’s his girlfriend.” Cora said, and all my sisters drew out *Oohs*.

“Just, everyone, calm down. Here,” I said to Libby, tipping my water bottle to her mouth.

“Does this have wine in it?” she croaked. She didn’t sound like she was on death’s door.

“It has electrolyte powder,” I replied.

She took a sip. “It’s gross. I want a martini.” She sat up.

The excitement over, my sisters turned to the corgi and started racing around with him in the soft grass.

“Have you been there all night?” I asked Libby after a moment.

“No, I wasn’t there all night,” she snapped. “Do I look like the type of person that passes out in the park?”

I took the water bottle back from her. “Maybe.”

She stuck her tongue out at me. “If you must know,” she said, “I was exercising.”

“Like, running?”

“Yeah, like, running,” she said, crossing her arms.

I was smug. “Guess I am a good influence on you after all.”

“No,” she said, “you are a bad influence.” She shoved me.

I barely moved.

“Ugh!” She let out a disgusted noise. “You’re so infuriating. I wish you’d never kissed me.”

LIBBY

Carl jerked back like I'd slapped him. Served him right.

The tendon on his neck was prominent. I curled my fingers into a fist to keep from running my nail along it. He turned back to me, his eyes flashing. Good.

"You can't get a girl all hot and bothered then just run off. I wish I'd slept with Cedar instead."

"Don't sleep with him." Carl grabbed me possessively.

A part of me was thrilled.

Guess the kiss wasn't that bad after all.

He pulled me to him. I grabbed his wrist with my other hand.

"You're not going to sleep with me, so why not?"

"Because he's not worthy of you," Carl said in a low growl.

"I don't need him worthy. I just need a functioning cock," I whispered to Carl.

His jaw twitched.

“In fact,” I continued, “I think I’m going to go home after this and send him a nice sexy photo to get him in the mood.”

“Don’t you dare,” Carl snarled.

“You’re not the boss of me.”

“I literally am,” Carl said, closing the distance between us. He was in workout clothes, not his usual suit, and that intoxicating masculine scent was wafting off him.

I was blissed out and drunk on the smell of him. “Are you ordering me as my guardian not to?” I breathed.

“Yes,” he said, his mouth hovering over mine, “I am.”

This kiss was a thousand times better than the last one. His thumb drew little circles on the bare skin between my T-shirt and my exercise shorts.

My whole body was electrified. His tongue slipped into my mouth, tangling against mine. If we weren’t in a park in the middle of Manhattan, I would have just pushed his head down to suck on my tits.

“I wish you could feel how wet I am,” I whispered to him, nipping his earlobe.

“Fuck, Libby.”

“She is your girlfriend!” several little voices shrieked.

Carl jumped away from me. “No, she’s not,” he insisted.

“Yes, she is!” the little girl said in a drawn-out tone. “You were k-i-s-s-i-n-g.”

“Are you going to get married?” an older sister asked.

I couldn’t keep them all straight; there was a whole pack of them. “Christmases must be fun at your house,” I joked.

“It’s like a Vietnam War flashback,” Carl said dryly.

“I’m telling Greg!” one little girl announced.

“No!” Carl barked, jumping up. His sisters scattered away from him, shrieking in laughter. “Do not tell Greg.”

“What are you going to give us?” one of the girls asked.

“Seriously, Enola?” Carl said in exaggerated shock. “I thought we were family.”

Enola pursed her mouth. “It’s not personal. It’s just business.”

I clapped a hand over my mouth to stop from giggling. It was adorable and so satisfying to see these little girls run rings around the powerful billionaire.

“Libby,” Carl said, turning to me. “Tell them they should keep quiet out of the goodness of their hearts.”

“Know your worth, girls,” I told them, putting a fist on my hip and wagging my finger. “Ask for a car.”

“Yes,” Enola exclaimed, “a car!”

“No,” Carl said. “I’m not giving you a car.”

“Okay,” another little girl said, crossing her arms, “we’ll take a new American Girl doll play set.”

“They drive a hard bargain,” I said with a smirk.

“And a box of donuts,” another girl added.

“I have found my people!” I said, raising my arms to the sky.

Carl sighed. “Fine, but only if you can catch me!”

He *booped* one of them on the nose, and she shrieked in laughter, then the whole pack of girls raced after Carl as he ran

around the field, Doug barking and chasing them.

Carl wasn't mean about it either.

I knew from experience that he could easily outrun them, but instead, he would slow down slightly so they almost caught him then sprint a few paces. When they seemed like they were flagging a bit, he finally let them catch him, and they all piled onto him like a pack of puppies.

My ovaries were doing somersaults, and my womb had hung up a neon vacancy sign.

Carl would be a great dad.

Ugh, no! I thought you just wanted him for sex? I reminded myself. Remember, he's not relationship material no matter how catnippy it is to see him with the girls.

But watching him with them, seeing the real, soft side of the normally hard billionaire, was making me want more than a hookup.

I think I might be falling for him.

LIBBY

“I am not running today,” I mumbled when I heard Carl’s footsteps in my bedroom Monday morning. “Also, I really need to fix the lock on that door.”

“You’re coming to my office for some work experience,” he announced. “Get up.”

I reached for the cold cup of tea on the makeshift nightstand that was two milk crates duct-taped together and took a sip. “And here I thought maybe you had come over here to have a quickie before work,” I said, sitting up.

He took the cup from me and set it down. Then he tangled his hand in my hair and forced my head back. Instead of pushing me down on the bed and giving me his cock, he pressed the barest of kisses against my neck.

“When I fuck you,” he murmured in my ear, “it will not be quick.” Then he released me.

I was having none of that. I grabbed the lapels of his suit jacket and pressed our mouths together. “I want you,” I begged, practically climbing on him.

He kissed me forcefully, his large hand cupping the back of my head. I nipped his bottom lip, and he retaliated by forcing his tongue into my mouth, making me moan.

My pussy was throbbing.

I was pawing at his clothes, but Carl regained the upper hand.

He grabbed my hips then slipped his hand under my shirt to feel my tits. “Fuck,” he grunted, “they are pierced.”

I gasped as his finger caught on one of the nipple rings and tugged it slightly. I arched my back. My nipples were painfully hard. He kissed me long and slow while he tugged at the nipple rings, playing with my tits.

“Oh my god,” I gasped against his mouth. “I think you could make me come like this.”

“Fuck, Libby.” He tugged a nipple ring again, making me gasp.

I bit his jaw. I needed his hands lower. I needed my clothes off. I needed his cock. “Fuck me,” I begged while he pinched and teased my tits. “My pussy is so wet for you.”

“Fuck, I just want to fuck your perfect pussy,” Carl growled.

There was banging on the door.

“You’re not watching porn in there, are you, Libby?” Gardenia flung the door open. I shrieked, and Carl cursed.

“Oh, shit,” my elderly roommate exclaimed. “My bad. I thought you were watching porn. That stuff is bad for you, you know...” she said as I grabbed at my T-shirt and tried not to look like I’d been about to have sex. “Porn sets unrealistic expectations, and it desensitizes you to being with a real human.” She smiled at Carl. “But I see you have that covered. Carry on!”

“I am so sorry,” I said after the door closed. “She has zero boundaries, but the rent is extremely cheap.”

Carl shook his head then reclaimed the distance between us. “Doesn’t matter,” he said. “I’m still going to put my tongue on your tits.”

“Yes!” I gasped as his hands slipped under my shirt.

The door slammed open again.

“I have condoms and lube here,” Gardenia said, marching in and setting a basket on my bed. “You kids have fun!”

“Welp,” I said, “that’s a mood killer.”

Carl checked his watch. “We have to be at the office soon anyway. I have a car waiting for you. Be at Svensson Investment in an hour.”

“You could have just texted me,” I told him, annoyed and horny. “Or were you trying to get me hot and bothered?”

His mouth twitched. “I tried. Your phone was off.”



I PULLED at the hem of my skirt as I walked off the elevator.

“Carl is waiting for you in the upstairs conference room,” the secretary said when she saw me. She pointed to a spiral staircase in the middle of the office.

I climbed it and went down the hall. There was a glass-enclosed conference room at one corner of the building.

Maybe he wants to fuck me in the conference room. My panties were immediately soaked.

But Carl seemed to have a better handle on not mixing business and pleasure than I did. Because when I walked into the conference room, he was all business. And it was hot.

“Sit, Libby,” he said.

“On your lap?” I teased.

He frowned and pulled out one of the upscale conference chairs for me. “Here is fine.”

“Your cock would be better,” I mumbled.

He narrowed his gray eyes at me then opened up a leather resume holder. I winced when I saw what was inside.

“I pulled the résumé that you submitted for your last college class about professional preparedness,” he said, tapping the résumé with a fancy pen that looked like it had been chiseled out of marble. “For someone who claims to be an artist, the résumé leaves a lot to be desired.”

“To be fair, that teacher did not like any of the art students. She was constantly bad-mouthing anyone who went into the arts. I had a nicer-looking résumé,” I explained, pulling out my ancient laptop, “but when she saw what I had done, she said that it was going to make me look overqualified when I inevitably had to apply for a job at McDonald’s as a french-fry cook.”

I tapped a few buttons and pulled up my résumé. It needed a little updating, especially on the expected graduation date, but it had all the pizzazz. In the center of the résumé was a slightly—okay, a quite-bit stylized—self-portrait done in oil pastels. My qualifications and experience radiated through little blurbs and funny quotes from various bosses or customers accompanied by little sketch vignettes. I had been pretty proud of my résumé, but of course, that career services teacher had pooh-poohed it.

“Wow,” Carl said, studying it. “This is actually quite good.” He looked up at me. “You ever thought about going

into graphic design?”

“I thought about a lot of things,” I said. “Obviously, the follow-through is not my strong suit.” It felt a little uncomfortable. Not to mention, I was wondering if Carl thought less of me. I had basically wasted the last two years of my life. I mean, what had I even been doing? Just jumping around from one failed idea to another.

Carl cleared his throat. “We were going to work on your résumé today, but clearly, you need to teach me.”

“Like you ever will have to apply for a job,” I scoffed. “You’re set for life.”

“I still have to apply to try and win accounts,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “If I were like your friend Cedar, sure, I could just drift around, playing pop-up acoustic guitar sessions and living off a trust fund. But in this business, if you want to dominate, you have to constantly hustle, constantly network, constantly market. ‘Growth’ is the magic word.”

He crossed his arms. “You think trying to beg for an entry-level job is difficult? Try to convince someone who believes that it is perfectly acceptable behavior to drop a hundred thousand dollars on a single shopping trip and then just leave all the bags in their condo and jet off to the next major city to let you manage their money. Rich people are both entitled and idiots,” Carl stated. “I’m going to have you take a look at some of our marketing material. We’re trying to branch out into the younger trust-fund set. Seems like you have your finger on that pulse.”

“You want me to be involved with your business?”

“As an expert consultant, yes.”

I smiled and nudged him with my bare foot under the table. He caught it and ran his thumb over my ankle.

Maybe if he had just been a complete asshole and lectured me about getting my life together, it would have been easier to write him off as a potential hookup. But all I wanted to do was have him in my life forever.

A man gives you one compliment, and you fall all over yourself for him.

But it wasn't just the compliment, it was that he actually seemed to respect me. He treated me like I had expertise, like my opinions were worth something. *Carl Svensson is a good man. And I think I might be falling for him.*

CARL

Libby was gazing at me adoringly.

The alarm bells that should be going off weren't. It was so easy to be in her company. It felt like I could spend hours with her, just chatting.

When I had engaged in the grueling marathon of online dating, the women had been a means to an end. The goal had been to get a girlfriend, any girlfriend, who could hopefully become a wife. With Libby, it felt natural. There was no waiting around for the happily ever after. Being with her was enough.

Of course, as soon as I had something nice, one of my brothers was there to ruin it. The glass door of the conference room slid back to thud against the doorstep.

"There you are," Greg said, striding in. "You're just as bad as Liam; you're in here hiding out instead of completing any of the number of tasks you're supposed to be working on."

"I'm working on—" I clamped my mouth shut. I didn't need Libby to know just how much money I was going to make off of her.

I'll give her a cut, I promised myself to try and assuage some of the guilt.

Greg narrowed his eyes at Libby, who was slipping her shoes back on. “Ah. I see you are working,” my brother said slowly.

I jumped up before Greg could blow my cover. I didn’t need Libby to know about the money, and I certainly didn’t need Greg to work out that I was becoming way too close to her and could end up screwing our changes to land the account.

“I’m going to work on the recruitment efforts after this,” I said changing the subject to one I knew would occupy all of Greg’s attention. “Libby is going to do some job searching while I work on it.”

“I hope you’re going to hire a photographer and a graphic designer,” Greg sneered. “The last thing we need is for you to make our marketing material look even worse.”

“I can help if you want,” Libby offered, raising a hand.

Greg made a *What the fuck?* gesture toward me. “Isn’t this the one that dropped out of college and lives in squalor?”

“She lives in an artist studio,” I growled at Greg, “and she was run out of college.”

“Hmm.”

Libby pulled what looked like a dead rat out of her purse.

I recoiled. “What is that?”

She held it up. “It’s a notebook, see?” She flipped the pages.

“Why is it furry?”

“It’s the butt of a corgi.” She giggled. “Isn’t it cute?”

It was not.

“What are you guys trying to do for your marketing campaign?” she asked, flipping to a new page in her notebook.

“Attract more women to work at the firm in the finance departments and analysis and investment,” Greg stated.

“But we’re going to hire a marketing firm,” I cut in.

“Is it for your charity ball?” she asked. “The clock is ticking.”

“Yes, Carl, it is ticking,” Greg said.

“If all you’re trying to do is attract women, the formula is simple,” she said.

I frowned. “While I appreciate the offer of help, it’s actually going to be pretty complicated. We have to convince women that Svensson Investment is a great place to work and that it’s worth switching jobs for. The campaign also can’t make us the laughingstocks of both Manhattan and the internet at large. We don’t want to turn into the punch line of a joke on a late-night talk show.”

“Again, easy problem to solve,” Libby said, scrawling in her notebook.

I bit back my annoyance. God, she was infuriating. How was she being so flippant about this?

“I have a million-dollar marketing budget allocated for this campaign,” I said to her.

“Dang,” she said, still writing in her notebook. “That’s a lot of money. Guess having your name on a tower really skews your perspective. I don’t think you need to spend that much. We’re just going to run this for, like, two weeks. It will hit hot and fast, then you should have your hires.”

“What’s your plan?” Greg asked.

“Are you kidding me?” I hissed at my older brother.

He shrugged me off. “She’s the first person that has come up with some sort of plan. So let’s hear it.” He took a seat and gestured to her to proceed.

I sat down in my chair, annoyed. Libby was a mostly failed Instagram influencer. What did she know about running a very fine-tuned campaign?

She held up her notebook. Sometime while Greg and I had been talking, she had sketched out little storyboards. “What do women like? Anyone in the peanut gallery?”

I shrugged. “Diamonds?”

“Errr, wrong,” Libby said. “Most women like hot guys, cute animals, children, and/or money.”

“I feel like diamonds were close.”

“You’re trying to attract cutthroat finance types,” Libby said. “They’re not going to buy that jewelry shit—they want cold, hard cash. Therefore, we’re going to offer any woman who comes to interview a stack of cash just for her presence.”

“This is the craziest idea I’ve ever heard.” I ran a hand through my hair.

Libby scowled at me.

“Really?” Greg said. “Because I’ve heard some dumb shit come out of your mouth.”

“Furthermore,” Libby said, “we’re going to post some sexy photos of you and your brothers being hot corporate types and, of course, playing with children and puppies. And *voilà*, you’ll have every woman in finance coming here to interview.”

Greg frowned and steepled his hands. My fucking brother was seriously considering this madness.

“Greg, this is a dumb idea,” I told him. “You cannot be serious. We can’t post thirst-trap pictures on our official social media accounts. The press will have a field day.”

“Oh, Carl, baby, no,” Libby said like I was a complete idiot. “Obviously it’s not going to be posted on your company accounts. We’re just going to have one small press release on your website. We’ll spread the pictures and news of the money through backchannels.”

“Backchannels, how?”

“I know you have some women working here. Can you bring them all to the conference room?”



TEN MINUTES LATER, the majority of the women who worked at our office were assembled in the conference room. We did not have a lot of them.

Libby clapped her hands, and the women stopped chatting and turned their attention to her.

“Thank you, ladies,” she said. “I know you all are very busy, but these boys have finally seen the light and realized they need to be the change they want to see in the world and bring more women into their company.”

“Hear, hear!” Marnie, Greg’s assistant, said.

Several others applauded.

“So we’re starting a little initiative. I’m going to be taking some photos of these guys over the next few days, and I’d like everyone to sign up to send them out. I’ll have some text you can post with the photos to pimp out your hot bosses as a

selling point for joining the company, and also, use the hashtag #SvenssonSevenHundred because anyone who applies and comes in for an interview gets a stack of cash.”

“I might quit and reapply,” one of the analysts joked.

Fuck, that was not the plan.

Libby smirked. “Don’t worry. We’re not making anyone work for free. These guys were planning on paying some marketing firm an obscene amount of money, so you all will get a cut of that as a bonus. How does that sound?”

“I’m sending this out to my sorority.”

“I’m sending this to everyone I know.”

“We want to make it seem like you’re doing your fellow women a favor by letting them know about it. It should feel organic! Remember, this is all about helping other women get rich. Know your worth, ladies.”

The women were chatting excitedly at the opportunity.

“Sorry,” Libby said to Greg after the employees filed out of the conference room, buzzing about how they were going to try to make the campaign go viral.

“I got a little carried away, but I totally think this will work. I do have a bit of experience doing social media influencing. This is how all those quote-unquote ‘viral campaigns’ are run. I should know—I’ve participated in enough of them.”

“I am fully on board,” Greg said. “Not to mention the fast timeline. Nice work.”

Libby beamed at him, and he hit her with his I’m-an-alpha-billionaire-and-I-know-how-to-do-things smile. She giggled and blushed.

I was furious.

“I do want to clear one thing up, though,” he said. “It’s actually my name on the tower.”

LIBBY

““**W**ho’s the hottest Svensson brother?” I said playfully as I snapped photos of Greg at his desk.

Carl made a noise in aggravation beside me.

“She knows quality when she sees it, Carl,” Greg said smugly.

The shutter clicked as I took a few more pictures. The photos were supposed to feel off-the-cuff and organic and make a prospective employee feel like she could be simply walking down the hall and *boom*, hot guy being hot.

“Okay, we got enough for this first round of Greg. Carl, you get in the photo.”

Carl glared at his brother.

“Hey,” I reminded him, “Carl, you’re the one who really wanted me to get a job.”

Greg smirked at me. “When Carl was little, he used to have nightmares that a giant chicken was chasing him.”

“You fucking—”

Greg just laughed when Carl rushed over and shoved him. I snapped photos.

“He was so adorable when he was small,” Greg told me. Then he glanced up at Carl. “I just can’t understand what happened.”

I had my phone plugged in and recording, too, to capture those natural interactive moments.

I knew from watching other social media accounts that that type of unscripted content with guys, especially family just acting human, was top-quality content.

I snapped a few more pictures of the two of them talking together in various configurations—sitting, standing, jackets on, jackets off. I also got a few very hot pictures of them rolling up their sleeves.

“I’ll just do the write-ups then send them out to the lists to post tomorrow morning. Fingers crossed!”



I WORKED in Carl’s office the rest of the afternoon and into the evening. The other ladies would come in and coo over the shots, and I had them give me their thoughts on the copy I was going to have everyone include on their posts.

It was dark outside when I finally put the final touches on the last video clip. “I really hope this works,” I mumbled after I had emailed everyone the content.

Maybe it was a dumb idea; maybe I should have kept my mouth shut.

I needed wine and pizza. “I’m going to head out,” I said to Carl, packing up my stuff. “Do you always work this late?”

“I was waiting on you.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling awkward. “I could have just stayed here and worked. I’m used to working late anyway. You know,

since I tend to get up around noon.”

I came around the side of Carl’s desk and leaned against it. He quickly minimized a tab on his computer. I frowned, but then his hands were on my hips.

“What were you working on?”

I gasped slightly as his fingers worked their way up my blouse.

“Did I ever tell you,” he said, “that you look positively fuckable in that suit?”

“That’s good,” I said, my skin tingling in anticipation, “because a really hot guy bought it for me.”

My blouse was open now, and he pressed light kisses up my torso to my tits. He pulled one out of the lacy bra then the other, rubbing his thumb over the sensitive nipples, tugging on the silver ring that pierced each pink nub.

“Your tits are the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen,” he whispered. Then he took one in his mouth, I gasped out in pleasure.

It felt even better than I had imagined. I had for a while regretted getting the piercings and had been thinking about taking them out, but if Carl was going to make me feel like this, I was keeping the piercings in forever.

Carl sucked on my tit, slicking the ring with his tongue, tugging on it with his teeth.

I moaned, my hands tangling in Carl’s hair as he sucked and played with first one breast then the other. My panties were soaked, and my pussy was aching. I tried to spread my legs to get some relief and to give Carl a hint, but the skirt was too tight.

Carl's mouth left my tits, then his fingers were back, pulling lightly on the rings, pulling me into him. When I was close enough, he crushed our mouths together for a kiss.

I moaned against his mouth. "I want you to fuck me," I whispered to him, pulling back.

"That's funny," he said, voice rough, "because I want to lick your pussy."

I almost came then and there thinking about that tongue flicking against the ring on my pussy.

"I'm so wet for you," I whispered.

He was sliding his hand up the tight skirt when far in the distance, the elevator dinged.

I cursed and pushed him off, looking around in a frenzy for my clothes. I didn't have time to button up my blouse, so I just grabbed the suit jacket and buttoned it up right in time for Marnie to knock on the office door.

"Just wanted to let you know that the post about the seven-hundred-dollar interview bonus is live," she said cheerily, "and I've got my stuff ready to post in the morning."

"Thanks!" I said, hoping that she hadn't seen any signs of what Carl and I were just doing in the low light.

"Fingers crossed!" she said in excitement.

"Thanks for all your help," I called.

"Oh my god," I whispered after she had gone. "That was close."

I felt Carl's hand against my ass. I slapped him away. I finally, for once in my life, had a good thing going. The last thing I needed was for everyone to believe that the only reason

I had gotten this gig was because I had slept with the boss.
Even though I really wanted to.

CARL

Her tits had felt amazing in my mouth.

“You don’t want my tongue in your pussy?” I whispered in her ear.

“N-no,” she stuttered.

“That’s funny,” I said, “because a couple minutes ago, you were begging for my cock.”

Libby visibly swallowed.

“All I want to do,” I said in a low voice in her ear, “is push up that sexy little skirt, spread your ass cheeks, and see just how wet you are.” I nipped her ear. “You don’t want me in your pussy?”

She was practically trembling from desire.

“Hmm?” I pressed the barest of kisses on her neck. Her pulse jumped.

“I don’t want to get caught,” she whispered.

“It’ll be quick this first time,” I told her, “because you’re half-gone already, if I’m not mistaken.”

“I have to get up early tomorrow,” she said, finally tearing herself away from me. She rushed to pull on her coat. “I’m

calling an Uber. You don't have to take me home. Good night."

My eyes narrowed as I watched her go. What was her deal? I fumed. Maybe it was Greg. Maybe she decided she wanted my brother instead of me.

But all I wanted was her.



IT WAS A ROUGH NIGHT. I got zero sleep and was up and back in the office by seven thirty.

Somehow, Libby was already there. She had commandeered one of the glass-enclosed conference rooms to set up a little war room with the women who were slated to post their content on social media that day.

One of the analysts was talking to Libby when I knocked on the door and walked in. "I just had to set this up last night," she was saying. "It's so much more exciting than derivatives trading! I wrote a script to scrape engagement numbers on anyone who uses our hashtag, and it will collate comments too."

"Excellent," Libby said. "I'm going to be monitoring the comments and repurposing the content with the best comments overlaid on images to drive more engagement."

"I came in here to see if you need anything, but it looks like you have it under control," I said.

"You just get sexy for your next photo shoot," Libby told me.

The women all laughed.

Doug barked when he saw me and waddled over. I bent down to pet him.

“Hold that pose,” Libby instructed, taking out her phone and snapping a photo then a video while I petted Doug. He flopped over on his back for me to rub his belly.

“Nice.” She and the other women oohed over the photo.

I turned to leave them to their social media. The corgi followed me when I left the room. “Guess it’s just you and me, Doug.” But I wished it was me and Libby.

I had hoped I could entice her away to a hotel or my condo since she hadn’t wanted to fuck in my office. But every time I went down to the conference room, there were more and more people there. Even a number of the male employees had gone to join in the excitement.

“I sent this to my girlfriend,” one recent hire said. “She’s in college right now doing her PhD in economics, and she’s sending this to all her friends to apply.”

“Oh my god,” Marnie said, hurrying into the conference room, “the media just called. Everyone is talking about it. We already have two hundred applications.”

“We’re going to get the best of the best,” I marveled. And if I was able to score those assets through Libby, we’d have more than enough to keep the new employees busy.

The charts of the screen refreshed, and everyone cheered at the spike in the graph of engagement metrics. “And the corgi picture hasn’t even dropped yet,” Libby said eagerly.

My phone rang while people were chatting in excitement. I stepped out to answer it.

“Carl Svensson. Ah, good morning, Mr. Weatly.” I paused as I listened to him ramble on. Then, my stomach dropped.

“Really? Right now?” I glanced over at Libby. *This is going to be a shit show.*

CARL

“I don’t understand. Why do I have to go change? You bought me these clothes.”

“Your godfather’s lawyer is old-school, emphasis on the old,” I said as I herded Libby through the front door of the apartment. “You need to wear something way more conservative than that.”

“I feel like this is pretty normal.” She looked down at her outfit.

“He’s going to want you in something that screams nineteen fifties,” I said as I followed her back to her bedroom.

She pulled all her clothes out of her closet and dumped the armful on the bed.

“This and this,” I said, pulling out a below-the-knee skirt and a polka-dotted blouse with puffy cap sleeves.

“Why does he want to see us?” Libby asked, taking the clothes behind a screen like in one of those old-timey movies.

The sound of a zipper being pulled down and the soft metallic twang when she unclasped her bra—I couldn’t resist. She was right there on the other side of the screen, barely clothed.

My cock ached.

I took one step then another, then I was behind the screen, and Libby was there. She held up the white blouse to cover her tits and took a deep, heaving breath when she saw me.

I hooked a finger in the blouse and slowly pulled it out of her hands. Then she stood there, her tits perfect and round, the nipple rings glinting in the light from the pendant lamp.

I leaned over and kissed her, taking her mouth slowly, my fingers drifting over her body. She whimpered, straining against me. I cupped her tits, tugging lightly at the nipple rings. Her head lolled, pleasure etched on her face.

I kissed her neck then trailed kisses down her collarbone to the full tits. I took one in my mouth, tugging lightly at the nipple ring, satisfied when she whimpered while I kissed and teased. My hand drifted between her legs to stroke her through her panties.

She let out a loud cry of pleasure like I had just slid my cock into her.

“Holy shit,” I said, my cock throbbing.

“I have, um...” She trailed off, biting her lip.

I rubbed my hand against the soaking-wet panties again, and she let out a deep, throaty moan. Her eyes were half-lidded, and she whispered, “I have a ring there.”

It was like an ice pick to my brain. “A ring where?”

She kissed me. “On my pussy,” she whispered against my mouth.

“Fuck,” was all I could say.

She bit her lip again as I stroked her through her panties.

“It’s funny,” she panted as I slowly rubbed the mound of flesh between her trembling legs. “It makes masturbation amazing because every time you do it”—her hips surged against my hand slightly—“the ring rubs against my clit.”

I was practically salivating thinking about her, legs spread and teasing herself, the ring rubbing against her clit. I knelt down in front of her and slowly pulled her panties down.

The smell of her was making me drunk. My tongue darted out, and I tasted the glistening slit between her legs. The lips of her pussy were smooth and hot, and there was a silver ring on one of the lips, a little surprise for anyone there.

I flicked my tongue out again and ran it along the slit, making her gasp. She rested her arms on my shoulders, and I braced one hand on her thigh. Her legs spread slightly.

I continued to dart my tongue out, making her whimper. My other hand stroked deeper into her pussy. “I wish I had time to fuck you,” I whispered. Then I plunged two fingers into her opening, making her moan. While I stroked up inside her, I pressed my mouth to her hot pussy, licking her, tasting her. I tugged lightly at the ring on her pussy lip with my teeth, satisfied when she moaned.

My fingers easily slid in and out of her. She was dripping wet.

“I probably don’t even have to touch your clit, do I?” I murmured. She moaned while I worked her pussy. “I bet I can make you come just like this.”

She whimpered, “Please.”

I continued to stroke inside of her, adding another finger, feeling her pussy flex around my hand as I pleased her.

Mouth still on her pussy, I teased that ring near her clit, nibbling around it, flicking it with my tongue, occasionally letting it rub against her clit.

“Please,” she panted, “please make me come.”

I finally gave her what she wanted and curled my tongue around her clit, licking it, applying pressure until she was gasping and shuddering around me. I continued to stroke her, milking her orgasm until she was half-collapsed on me.

“God, that was good,” she slurred, then pressed sloppy kisses to my face and my mouth. “Fuck me,” she whispered. Her hand ran down my suit to palm at my zipper.

I hissed and grabbed her wrist. “We’re going to be late,” I said, standing up.

But she grabbed my belt. “I have a tongue ring,” she said and winked. “I think I’ll make you come a little faster than the other girls.”

Fuck.

I knew I should walk away, knew there was too much money riding on this, but she was undoing my belt and pulling the zipper down with a rasp.

Then her hot mouth was on my cock.

The only thing in the world that would have felt better was if I was fucking that dripping wet pussy of hers. But her mouth was the next best thing.

“Fuck, Libby.” I tangled my fingers in her hair, slowly rubbing her scalp as she ran her tongue along my cock, the tongue ring applying a pinpoint of pleasure that was making me so fucking hard.

I had been half-gone already, and standing there listening to her moan, feeling the wet, tight heat of her mouth as she ran the tongue ring over the head of my cock then deep-throated me, was enough to send me over the edge.

I came with a curse. She pulled off of me then pushed up her tits so I spilled cum all over them.

“God damn,” I said.

She drew a heart in the cum on her tits while I zipped up.

Though I wanted to just flip her over and fuck her doggy-style on the floor, I checked my watch.

“Damn, we’re late.”

LIBBY

“Do I smell like sex?” I whispered to Carl as he hurried me up the narrow staircase of a building that looked like a set for a World War II movie.

He pressed his mouth to my neck and inhaled. “Yes. But this whole place smells like mothballs and old newspapers, so no one will notice.”

“You’re really turning me on,” I whispered.

Since Carl had said we were aiming for a nineteen-fifties vibe, I had gone all out and put on little white gloves and a pillbox hat I’d found in a thrift shop that was doing double duty by covering up some of my pink hair. Cat eyeliner and a red lip completed the look. I felt like I looked very nineteen fifties.

“Do you have an appointment?” the oldest, tiniest woman I had ever seen asked, peering at us through thick spectacles when we entered the office.

It was like walking into a sepia-colored photograph. All the color had been leached out of the office over the edges.

It reminded me of my godfather. Talking with him had been like going back in time. His apartment had always been

filled with newspapers and magazines from forty years ago that he would pick up and use to lecture me about how the world was going to hell. Though he and I hadn't ever seen eye to eye, being in this office made me miss him just a little bit.

"There they are." A tottering elderly man hobbled into the main office. His secretary continued to slowly type on the typewriter—*tap, tap*.

"Coffee, Mrs. Manchigo? But not for Ms. Libby. We're trying to keep her teeth in good condition."

I opened my mouth, but Carl nudged me.

"We came as soon as we could, Mr. Weatly," Carl said.

"You did?" He seemed confused.

My lord.

"You said there was an emergency?" Carl prodded.

"Ah, yes," the lawyer said, turning around slowly and tottering his way to his office.

Carl hovered on one side of him with a hand outstretched to catch him if he fell.

Mr. Weatly dropped heavily into one of the creaky leather chairs.

"It is quite the emergency." He peered up at me. "Where are my glasses? Let me have a look at Herbert's ward. Where are they?" He slowly patted his chest.

Carl retrieved a pair of round spectacles, which looked like they belonged in a museum, off his desk.

Mr. Weatly put them on then peered at me.

"Good lord!" he shouted when he saw me.

Carl and I jumped. Was he having a heart attack?

“You look older than I thought.”

And you look like you're dead, but I'm not saying anything.

“I'm twenty-three.”

Carl glared at me.

“I had no idea how old she was,” Mr. Weatly said, shaking his head as he pulled out a yellowed folder and slowly flipped through it. “I thought she was a young thing. And then I looked at the paperwork today and realized, my word, she's an old maid, a spinster.”

Fuck this shit.

I almost jumped up to leave, but Carl rested a hand on my shoulder. “I'll buy you a drink after this,” he whispered to me.

“What have you been doing this entire time as her guardian?” Mr. Weatly demanded of Carl.

“Sir,” Carl said, “I've only had the position for two weeks.”

“But she's not married,” the lawyer blustered. “Libby should be married by now. She's twenty-three. She should already have a child.”

Wow, we really had gone back to the nineteen fifties, huh?

“Times have changed a bit,” Carl said delicately. “Nowadays, women get married a bit later. We're seeing quite a number of women waiting until their thirties to tie the knot.”

The lawyer's false teeth almost fell out of his head.

“Well,” he said, chin wobbling. “I never! What has the world come to?”

I rolled my eyes.

“Your godfather would be disappointed.” He shook a finger at me.

Carl was tense. What did he care if my godfather was disappointed?

“I understand,” Carl said.

“You need to do your job; you were entrusted as her guardian.”

“We’re working our way up to a suitable marriage for Libby,” Carl promised.

We are?

“You need to work harder,” the lawyer insisted. “I want to see results and her on a marriage track in the next two months, or I’m sorry to say I’m going to have to find someone else to be Libby’s guardian.”

CARL

This was a fucking disaster.

“I’m not getting married,” Libby said stubbornly as we walked out onto the street. “Especially not in the next two months.”

“You just have to be on a marriage track,” I said, my brain spinning, trying to find a solution.

Marrying her off wasn’t a solution. Even the thought of another man touching her, his hands where mine had been, his mouth where mine had been, his cock where mine had been—the fact of the matter was that any man who Mr. Weatly would deem acceptable would not find it acceptable if Svensson Investment just took over all of my mother’s great-uncle’s assets.

I needed the money and the property portfolio. All of it.

“I’ll think of something,” I promised. “Let’s go buy you that drink.”



THE VOLUMINOUS SKIRT swished around Libby’s legs as we walked into the bar. She slid onto a barstool.

“Scotch,” I ordered from the bartender.

“Martini, please,” Libby said. “Extra dirty.”

She nudged my foot with hers.

I smiled at her and took her hand. It was almost frightening how quickly I had begun to think of her as mine. I was never going to give her up.

“You know,” she said while the bartender went farther down the bar to mix our drinks. “You could just forget about the apartment building. I know you’re doing this because you feel obligated and you’re related to my godfather, but honestly, the neighbor down the hall said her ceiling looks like it’s going to collapse with the next big rain, and I don’t think the boiler’s going to survive the winter. All of this stress of dealing with the lawyer and having me in your life can’t be worth the building.”

“Anything is worth having you in my life,” I told her seriously.

She looked up at me, wide-eyed.

I tucked one of her locks of pink hair around her ear.

“Even though I’m not respectable?” she teased.

I frowned as the bartender slid our drinks to us.

“I don’t know if it’s a matter of actually being respectable. In this upper-class world, a lot of the families don’t care how you dress, or how much money you make, or how cookie-cutter your personality is—if you can’t trace your family lineage back to someone prestigious, they don’t care.”

“That is true,” she agreed. “It’s such a racket too.” She sipped her drink. “My mother came from one of those types of families. They could trace their lineage back to Plymouth Rock. Not that it helped her at all. She still got involved with

my father, and if you think I act a mess, you should see my mother. I don't even know where she is. Last I heard, she was in India finding herself."

"She doesn't contact you at all?" I asked.

"Nope." She ate one of the olives from her martini. "When I was a teenager, my godfather would always go on and on about how I came from a so-called 'good family' and needed to uphold the family name, and I always thought, what's the point? Why would I want to be like people that treat you like trash?"

"Your mom's parents didn't help you at all?" I frowned.

She grimaced. "They did for a few years, but my mother was their youngest child, and they were older at the time, at least my grandfather was. He had married late, and by the time my mother had rolled out, he was in his sixties. He was practically knocking on death's door when I lived in their house and refused to be a perfect princess and instead did things like try and start a worm farm under my bed or draw a life-sized Barbie-mermaid mural in my bedroom. They kicked me out, then I became my godfather's problem."

She glanced at me. "If my godfather was related to your mother, then you come from a 'good family' too." She used air quotes.

"About that." I took a long sip of my scotch. "Once my mother ran off with millions of dollars she stole from her siblings to go live in the desert in a compound with my father, her parents cut her off."

"Ouch!"

"Her parents didn't like the fact that she made them look bad, and so she was dead to them. She had five brothers and

sisters, I think, so her parents basically focused all their attention on the kids that weren't fuckups. Mom was a classic middle child."

"Still," Libby remarked. "Moving out into the middle of nowhere seems like shooting yourself in the foot to rebel."

"My mother suffers from delusions of grandeur, and my father is manipulative, so I'm sure she firmly believed that she was going to turn that property into a photogenic bed-and-breakfast, land a book deal, and be played in a blockbuster romantic comedy by Julia Roberts. Instead, my father stole all her money and left her with six rowdy young boys."

"At least you have siblings," Libby said, putting her hand over mine.

"Right." I signaled the bartender for another drink.

"I wish I had siblings," she added.

I huffed out a laugh. "No, you don't. They're more trouble than they're worth."

"Your sisters are adorable."

"You haven't met my brothers."

"I met Greg. He's nice."

I burst out laughing. "Greg is not nice; he is anything but nice. You should talk to his ex-girlfriend."

"Not sure why anyone would give him up," she remarked.

I signaled the bartender for another martini for Libby.

"You haven't seen him when he's out for blood," I said. "When my brothers and I escaped, Greg managed to dig up information on our mother's family. We showed up at the doorstep of their huge mansion, hungry, cold, and dirty. They

took one look at us and told us that if we kept contacting them, they were going to call the police and we were all going to end up in foster care and never see each other again. Greg was not going to let that happen, so we all skipped off to the small town of Harrogate and lived illegally in an abandoned building until my older brothers managed to earn college degrees and build their businesses.”

“That was noble of Greg,” Libby said.

“Well,” I said smiling at the memory, “Greg holds a grudge like no one else. He bided his time, waited and waited for an opportunity to get even. He had me watching all their finances and their property. They lived in a gated community, and the street outside of their house was legally its own parcel of land that taxes had to be paid for. Somehow, it slipped through the cracks, and the parcel of land went up for auction for unpaid taxes. Greg bought it for millions then paid even more money to have the asphalt bulldozed up one night and build tiny houses for homeless people on the land.”

“How did he get them through the gate?” Libby asked in wonder.

I smirked. “A fucking helicopter. Everyone in that rich neighborhood was furious. Greg passed out flyers that put the blame on our grandparents.”

“Dang,” she said, eating another olive.

“Yeah, don’t fuck with my brother. He’s an extra level of cold-blooded. He still owns that property too. They fought him in court, saying it was a code violation and we had to remove the houses. Now he charges the gated community a ton of money for easement rights.”

“Serves them right!” Libby said, laughing. “I wish I could have seen their faces!”

It felt so easy sitting here, talking to her, like we had been together forever. There was no way I was letting anyone marry her. She was mine.

But her godfather still had a hand in her life from beyond the grave.

Was I really willing to let go of all that money for Libby?

You shouldn't, I scolded myself. *You haven't even slept with her yet.*

But I would. I was going to make her come on my cock.

The problem was that after I slept with her, I was going to be truly done for because I was never going to be able to give Libby up after that, no matter how much money was on the line.

Greg is going to fucking kill you.

LIBBY

“It’s family picture day!” I said in excitement. I had told all the Svensson brothers to assemble for a photo shoot. The idea was to make it look like if you worked at Svensson Investment, all these hot, wealthy guys would casually drop by like it was a reality TV show or something—*Keeping Up with the Svenssons*, but they’re all hot because they were born that way, not because of plastic surgery.

“Am I getting paid to be here?” one of Carl’s older brothers grumbled.

“You’re doing this out of the goodness of your heart, Beck,” Carl argued.

“I don’t do anything out of the goodness of my heart,” he told Carl. “If there’s no money on the line, then I don’t care.”

“I had breakfast ordered,” I told him.

He turned his gaze on me then scowled.

I snapped a picture of him and Carl. He was like James Bond but with bucketsful more testosterone.

“You don’t want a French toast sandwich?” Ophelia, one of Carl’s little sisters, asked, offering up a plate to Beck.

He smiled softly and bent down to put his face on her level.

Snap, snap.

These pictures were all gold.

Liam, another of their brothers, snagged the French toast sandwich off Ophelia's plate and took a bite. "Man, this is amazing," he said while Ophelia jumped up to grab his arm, giggling and telling him, "You can't take my food!"

"Stab him," Carl said, eyes dancing as his siblings play-fought in the conference room.

Ophelia pretended to go after Liam with a fork. Carl grabbed the plate of food then Ophelia and set her down on the conference table, where she ate the rest of her breakfast.

"What is a French toast sandwich, anyway?" his brother Walker asked, sitting on the conference table.

"It's like an Egg McMuffin but better," Liam said.

Their teenage sister, Enola, opened up her laptop. I was staging this particular photo shoot to make it look like Carl and his brothers were training the next generation of Svensson girls to take over the company.

"Where do you want us to stand?" Carl asked me.

"Just pretend you're talking with your sister about her spreadsheet or whatever she's doing."

"I'm trading cryptocurrency options," Enola informed me.

"Sounds difficult," I said, having no idea what any of those words meant.

"It's basically just gambling," Carl said with a frown. "I hope you're not using my money."

“Is this what you let them get up to?” Beck asked, annoyed. “We’re all probably going to go to jail.”

“It’s not illegal,” Enola said, looking over to him while I snapped photos and took videos of the brothers talking to their sisters.

“Greg!” Beck barked at their brother when he walked into the conference room. “Did you know they were doing this?”

“Don’t waste your time on crypto,” Greg said. “We’ll give you a more robust portfolio to manage.”

Enola beamed at him. It was an adorable photo. My heart ached watching the siblings together.

I had always dreamed of having a big family. Being by myself with only occasional interactions with my godfather, which usually consisted of him being critical of everything I said, wore, or thought, I had wished I had a real family out there that would accept me for who I was.

I knew that sometimes siblings did not get along, but the Svenssons seemed to love each other, even if Carl did complain.

“Guess this marketing campaign got a lot of interest,” Liam said, loading up plates of food from the catering table for the gaggle of little sisters that wandered around the large conference room.

Carl picked up one of the littlest ones and nuzzled her nose, making her giggle.

Hi, universe? Yes, I would like to place an order for the perfect husband, please.

You haven’t even slept with him. You can’t seriously be thinking about marrying him. It’s not love. It’s lust and

impulsiveness. That's gotten you in trouble before.

“You know what would be funny?” Walker said. “If Belle came and interviewed just for the money then walked off.”

A scowl spread over Greg's face.

“Is that the famous ex you're holding a grudge on?” I asked before I could stop myself.

The look Greg shot the camera was so not going on any social media accounts, because he looked extremely aggressive. “Yes,” he practically spat.

“I told you he holds a grudge,” Carl told me, setting his sister down. “No one other than Greg would waste time and money on something so petty.”

“Man, Carl's really living on the edge there,” one of his brothers remarked.

“It's not petty,” I said, coming to Greg's defense. “Sometimes, you have to go all out to maintain your reputation. If you give people an inch, they'll try and bury you.”

“And just like that, Libby is my new favorite person,” Greg said.

“Chasing this award is good publicity for you all,” I said, framing more shots. “I bet you get a bunch more big accounts now. A lot of families have started handing over the keys to their finances to their daughters instead of their sons because boys are lazy and easily manipulated.”

Enola giggled.

“Those women will appreciate a firm that respects and tries to empower women. I know I would if I had that kind of money.”

Carl and his brothers exchanged worried looks.

Had I said something wrong? *You always put your foot in your mouth, Libby.*

“Why don’t we go out to the observation deck and get some more shots of you playing with your sisters?” I said hastily.

During the photos outside, the brothers still joked around, but it seemed a little tense. The photos were gold, though, and I spent the rest of the afternoon and into the evening selecting the best ones, cropping them, and formatting them for the various social media sites.

The brothers’ reaction had bugged me. I wracked my brain as I worked, trying to figure out what it was that I had done that had been such a faux pas. Was it because I had talked about money? Was it because I was acting like one of the gang and asking Greg about his ex?

I chewed on my fingernail as I read over the snippets that were going to be posted with the images.

It was pretty clear that Carl and all his siblings, even his little sisters, were highly ambitious. They were dealing in big business and big money. They weren’t out there posting their doodles on Instagram and hoping a company would take pity on them and offer them a sponsorship deal to shill boob-enhancing drugs in exchange for free movie tickets.

Maybe they were all embarrassed by me. Maybe they were all going to tell Carl that he needed to cut ties with me, that I was hopeless and not worth the time he was spending trying to make me into someone respectable.

So what if I wasn’t respectable. I was trying to better myself; I was trying to be more of an adult. And part of that

was confronting people and not passively sitting there, allowing them to badmouth me. If Carl had a problem with me, then he needed to say it to my face.

I took a deep breath. It was late, and the office was dark. Carl had his desk lamp on and was answering emails on his computer.

I stood up, smoothed down my skirt, and marched over to him. “Carl,” I said forcefully. “I need to talk to you about earlier today when I made that comment about having a lot of family money under management.”

He froze then slowly turned to me, body tense.

What the hell was going on with him? What had I done?

LIBBY

Carl slowly stood up. My body was taut. Was he angry? Was he going to yell at me?
Screw him if he was. I could give as good as I got.

But instead, he pushed his hand under my skirt, making me gasp.

“You know,” he said in that deep voice, “I never did get around to fucking you in my office.”

My eyes widened, and his head dipped down to press a kiss and nuzzle to my neck. “Someone’s going to see,” I gasped.

His fingers rubbed my pussy through my panties while he continued to press long, slow kisses on my face, my collarbone, and finally, my mouth.

My pussy was hot and wet when he pressed his hand there. I bit my lip to stifle a cry as he stroked me, the pussy ring rubbing against my clit.

“So you don’t want my cock?” he whispered, still stroking me.

I did want him. But I needed to turn over a new leaf. Sleeping with your guardian in his office, where anyone could walk in on you, seemed like an impulsive decision that could end badly.

Or end fantastically.

I whimpered as his fingers slipped under the wet fabric of the lacy panties to stroke my aching pussy. I was half-collapsed on him.

He slowly unbuttoned my blouse, kissing my tits and pulling one out to tease me with his tongue then flicking the nipple ring, making me moan. With his fingers playing in my pussy and his tongue and hand on my tits, I was so close. My breath came out in little pants.

“You feel so good,” I whimpered.

Then suddenly, he stepped back.

I propped myself up on the desk. “What are you doing?” I asked in disbelief.

“You said you don’t want to fuck in my office, so I’m respecting your boundaries.”

I looked at him in disbelief. “Asshole.”

“I’m a gentleman,” he said and brushed a good-night kiss on my cheek.

I grabbed his suit jacket then reached up to bite his lip. “You better make me come.”

“I don’t know,” he crooned. “You said you didn’t want it.”

“I do want it,” I gasped, everything in me feeling raw.

“Hmm,” Carl said. “I’m not convinced.”

I shrugged off my blouse and bra and let the garments fall to the floor.

Was it a bad idea? Sure, but I could get hit by a bus on my way home and die horny. Did I really want to go out that way?

Still keeping eye contact with him, I unbuttoned the pencil skirt and slid it off, arching my body. Carl was eyeing me like I was a piece of meat and he wanted to eat me up.

Good.

“You’re right,” I said, walking up to him then leaning against his desk. “I don’t want you fucking me in your office. Sometimes it’s better to just do these things yourself.” I rubbed my hands over my tits, teasing and pinching the nipples.

Carl grunted and stepped to me.

“Uh-uh!” I said. “Boundaries, remember?”

I continued to tug and tease my nipples, pulling on the nipple rings. I let one hand drift down to my legs. I spread them, teasing myself with the pussy piercing, whimpering as it brushed against my clit.

“You are so fucking sexy,” Carl growled. His pants were tented slightly.

“I know,” I said, hooking my fingers on my panties and pulling them down while arching my back further. I let them fall to the floor then bent over his desk, my ass in the air, my legs spread.

I reached my hand around to tease my pussy, flicking at the piercing then rubbing my clit. “You know what I’m thinking about?” I whispered. “You fucking me with that huge fucking cock and coming in my pussy.” I let out a low moan, then I gasped as Carl grabbed my ass.

Then his mouth was on my pussy.

His tongue felt a thousand times better than my hand. I moaned and gripped the desk as he licked and stroked me, tugging at the piercing with his teeth.

“Yes, make me come.”

But then he stopped. I cried out in frustration.

“My apologies,” he said, his tone infuriatingly mild. “I seem to have lost myself.”

“Make me come,” I begged, “please! I want your mouth. I want your cock.”

“Are you sure?” He ran a possessive hand up my back then reached around to palm one of my tits.

I gasped when he hooked a finger in the ring on my nipple.

“Please, fuck me.”

“Not yet,” he growled and then gave one more tug on the ring. Then his mouth was back on my pussy, and I groaned in pleasure as he licked and kissed me, playing with the ring with his tongue.

Two fingers slid in my opening, and he finger-fucked me as he stroked and teased my clit, using his tongue to rub the silver ring against it, giving me waves of excruciating pleasure.

I came with a cry and his tongue on my clit.

“Seems you do like sex in the office after all,” Carl said while I lay panting on his desk.

He unzipped his pants, and I was hot and ready for him all over again.

“Fuck me,” I whimpered, raising myself up slightly, spreading my legs, offering my pussy for him.

But instead of ramming his dick in me and fucking me until half of Manhattan heard me scream, Carl lazily rubbed the head of his cock on my pussy, playing in the hot wetness.

“You are ready for my cock, aren’t you?” he murmured, one hand rubbing my lower back, holding me in place while he rubbed the length of his cock along my pussy. “God, it’s going to feel so good to fuck you, that pussy ring sliding against my cock every time I take you.”

He thrust against me, his cock sliding along the throbbing flesh. I cursed as it stroked against the ring and my clit.

“Take me,” I begged.

“Oh, I plan to, but I’m going to take my time.” His cock was hard and thick and better than any sex toy as he rubbed and thrust against my pussy while I begged shamelessly for him to fuck me.

I tried to close my legs around his cock and encourage him to get with the program, but he gripped my thighs and spread my pussy so that he could continue to rub in the wetness. After just being catapulted over the edge, the feel of his cock on my clit and thinking about his cock in my pussy was enough to send me tumbling over again. I lay collapsed on his desk, my legs trembling.

“Are you going to fuck me now?” I whispered and was rewarded with his fingers in my pussy.

“I am fucking you now,” he said as he added another finger and stroked inside of me.

“With your cock,” I groaned.

I heard a condom wrapper rip, and then finally, his cock was back.

I cried out as he thrust into me so hard I almost went over the other side of the desk. He withdrew then thrust into me again, pulling me back at the same time, making me scream as he gave me every thick, hard inch of his cock.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” I moaned. Then I wasn’t doing much more talking as he jackhammered into me.

Getting caught was the last thing on my mind as he took me, his breath hissing as he took his pleasure in me, fucking my pussy, his large hands digging into my ass as he rammed his thick cock into me.

“I’m going to—” I finally managed to choke out, then I was shuddering around him. He jerked into me then leaned over me, kissing my neck and biting my shoulder as he came.

“That was literally the best sex I’ve ever had,” I told him when I finally had my breath back.

I felt him smile against my hair. “Of course it was.”

“Don’t sound so smug.”

He kissed me then pulled me off the desk to face him. “I’m about to fuck you again,” he said, kissing me hard and sliding his fingers in my pussy, “and then you’ll see that this wasn’t a one-off experience.”

I moaned then gasped as his phone went off.

“Ignore it,” I whispered.

Then it went off again. Carl grabbed it, read the text message, then frowned. “I have to go.”

CARL

Fuck.
Why was my life falling apart?

Libby was clearly on to me about her godfather giving her money. I never should have let the topic of conversation the other day revolve around rich families.

She probably recollected something Herbert had said or, shoot, just put two and two together that a well-connected guy like her godfather probably had more assets than a crumbling apartment building. Libby wasn't stupid. She could easily do some digging on the internet and gather some idea of Herbert's net worth.

Fuck, was she testing me? She had to have been about to confront me on it if I hadn't gotten her all hot and bothered.

That wouldn't work forever. I couldn't fuck her every time she was about to bring up the fact that I was stealing money from her.

"It's not stealing," I told myself as I drove through the misty night back to the condo tower where I lived with my brothers. "She clearly can't manage that money."

But what if she could? It wasn't like she was just going to go out and buy a ton of hot-air balloons or llamas or

something stupid.

Maybe if I told Libby the truth and explained how I planned to use the money, she would be on board.

But then, what if she wasn't? Svensson Investment was about to hire all those new employees. I was projecting work for the new hires based on managing the accounts that were coming in from Libby's godfather. And the reality was he had technically left them in a trust for her. The money was supposed to go to keeping her secure and comfortable. Sure, he wanted someone to manage it, but it was hers.

"Not technically," I tried to argue as I parked the car. "I would legally be the trustee, and therefore, I could make whatever decisions I want."

But I knew that wasn't going to hold up under scrutiny of court, and it certainly would tarnish Svensson Investment's reputation if there was a big public lawsuit with Libby accusing us of stealing money. We would be ruined.

"It may not even matter," I reminded myself, "because she's supposed to get married to a respectable young man."

I couldn't let that happen. I was fully addicted to her; she was mine, and I would never let another man have her. But I certainly couldn't marry her. That wasn't going to fly with the lawyer, and besides, respectable young men did not fuck their wards in their office. Even I knew that.

What was I going to do?

What was clear was that above all else, I had to keep my mom away from Libby.

My mother had a nose for money. She had abandoned us when we were children, but as soon as Greg's name had hit the papers for being the head of one of the hottest investment

funds in Manhattan, my mother had materialized like Maleficent, looking for her cut.

She had come to Greg with a sob story about being manipulated by our father and how she was about to be homeless. In an uncharacteristic moment of weakness, Greg had started giving her money; so had the rest of my brothers.

But she burnt one bridge after the other as soon as my brothers found out that not only had she never been in danger of being homeless, but she had managed to shack up with a rich old guy who had died and left her all of his money. And that had happened when we were all still at the compound. Athlyn had never lifted a finger to save us, her own children.

After she had spent all that money on purses, hotels, and fancy vacations, she continued to peck at the edges of our lives, looking for handouts. She must have heard her great-uncle had died. She knew he had money. And if she didn't use me to get it, she was going to use Libby.

I had to keep them apart at all costs.

“That won't be difficult,” I assured myself. “Libby never does anything or goes anywhere.”

For once, I was thankful that she liked to sleep all day and lounge around, working on her social media. There was no chance for my mother to orchestrate an accidental meeting.



MY BROTHERS WERE ASSEMBLED in Greg's condo when I arrived. My younger sisters were outside, where a firepit had been set up for roasting hotdogs, marshmallows, and anything else you could skewer on a stick and shove in the fire.

“I thought you bought Mom a one-way ticket to LA?” Walker said accusingly to Mike.

He held up his hands. “I even set her up with a job with one of those scammy juice companies. I figured if anyone could convince bored LA housewives to buy overpriced juice, it would be Mom.”

“I’ve been monitoring her social media accounts,” Liam said. “It seemed like she had a good thing going there. She was in scammer paradise. It’s weird she would leave.”

One of the girls bounced in with a plate of hot dogs in varying states of burned-ness.

“Thanks, sis!” Liam said brightly and helped her slide the hot dogs onto the counter.

We waited until Annie had bounded back out saying, “We have more coming. Don’t start yet!” to continue the conversation.

“At least Mom can’t come and try to kidnap anyone.”

“Yeah, Carl’s finally an adult,” Beck remarked.

“None of the other girls’ mothers have shown up, right?” I asked in concern.

As a last-ditch effort for funds, my mom had resorted to blackmailing Greg for money under the threat that she would go to court for me. On my eighteenth birthday, my brother had burned a hundred-dollar bill, videotaped it, and sent it to our mom.

“I don’t understand why she’s back,” Walker said, shaking his head.

My back felt tense, and I fidgeted with my wristwatch. “I think she’s after Libby,” I admitted.

“Why?”

“Because she must have heard about her great-uncle’s death,” I reminded my brothers.

“It’s not like there was a big announcement about money,” Mike said with a frown. “There was only a small obituary in *The New York Times*. It mentioned all the possums that were found in his apartment. Doesn’t sound like someone with money.”

“You were supposed to keep this under wraps,” Greg said in a hushed tone.

“Clearly, Carl was incapable,” Beck sneered. “The fact that Libby seems to be catching on that there’s a big pile of money out there somewhere means Mom must have been able to as well.”

I let out a frustrated growl. “Mom doesn’t have any proof.”

“She’ll go to the lawyer.”

“Mr. Weatly is not going to see her,” I said, sounding more sure than I felt. “He has very low opinions of women, and you know how Mom is. He won’t give her the time of day.”

Beck didn’t look convinced.

“It’s going to be fine,” I lied. “Mom’s not going to ruin the plan. I have it under control.”

My brothers’ argument was cut short when my sisters came back in with the rest of the grilled food.

“Yum,” Walker said as one of the girls handed him a charred piece of eggplant. “I love crispy vegetables.”

I put cheese and onions on my own hot dog. I didn’t have an appetite, though I didn’t want to hurt the girls’ feelings by not eating.

The truth was I did not have anything under control.

You are a billionaire, I reminded myself. *You will win.*

But what if I didn't? What if I lost everything?

LIBBY

Why had Carl just walked off?

I lay in bed the next morning, wondering. I had already sent out the posts about Carl and his siblings. The posts were doing great, but I didn't care. All I could think about was why Carl had just left.

He hadn't given any explanation for the phone messages. He had adjusted his clothes then fled after telling me absently to make sure I called an Uber.

I was left to dress alone.

Maybe he realized that I wasn't what he wanted after all. Maybe he would rather have been with someone who stuck to her guns and didn't have sex in his office. Maybe it wasn't that good. Maybe I looked weird. Maybe the piercings were too much after all.

I covered my eyes with my arm.

I was sure someone like Bitsy would never be caught dead getting fingered in the office of a guy like Carl, let alone stripping her clothes off and getting fucked on his desk.

“So what if he didn't think it was proper or whatever?” I told myself, rolling over. “He was clearly into it, and I was into it, so what does it matter? You heard Mr. Weatly—you're

supposed to find a nice guy to get married to. It was never going to be Carl, and that's okay. In fact, it's great."

But I couldn't shake the desire that I wanted to be more than his late-night hookup. I wanted him to want me. I wanted to be his everything.

"Delusions of grandeur," I told myself.

But I couldn't help it. "This is why you shouldn't have slept with him. Because you flew too close to the sun, and now you fell for him. And he's never going to feel the same way about you. He's going to be just like your mother and your godfather who always thought you were just something to be endured. You were never a viable wife for him."

I just wanted to sleep the rest of the day away. I was regretting hooking up with Carl. Maybe I should have played harder to get? You know, get a ring on it before giving up the goods and all that.

"Enough with the pity." I sat up. "We are moving onward and upward. Brea was right—you give up too easily."

What did I want? Carl. Was I going to give in and let Bitsy 2.0 have him? Not without a fight. Carl wanted me to be the type of girl my godfather had wanted me to be? Fine. I could do that.

First things first? I was going to get a job. A real job. A respectable job.

I wrapped my comforter around myself, grabbed my laptop, padded into the living room, and settled on the sofa.

Gardenia was already there. She was knitting what looked to be a cock and balls out of hemp fiber. On the stove, the lid of a pot started rattling.

“Oh, good, you’re just in time,” she said brightly. She jumped up, way more limber than I was feeling after I had been fucked six ways to Sunday by the biggest cock in Manhattan.

Gardenia set a wooden tub down in the center of the living room and then carried the pot of water and poured it inside. Then she threw in several handfuls of dried herbs, sprinkled some black pepper in there, and sat two sawed-off two-by-fours on either side of the tub.

“Your vag cleanse is ready!”

The water burbled ominously.

“I’m not sitting in that,” I said after a moment.

“No,” she said, demonstrating, “You sit on it. Straddle these pieces of wood, and then you steam.” She made wafting motions with her hands. “It’s going to cleanse everything.”

“I took a shower last night,” I demurred.

“Did Carl use a latex condom?”

“I—what?” I shrieked. “We didn’t, uh... that.”

Gardenia sniffed. “I read your tarot cards. I know you got laid.” She picked up a large crystal and waved it around me. “Yep, you definitely did.”

“You can’t know that from a crystal.”

“The crystal never lies,” she said sagely. “And if you want him to continue to enjoy partaking in your feminine offerings, you’re going to steam your cooch. You need to realign your aura—it’s all off. You don’t want Carl sneaking off to someone else with more balanced chakras than you, do you?”

Gardenia raised an eyebrow.

If I was really on the get-Carl-at-all-costs train, then I probably should. Steaming couldn't hurt anything, right?

Gardenia wrapped a white linen sheet around me. I slipped off my underwear and settled on the makeshift wood seat.

“Let the steam rise up and fill you; let it rebalance you.”

“I guess this does actually feel pretty... oh my god!” I screamed, jumping up and fanning myself. “That's hot! I almost burned myself!”

Gardenia threw a few ice cubes in the tub. “Try it now.”

“Ugh,” I said, grabbing my laptop and settling down. “Carl better appreciate this.”

“You should be meditating,” Gardenia scolded.

“I need to find a job,” I told her.

“Focus on your art.”

“I did a comic last night about Doug and Carl at the office. But the pizza shop around the corner doesn't let you pay with exposure bucks or Facebook likes, so I need to start earning some real money.”

“You're not going to find a job on a laptop,” Gardenia scoffed at me.

“That's how everyone finds a job nowadays,” I argued. “I'm going to search for jobs online then apply online and pray I get an interview.”

Gardenia sniffed. “Fine, but I have people coming over for an orgy in an hour and a half.”

I looked up at the ceiling. “I guess I'm going to do it the old-fashioned way.”

“That's my girl!” Gardenia pumped her fist.

~

AN HOUR LATER, my hoo-ha—freshly steamed and only slightly burnt—Doug, and I were walking along one of the wide avenues that traversed the Upper East Side, looking for high-end art galleries.

I was wearing my best artsy-Manhattan-socialite getup, with black ankle boots and an asymmetrical black dress in a heavy, rich fabric with large flowing sleeves that Brea had made me. On my wrists were chunky bangles, and I had even managed to straighten my hair and only singed my neck twice.

Doug was wearing a large black bow around his neck and a little beret.

“Hi!” I stepped into the first gallery I saw. “I just wanted to see if you all had any openings?”

The man there acted like I was a one-legged pigeon that had wandered in from picking in the trash.

“It depends,” the man said in a snotty tone. “Are you related to anyone rich, famous, or powerful?”

“Uh, I guess not?”

“Then no,” he said with a fake smile, “we don’t have any openings, sorry.” He sounded anything but.

“Don’t worry, Doug,” I told the corgi. “It’s not like we expected success on the first try. Maybe the next one.”

The next gallery was a large white box with only five large paintings that looked like someone had stepped in cat vomit and tracked it everywhere.

A pinched-faced young woman looked up from her phone when I walked in. “Are you an interior designer?” she asked in a nasally voice.

“No, I’m an art student.”

“This isn’t a charity,” the pinched-faced woman said, rolling her eyes. “You can’t just come in here to look at the art; you have to buy something.”

“I wanted to drop off my resume,” I said, trying to sound polite. “Are you all hiring?”

She took my resume in two fingers and made a sour face.

“This is like, so derivative,” she said with an exaggerated sigh and handed it back to me. “We’re not hiring.”

“Third time’s the charm,” I told Doug when we were back outside.

But it wasn’t. The next gallery had a flock of mean girls who laughed into their drinks when I asked about a job. The next eight galleries I visited weren’t much better.

“Maybe we need to branch out in the realm of respectable jobs,” I told Doug.

The corgi was looking a little bedraggled, and to be honest, so was I. It was warm and humid outside, and I wished I had brought some water.

My stack of resumes was wilting in the heat. Only two people had taken one, and one of them had tossed it right in the trash after I left—I saw her do it through the window.

The problem was that I wanted to use my art degree in some way—well, my almost-art degree. However, all the museums or corporations that might be hiring wanted a four-year degree or, better yet, a masters. I had none of that. So a small independent gallery was my only option, at least until I finished college.

My feet were hurting in my heels.

I went into the next gallery I saw and decided I was going to pretend like I was shopping for a billionaire client. To be fair, I did know Carl. Maybe I was shopping for him. At least then, I could sit down and Doug could have a drink.

An elderly woman sitting at a small table greeted us when I walked into the gallery.

“Oh, hello!” she cried when she saw Doug. “What an absolutely handsome boy!” She walked over and bent down in an elegant motion that oozed old money to pet Doug.

“I absolutely adore corgis,” the elderly woman cooed to him. “What a beautiful, strong boy you are.”

Doug lapped up that attention.

“And isn’t that a very smart hat.” She adjusted Doug’s bow.

“I do apologize,” she said, standing up with a dancer’s grace. “I must admit I’m quite enamored of corgis. Such wonderful dogs with a big personality! Do you do sheepherding competitions with him?”

She looked at me expectantly, like I’d know what that was.

“No,” I said with a pained smile, “he’s more of a lapdog, though.” I added, “Doug did herd my Roomba once. Off a balcony, but still, it’s the thought that counts.”

Doug wagged his tail.

The elderly woman pressed a hand to her chest and laughed.

“Is this the famous Doug from the Doug-and-Carl comics?”

“Uh...” I was speechless. “Well, yes,” I said, regaining my composure. At my feet, the corgi was spinning in happy circles, glad to be in the air-conditioning.

“Doug, you’re famous.”

“Of course he is,” the elderly woman said. She floated over to the table and picked up her tablet and pulled at the spectacles that were sitting on top of her head to place them on her nose.

“I just love your cartoons,” she told me, tapping on her tablet with a stylus and opening up my Instagram page. “So imaginative. I’ve shared them with all my friends in the local corgi kennel club; they simply can’t get enough.”

Oh my god, someone was recognizing me for the art I had made! Granted, the comics weren’t like the half-a-million-dollar contemporary art paintings that hung on the wall, but hey, it was better than nothing.

“Are you here looking for inspiration for your next comic?” she asked me excitedly.

“More so looking for a job,” I said, “though I’ve basically given up on that, and Doug and I were in here looking for a place to sit and grab some water.”

“The poor dear.” She opened up a bottle of eye-wateringly expensive imported water and poured it into a bowl that I recognized as a luxury Swiss porcelain brand. In my daydreams of playing house with Carl, those dishes had been featured heavily.

“Do you know the gallery owner?” I asked her.

“I’m the owner, Mrs. Gloria Hauffman,” she said, air-kissing me. “It’s so wonderful to be old, dear; one can indulge in one’s passions of corgis and art.”

“Pleasure to meet you. You’re clearly my life goals.”

“It helps to have a rich husband as well, dear,” she said with a wink. “Now, let’s see that résumé.”

I offered one to her, bracing for the ridicule I’d received at the last galleries.

But instead, Gloria exclaimed, “What a novel résumé—look at that.” She showed Doug. “Isn’t Libby clever? You’re hired,” she told me.

“Really?” I said in disbelief.

“Of course! Come by tonight. We have a big artist gallery show, and you can start then.”

“Well, thank you,” I said, still in shock. “This is incredibly exciting!”

“On one condition,” she said, raising a finger.

“Anything,” I said automatically.

“You must bring Doug.”

“Doug goes everywhere with me.”

“And”—she winked—“why don’t you bring that handsome Carl here on occasion too? A good-looking man is good for business, no?”

“Sure!” I said giddily.

This was it—my life was on the up-and-up, and best of all, maybe now Carl would see me as the type of girl he could buy expensive Swiss porcelain serving ware with.

I pulled out my phone after working out the particulars with Gloria.

Libby: Guess who got a JOB!!!

Brea: OMG!!!!

Brea: It's not at a strip club, is it?

Libby: No girl, this is a job job, like the first step in a career as a boss babe gallery owner.

Brea: Woo! We are going to celebrate!

Libby: Pizza?

Brea: Um, you are now going to be working at a high-end gallery. We are dining on caviar and champagne!

Libby: I haven't been paid yet.

Brea: It's left over from the wedding, hashtag, I'm not made of money.

I laughed and checked my phone for directions to Brea's office. As I was doing so, a text message came in.

Carl: Tell me where you are. I've sent a car out to find you.

Carl: You need to come to the office immediately.

CARL

I missed having Libby in the office. It was scary how quickly I had grown used to seeing her in the morning there, with her camera and her notebook and her quirky clothes. I smiled, thinking about her. Even though I had bought her all those conservative clothes, she had still managed to put her own stamp on them.

My phone beeped.

My heart leapt thinking it was her.

I hadn't texted Libby at all since we'd had mind-blowing sex in my office because I was too busy trying to think about what to do about my mother. Then the next morning, it seemed a little strange to just text her out of the blue. I didn't know what to say. I wondered if she hated me for just leaving.

If I were her, I would be pretty pissed. Maybe I should buy her flowers?

I tapped the message. It wasn't Libby.

Walker: Dude, come up to the conference room, quick. You have got to see this.

My brothers were all gathered in the conference room. On the screen at the front of the room was a business talk-show channel interviewing Belle Frost.

“It’s such a performative gesture,” she was saying. “Honestly, if the Svenssons think their little social media stunt is going to fool anyone, they’re delusional.”

“Man, she’s really pissed at you,” Beck said to Greg. “She’s going for the throat.”

“Are you sure it’s not sour grapes?” the host asked. “Svensson Investment has reportedly gotten applications from hundreds of qualified women from around the country. This could be a game changer for them.”

“Thank you,” Mike murmured.

“Let’s be clear,” Belle said sharply. “Greg Svensson has no intention of having these women be anything more than a marketing gimmick. He’s not giving one of them a board seat—they’re going to be low-level analysts. His clients are not going to see any of the real value created by having women in charge of an investment firm. Women-led investment firms put the client first, not their egos. We don’t engage in pissing contents. At Artemis Investment, we talk with the client about their needs and risk tolerance then invest accordingly. We don’t railroad anyone, but we do present all the facts in a thorough manner and with the pros and cons of each.”

I thought the pen in Greg’s grasp was going to crack.

“Turn it off,” I said, gesturing to my brother before Greg blew up.

“Is this going to deter any of the women on the interview list from taking a job here?” Beck asked.

“It might,” I said in concern.

“You wouldn’t have this issue if Greg had just apologized.”

“It’s too late for that,” Greg said. “Belle is deliberately trying to ruin my business.”

“You still love her though, right?” I said in concern. I knew how Greg was when someone was on his shit list. While Greg was a ruthless investor, he could also be his own worst enemy. “We need to just ignore her.”

“I’m not ignoring her,” he said. “She’s going down.”

Marnie, Greg’s assistant, stuck her head into the conference room.

“We have the first crop of interviewees here ready for you,” she announced.

I walked with Greg to the downstairs conference room.

“I’ll bring some waters in,” Marnie said, disappearing into the break room.

Greg turned to me, eyes cold as the winter sky. “I made a mistake getting involved with Belle,” he told me. “I shouldn’t have mixed business with pleasure. I’m not an idiot. I see what you’re doing with Libby, and you better fucking stop it. I will let you burn before you ruin this business with your bullshit.”

“Nothing happened,” I lied to him.

“Don’t fucking lie to me,” he hissed. “Break it off with her and fulfill the terms of the contract with their lawyer and get that money.”

“He wants to marry her off to some trust-fund brat with two brain cells.”

“So?” Greg said with a sharp shrug. “Let him. It’s not any of your concern.”

But it was my concern. I was never going to give up Libby.

Neither my brother nor I looked all that pleasant when we walked into the conference room.

There were four women there. They exchanged looks as we stormed in.

“And they say women are the emotional ones,” a dark-haired woman with heavy eye makeup drawled.

Greg took a deep breath. “My apologies,” he said. “It’s been a stressful morning.”

“Why, because Belle Frost took the piss out of you on *CNBC Market Watch*?”

Greg worked his jaw.

“I’m Magdalena. Mags is what people call me, though,” the woman said, offering her hand for us to shake. “I’m the CEO of Brooklyn Fintech, and these are my cofounders. We’re here to talk business, but I can come back when you boys aren’t on your cycle anymore.”

My mouth dropped open. Greg’s eyes about fell out of his head.

Had we just found Belle’s replacement?

Mags could certainly give Belle a run for her money. While Belle was a tall ice queen with platinum-white hair, Mags was an Italian bombshell with eyes that could burn a hole through your forehead.

“I’m assuming,” Mags continued, “that since you seem so bent out of shape about Belle’s interview, you were not in

charge of the marketing plan. You seemed like you were caught with your pants down with no contingency plan.”

“Did you just come here to insult us?” I asked.

“No, I came to talk to your head of marketing. Like I said,” Mags countered, “I own a fintech firm, and I’m either going to poach the woman who organized your campaign, or I’m going to offer you a deal to buy my company and put me on the board.”

Greg seemed intrigued by her brazenness.

“Call Libby,” he told me. “Now.”



LIBBY WALKED into the conference room an hour later. During that time, Mags and her associates had talked through the projects they had worked on, the processes they had developed, and had provided information on how they were going to interface with Svensson Investment.

“There’s the all-star marketer,” Mags said when Libby held out her hand to shake. “The smartest person in the room just walked in.”

Mags leaned back in her chair.

I noticed that Greg couldn’t keep his eyes off her. Was this it for him and Belle? I had always thought they would get back together, that she was his one true love, but Greg was too much of an idiot to get out of his own way. What if it wasn’t true love, though? What did that mean for me and Libby?

You’re not in love with her.

Right, I just didn’t want her to be with any other man except me.

“Oh, it was just a few social media posts,” Libby said.

“Own your creative genius,” Mags said to her. “I thought it was brilliant. Social media marketing is notoriously fickle and expensive for few results. I have several companies I’ve invested in that I’d like to recommend you to.”

“I don’t really have a firm.”

“You could be a very highly paid consultant.”

“Oh,” Libby said. I could see the gears in her mind spinning. She was brilliant and beautiful.

You don’t want someone like that as your wife? I asked myself. She would be perfect.

“Since this is your marketing campaign, though,” Mags said, tapping on her tablet to bring up the interview with Belle, “how do you propose handling this little snafu?”

Libby watched the video for a moment. “There’s always the low road that Belle is Greg’s jilted ex.”

“Is she?” Mag’s gaze flicked to Greg. She all but licked her lips.

“But,” Libby said, “since this is a high-class investment firm and not a dive bar, we should do the respectable thing and take the high road. Maybe release a fairly neutral statement and make a donation to the charity that’s hosting the ball for their programs that are teaching young girls about finance.”

Mags nodded in agreement.

“Of course, if you hired someone higher up in the company,” Libby added, “that would probably also be good. We could do fun social media posts similar to the hot-guys posts of all the women in the office, having a good time, showing the new hire the ropes, having a mentoring happy

hour, that sort of thing. It's like *Real Housewives of New York*, except everyone has a job."

Mags laughed and clapped her hands. "I love it," she said. "What do you say, Greg? Do we have a deal?"

"A deal?"

"You buy my company for ten million. I get a board seat and a say in the new hires from this marketing campaign."

I wasn't sure if this was the best idea. I couldn't pinpoint why. On the surface, it should be good for Svensson Investment. Ten million wasn't that much to purchase a company. And the four women, Mags especially, were finance bombshells. It was going to make Svensson Investment look good.

Maybe something would come up in due diligence about the firm that would tell me why my Spidey senses were tingling.

"We'll discuss it," I stated.

"No," Greg interrupted, "we have a deal."

"Fabulous!" Mags said. "Have your lawyers call my lawyers. We'll get the contracts ready."

She and her associates stood up. She shook Greg's and my hands and air-kissed Libby.

She whispered something to her. From reading her lips, it looked like *Good luck on landing a Svensson*, but I couldn't be sure. How would she know? She'd only just met me and Libby.

"I'll see you out," Greg said, opening the door for Mags.

“Guess that marketing campaign worked, huh?” Libby said after we were alone in the conference room.

Finally alone. I swept her up into my arms and kissed her.

“All thanks to you,” I told her.

It was addictive how she leaned into me.

“How about we go back to my place and celebrate?” I nuzzled her neck.

But she pushed me away. “Sorry, can’t,” she said. “I have to go to work.”

LIBBY

As much as I wanted to go back to Carl's condo and let him fuck my brains out, that was not the type of behavior of someone who was going to her very first gallery opening at her brand-new big-girl job in her degree field. Booyah!

I ran home to change into one of the outfits Carl had bought me—a black circle skirt paired with a funky yellow vintage cashmere crop top I found at a flea market. I twisted up my hair, hoping no one noticed that my roots were already showing again, and added some statement jewelry.

Then I looked at my shoes. Under normal circumstances, I would wear my black boots to give the outfit an edgy vibe, but we were going for respectable here, so I slipped on black stiletto heels.

“It's fine,” I told myself, wincing slightly as I snapped my fingers for Doug to follow me. “Once you have a glass of wine, you won't even feel them.”



“THERE SHE IS!” Gloria sang out when I arrived. “And our handsome celebrity.” She reached down to pet Doug.

“Honestly, Grandma, you didn't hire her, did you?”

I froze as Bitsy came around the side of a large display with one of the bright-colored paintings from the gallery's newest featured artist. My hands bunched in the skirt, then I forced them to smooth it out.

Bitsy's lip curled. "You can't hire someone like her."

"She came in person, had a paper résumé, and asked for a job," Gloria said, floating around the gallery, pointing at the caterer where to set up. "It's so refreshing to meet someone with the gumption to show up and ask for a job."

Bitsy glared daggers at me. I was going to pay for it later. Except, you know what? Actually, I wasn't. I was done letting her push me around.

"What's your role here?" I asked Bitsy, channeling my inner art professional. "Are you doing marketing? Is there a hashtag I should use for social media posts?"

"I'm not doing marketing," she sneered.

"Organizing the meet and greet?"

Bitsy glared at me.

"She's just here for moral support," her grandmother said, squeezing her arm.

"Ah," I said, "here for the free food. No shame in that. That's how I made it through college."

"Free food? Killer!" An older, heavysset woman with curly hair and oversized jewelry set down a stack of glossy caption cards about the paintings.

"Isla Longshore," I exclaimed, extending my hand to shake hers. She ignored it and enveloped me in a hug.

"So glad you came to my show."

“This is my new employee,” Gloria said proudly.

“Finally hired someone, eh?” Isla had a Scottish accent and a friendly, broad smile.

“I love your work,” I gushed. “I follow you on Instagram, and your work is divine! I would literally live in one of your paintings.”

“She draws those comics. Isla is a fellow corgi lover,” Gloria explained to me.

Isla bent down to scratch Doug behind the ears. “I need you to put out those comics on a daily basis,” she joked. “The one where the Roomba goes off the balcony—killer!”

“Yeah, Carl was pretty upset about it,” I admitted. “He had to go to the other side of his garage and get a different car.”

Isla held her stomach and belly laughed. She wiped away a tear. “Since you’re a corgi fan, you have to come look at this painting,” she said. “I just finished it yesterday, and it was too good not to add to the opening.”

Around the corner on an opposite wall was a painting of what could only be described as “psychedelic space corgi goes on a shopping spree.” The huge painting had a background of pinks, blues, and purples, and in the center was a very-happy-looking corgi in sunglasses surrounded by bright-orange, green, and yellow shopping bags.

“My soul is in this picture,” I said. I held up my phone. “Do you mind? I don’t have a lot of followers, but I can for sure post about this.”

“Go for it! I’m not that social media savvy. Neither is Gloria, isn’t that right?” she hollered to the old woman.

I snapped a selfie of me, Isla, and a slightly squashed Doug in front of the painting.

“Perfect.” I sighed happily. I felt like I was among my people.

“Don’t your feet hurt in those?” Isla pointed to my shoes.

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Should have worn something comfortable.” She pointed to her own sparkly tennis shoes.

“She needs her heels because her boyfriend is so tall,” Gloria said.

“You’re dating Carl Svensson, aren’t you?” Isla said loudly.

I winced. Bitsy seethed in fury a few paces away.

“No,” I said hastily.

“That’s a ‘no’ with a wink!” I cringed as my elderly roommate swept into the gallery. Gardenia was wearing what looked like a moth-eaten bright-yellow bridesmaid dress from the seventies with a matching bonnet.

And I was concerned about dressing appropriately for this gallery opening.

“Gardenia!”

“Isla!” Gardenia did a complicated handshake with Isla.

“I had to make her one of my special steam baths for her vag after one night with Carl. It tightened everything up, didn’t it?” Gardenia elbowed me.

A server came by with a tray of wine, and I took a glass and guzzled it down. “I’m going to grab one of those lobster rolls,” I said, ducking around the older women.

The gallery wasn't that big, and I huddled in a corner and took a big bite of my lobster roll.

"I knew I was right about you." I jumped and almost choked on a piece of lobster as Bitsy hissed in my ear. "You're sleeping with him for favors just like you did with the TA. You have no morals."

"None of that was true; you made it all up," I said forcefully.

"No, I didn't. I was there. I saw you with the TA, and I saw you going after my boyfriend. You stole him just like you did with Carl."

"You and Carl weren't dating," I hissed, "and neither are he and I."

"That's not what that batty old woman said."

"Gardenia's not batty," I said, jumping to my roommate's defense.

"She's as batty as my grandmother—giving gallery space to someone like her." Bitsy scowled in Isla's direction.

"Her art is amazing," I said, my grip tight on my cocktail plate. "You're just jealous."

"Of an overweight artist who never grew up and still pretends she's a teenager from the nineties? Or," Bitsy added, "are you implying that I'm jealous of you? As if. You're pathetic. You use all sorts of gimmicks to throw yourself at men to make them want you, but they don't actually care about you. They don't actually want you. They just want to sleep with you, and Carl's the same way."

"You're mad because he doesn't want to be with you," I shot back.

“Do I hear hot goss?” A middle-aged woman with bleach-blond hair and a fake tan wobbled over to us on impossibly high platform heels. Her name tag said her name was Athlyn. A lifetime of dieting looked to have given her spindly ankles, and I winced as she almost fell over.

“You’re looking at the next wannabe Mrs. Svensson,” Bitsy told the woman cattily.

“Oh?” Athlyn drained her wineglass then grabbed another from a passing server.

“Carl Svensson, hmm? Seems like quite the stretch, but it’s good to have goals.”

“I’ll say,” Bitsy said. “She literally has no family.”

“None?”

“My godfather just died,” I explained, “and my mom is off traveling the world since I was in middle school.”

“How tragic.” Athlyn seemed intrigued. “Art doesn’t seem like the best prospect for someone who doesn’t come from a stable family background and is, I assume, penniless.”

I shrugged, feeling awkward. “Guess love trumps logic.”

“That’s why I’m on the board of the Women in Finance charity,” Bitsy said, bragging. “We try to keep girls from falling into her type of trap, where the only viable option for them to not live in a box under a bridge is to try to hoodwink a rich man. We teach them about finance and help encourage big companies like Svensson Investment to hire more women and mentor them. We have a big fundraising ball coming up. You should come, Athlyn.”

I used the excuse to slip away from them. The topic of conversation had me on edge. Bitsy was so obviously looking

for ammunition she could use against me. Why could I never escape her?

I spent the rest of the evening attending to prospective buyers and making social media posts. I tried to avoid Bitsy as much as possible in the small gallery space. I still felt her watching me—her and Athlyn. The heavily tanned woman was going through bottles of wine, pretending to look at the paintings, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was the most interesting object in that gallery to her.

You're being paranoid and crazy. Bitsy's gotten in your head.

"That was quite the successful evening," Gloria was saying to me as the party was winding down. We'd sold half the paintings, and I had a ton of likes on the post of the corgi painting.

"A fabulous evening," Athlyn said to us, air-kissing Gloria then me.

My phone beeped.

"Is that him?" she asked, her expression more crafty than would be expected for someone who had just shotgunned several glasses of wine.

"Who?"

"Carl Svensson, of course."

I glanced at the phone. "No," I lied.

"Hmm," she said. "Shame. There are other billionaires in the sea."

I helped Gloria finish packing up, wondering what the hell that was all about.

Bet Bitsy was telling that woman all sorts of lies about me.

“Have a good weekend!” Gloria called to me when I waved for Doug and grabbed my purse.

Outside, a sports car idled down the street. The door opened, and Carl stepped out. He didn't say anything when he saw me, just wrapped me in his strong arms and kissed me. I sank into him. It felt like a very boyfriend thing to do to wait around and pick up someone after work.

“You're the sexiest Uber service ever.”

“I hope you're not riding in any Ubers where they're about to take you back to their bedroom and fuck you until you scream.”

I shivered.

Was it bad that I wanted this every day for the rest of my life?

LIBBY

As soon as we were in Carl's condo, he had me pushed up against the wall and was kissing me.

I adored the way Carl kissed me. It was both domineering and insistent and set my blood on fire with want for him. I moaned into the kiss and parted my lips, giving him as much access as he wanted.

He took it and more, his tongue sweeping inside my mouth. Meanwhile, with the bulk of his body pressed up against my own, I was pleasantly pinned.

His hand came up to cup my tits to tug and play with the rings.

"I'd rather you did that to the one on my pussy."

Now he looked both intrigued and aroused. Deciding to capitalize on the upper hand, I leaned into him and whispered in his ear. "If you're a good boy, I'll let you taste it."

"I can be very good to you."

"Prove it." I nodded to the couch.

He grinned and stepped back. I regretted the loss of his body pressing me up against the wall but not when he pulled me to the couch.

As soon as I sat, he sank to his knees in front of me, pushing my knees apart to give him access. I flipped the skirt up to give him a show.

Carl made a rumbly sound of approval deep in his throat. Then his thick fingers pulled aside the fabric of my panties. He leaned in, all but yanking my panties down and off me. Then, he bent in and started teasing my ring with flicks of his tongue.

I closed my eyes in rising bliss. Carl instinctively seemed to know what he was doing. He was gentle with the ring but teasing. He took it in between his teeth and tugged it just a little, this way and that. As he did, the tips of his fingers went to work on my clit, rubbing and stroking my little nub.

I moaned aloud, spreading my legs further. My fingers tangled in his thick hair as I held him in place.

When he added his tongue into the mix, stroking first over my pussy lips and then delving to my clit, I was in heaven.

In fact, it was too good.

“Carl,” I breathed out a hasty warning. The feeling of warmth blossoming up inside me was a prelude to my orgasm, and I didn’t want to cum just yet.

Carl reached down and pulled his shirt over his head.

I stopped myself from gaping at his abs long enough for me to figure out I needed to undress too. I reached for my blouse while Carl kicked off his pants and boxer briefs.

Thick and long, his cock was making me dripping wet. Hot damn, he was packing real heat, and my pussy gave a hot clench of want when I caught sight of him.

Seeing me leering, he reached down and gave himself an easy stroke. He was already fully erect, but the way he did it

made him look like he was priming a weapon to fire.

Well. I was more than happy to be his target for the evening.

“How do you want me?” he asked.

I licked my lips as I tossed my last article of clothing away. “Just like this. On the couch.”

That was all the invitation Carl needed. He descended on me, kissing a hot line down my neck and to my breasts. The man liked my piercings and spent a satisfying time teasing my nipples with his tongue and playing with the rings with his teeth, much as he did with my pussy piercing.

Meanwhile, his free hand went back to play between my legs, alternating between the ring there and my clit.

I moaned, clutching his shoulders and doing everything I could to stay in the moment and not to come. It was hard because he seemed intent on teasing me.

“Carl,” I moaned, “I want your cock.”

That seemed to be what he was waiting for. He paused only to reach back into his pants and pull out a condom from his pocket. Then he rolled it on and positioned himself.

The first few inches as he breached me took a little getting used to—he was big, and I had the ring on. But once I relaxed, he was able to sheathe himself inside me... and his cock felt amazing. It filled me to the brim and only got better when he started to move.

The man had a natural sense of a rhythm, which I fell naturally into, arching myself to take in every one of his deep thrusts. He knew where to hit inside me. I gasped aloud when he found my G-spot.

Carl just grinned and made sure to hit it again and again.

Pleasure bloomed up inside of me, and I knew I couldn't last. I tried to warn him, but I was so far gone my voice came out stuttered.

He increased his pace, mercilessly, and I came with him pounding inside me.

As my climax ebbed, Carl dropped his head between his shoulders, finishing inside me with short, powerful thrusts.

I lay sprawled on the couch, breathing hard, my tits rising and falling. I was trying not to drift off into sleep. It was probably not a good look to pass out on Carl's couch, naked. I used my last ounce of strength to drag myself upright.

"I guess I should go home."

"No," Carl said, wrapping his body around me, the hard muscles under his skin rippling against my skin. "Stay."

I felt an explosion of delirious joy. He wanted me! He wanted me to stay! Maybe getting myself together and getting a job had worked out after all.

I turned and kissed him softly. "If you insist."

He kissed me again and picked me up easily in his arms.

"It's better this way," he said, nuzzling me, "because then we can just go to the ball together."

I almost fell out of his arms. "A ball? The charity ball?"

"Of course."

"Uh, no. No way."

LIBBY

When a man like Carl invited you into his personal space, in his bedroom, in his bed, it should be a joyous occasion. I should have relished it, taken it all in like Cinderella when she went to the castle for the first time and danced with the prince.

Except the ball was the problem.

A charity ball in a big gown with important people where I had to keep it together for hours and not say anything embarrassing or that could get me sued? Nope. I wasn't going to be able to do it. I was going to drink too much then spill food all over my expensive dress.

Shit, a dress! I didn't have a dress.

Carl wrapped his arms around me and nuzzled my neck. "I guess I didn't fuck you hard enough," he murmured, "if you didn't immediately pass out."

"Are you absolutely sure I have to be at the ball?"

"It's part of the proof to show Mr. Weatly that you're a respectable woman," he said wryly in the dark.

I snorted.

“Relax,” he murmured, peppering kisses on my bare skin down my torso, paying special attention to my tits. “Don’t I always take care of you?”

Yes, but now I’m going to take care of you. He let me push him down onto the bed. His cock jutted out, thick and hard. I wanted him.

I straddled him, rubbing my aching, wet pussy against the length of his cock. “Tease,” he grunted as the piercing on my pussy grazed his length.

I surged my hips forward again, and he cursed. His hands caressed my hips then my ass then traveled up to play with my tits. He hooked a finger in each of the rings and tugged me forward. I gasped from the pleasure. My body arched, and my head tipped back, the rings on my nipples little points of pleasure as I rocked my ass back against his cock, taking my pleasure from him but not letting him enter me.

“Shit,” Carl cursed.

He released my tits and fumbled on the nightstand for a condom.

“You don’t want me to make you come just like this?” I purred.

He nudged me off of him with his knee. I hovered slightly above him and took the condom from him. I opened it with my teeth then rolled it on his thick cock. Before I could settle back on him, he grabbed my hips and thrust in me. My pussy clenched around his cock as he gave me every thick inch.

Carl took me hard and fast—just the way I was craving it. The piercing gave me just a little bit more tightness, just a little more feeling of being stretched.

“Fuck,” I moaned, arching, and knowing I wouldn’t last long.

Carl reached between my legs to rub the piercing against my clit. It was enough to send me over the edge. I came with a cry and a shiver. He followed a few moments later, his rocking thrusts slowing to a stop.

“You can’t say a respectable girl is more fun than that.”



I WOKE up with blankets wrapped around me like a cocoon. I was warm and safe. I burrowed deeper in the blankets. Then I flopped over and blinked in the light streaming in from the windows.

I wrapped the sheet around me, fully intending to embrace my inner sex goddess and make love to Carl wherever I might happen to find him. I padded around the master suite but didn’t see him. Sheet half-wrapped around me in what I hoped was a sexy-Roman-goddess style, I opened the next door I came to.

It was his study. No Carl.

“Oh, Carl!” I sang out. “I think I might need a little more convincing to go to the—*ahhhh!*” I screamed when I walked into the living room.

“Good afternoon?” a slightly shocked woman in black slacks and a blazer said when she saw me.

“Uh...”

Who the fuck were all these people? In addition to the woman with the blazer, there were several bored-looking men idly flipping through a clothing rack that was groaning under the weight of numerous couture dresses. Another woman was

on her phone with several makeup bags next to her, and yet another had what looked like half a hair salon assembled on the coffee table.

“What the f—”

“Hi, Libby!” Carl’s sister Ophelia exclaimed. She and several of her sisters ran over to me.

“You’re finally awake!”

“We came to help you get ready for the ball!”

Crap. I was not wearing underwear or a bra or anything other than this bedsheet. I hadn’t even showered.

“I, uh...” I gritted my teeth.

Carl wandered into the living room, texting someone on his phone.

I gave him a *What the fuck?* look. He froze and returned the shock.

“Where are your clothes?” Carl asked in disbelief.

“That’s the question you’re going to ask?” I hissed while his sisters excitedly told me which dress they thought I should wear.

I hugged the sheet to me. It suddenly felt like the size of a washcloth.

“I hired these people to help you get ready for the ball,” he explained.

“We only have five hours,” I heard Carl’s sister say amidst their chatter, “until you have to leave.”

“Seems like plenty of time,” I assured her.

“Oh, no,” Ophelia said, gesturing to me. “We have to fix *everything*.”

Guess there was no one in the world more savage than a tween girl.

“Maybe we could have breakfast first?” I suggested hopefully.

The hairstylist pulled me down into a chair, causing my bedsheet to almost slip.

“I’ll make you a smoothie,” Enola offered.

“Can’t I change first and take a shower?”

“We need to start on your hair,” the man said, waving a brush around.

Carl’s little sisters started pulling out enough vegetables to make a soup. They then set a blender on the counter.

“This is going to be really tasty,” Enola assured me. “We’re putting carrots in your smoothie.”

“You have corrupted your sisters,” I told Carl with a scowl.

He smiled and leaned in and kissed me. “I’ll go get you a breakfast sandwich.”



WHILE CARL WAS OUT, I was pampered and styled into a pile of mush on the floor. The hairstylist muttered a prayer to various saints as he stripped the pink dye out of my hair, cut it, then recolored it while Carl’s sisters force-fed me a smoothie that looked like cat vomit.

My head was wrapped in plastic wrap and tinfoil for the color to set while several other stylists waxed every single

stray hair off my body while I tried not to scream in agony and traumatize Carl's sisters.

"Is this really necessary?" I begged as the aesthetician stirred the hot wax.

"You might want to choose a revealing dress," she said.

"No, not I," I said as the sticky hot wax was spread on me. "I will never choose anything that's going to reveal all the way up there—mother of god!"

Ophelia handed me a mug.

"There better be vodka in this."

"It's herbal tea."

It tasted like lawn trimmings.

"I can't believe with all his money, your brother doesn't have any better food," I grumbled.

Two more painful hair removals later, then I was ushered off to a bath. I shrieked as they shoved me into the water.

"It's freezing!"

"It's good for your skin," the aesthetician said, draping a face mask on me while I shivered. Ophelia dumped a bucket of ice cubes in the water.

I was still shivering an hour later as the beauticians gave me a manicure and pedicure.

"Can I have green nail polish?"

"You can have a French manicure," the stylist instructed.

My stomach was growling when Carl walked back into the open living and kitchen area with a brown paper sack of the most delicious-smelling food of my entire life. Even Doug

roused himself from where he was taking a nap to recover from his previous nap on the couch.

“Gimme,” I said.

Carl pulled out a slightly greasy breakfast biscuit wrapped in butcher paper.

“It was a little more difficult to get a breakfast sandwich than you’d think at this hour,” he said.

I almost cried when I realized my nails were still wet and I couldn’t eat the sandwich.

Carl unwrapped the sausage, egg, and cheese biscuit and held it up to my mouth so I could take a grateful bite.

“Why are we going to a ball when we could just have a nice evening inside and watch movies and eat delicious food and very expensive wine?” I asked him.

“It’s good networking,” he said with a small smile. He kissed me then fed me another bite of the sandwich.

“Which dress are you going to wear?” His sisters peppered me with questions as I took another big bite. They pulled dresses off the racks, sweeping them in front of me for my inspection.

“All of these dresses would be appropriate,” the stylist said as I finished off my biscuit. Now that I had food, I was feeling a bit better about this whole charity-ball thing. Carl’s phone rang, and he left for his study while his sisters begged me to pick their favorite dress.

“This one has a slit up the side,” Enola said, holding up a blue dress with a V-neck sparkly bodice with long sleeves. The split on the satin skirt did in fact go all the way up, and I could see now why the waxing had been so painfully thorough.

“I’m going to end up flashing someone.”

“This one is super gorgeous,” Annie said, holding up a simple black sleeveless dress with an A-line skirt.

“Might I suggest this one to go with your new hair color?” the hairstylist said, holding up a dress that was both artsy yet not completely over the top. The bodice had capped sleeves and a sweetheart neckline that was lined with blue feathers and crystals. That same blue scrolled down the bodice in an intricately embroidered feather pattern to dissipate on the swishy A-line skirt that had the same embroidered-feathers pattern in a shimmery white.

“Yes, please, that one!”

I had been upgraded from the bedsheet to a plush monogrammed robe that had the initials *CS* on it. I was really living the billionaire’s life.

The nail polish had dried, and I could finally sip a cocktail and have another breakfast biscuit while the hairstylist put the finishing touches on my hair.

“Is Carl a robe man?” I asked his sisters.

Annie frowned. “He only wore it once when Kiki had a sleepover. The dress code was luxury pajamas.”

“Man, you guys are really living large.”

“You can come to the next sleepover,” she offered. “I think you’d appreciate a Disney princess movie marathon more than my brothers.”

“I like Disney as much as the next girl, but a whole marathon is a lot.”

Carl smirked from the doorway. “It’s a lot more fun if you take a shot every time an inanimate object bursts into song.”

“Did you let them do your hair?” I teased him.

“No,” Annie said, glaring up at her brother.

“You don’t want to do my hair,” he said, smiling at them softly. “It’s too short; it can’t be any fun.”

“We could color it blue.”

Carl made a face. “Libby’s hair is blue.”

“It’s a blue ombre,” the hairstylist corrected, turning me around to face a large mirror.

I gasped as I gazed at my hair. The color and cut were everything I had tried to achieve when I was a teenager and had always failed at. The shaggy bob was long in the front and slightly shorter in the back. The color gradient was *chef’s kiss* and started out dark at my roots then transitioned to a dark blue, the same color as the blue on my dress, then to a luxurious silver at the ends.

“You look like a fairy-tale princess,” Ophelia marveled.

Carl was intrigued, like he wanted to run his hands through my hair while I rode his cock.

I swallowed.

“I better get dressed since you’re almost ready,” he said finally.

I was wishing I had gone a little easier on the breakfast biscuit while I was practically sewn into my dress. “What if I have to use the bathroom?” I asked in concern.

“You’ll have to do what the Victorians did,” Ophelia said dramatically.

“What’s that?” I asked apprehensively.

“You hold a pan up and—”

“Thank you, Ophelia,” Carl said from the doorway. “Let’s try and keep it at least somewhat classy.”

Carl was more lickable than a cake pop in his three-piece black tux that would make James Bond seethe in jealousy. The gold chain of a pocket watch was the only ornament on his breast pocket.

Of course, he’s wearing a pocket watch.

“You look amazing!” his sisters said in excitement.

He leaned in to kiss my neck and whispered, “You do look amazing.”

Ophelia took our picture while Enola took my phone and slipped it into a crystal-and-sapphire-encrusted clutch.

“Poor Doug’s not going,” Enola said, petting the corgi’s head.

“I’m sure you’ll be great dog babysitters.”

“Have fun!” they said, waving as Carl took my arm and escorted me to the elevator.

This was going to be fun, right? No pressure, right? All I had to do was not drink too much, avoid Bitsy at all costs, not spill wine all over myself, and not completely embarrass Carl so that he never speaks to me again. What could be easier than that?

Gulp.

CARL

““**Y**ou can’t seriously be bringing her,” Greg hissed at me. “What did I just tell you?”

“She’s not going as my *date* date,” I whispered back at him. “Svensson Investment bought a number of tickets, and I gave her one because she helped on the campaign. It’s the same reason Mags got a ticket.”

Greg narrowed his eyes at me.

I resolved to treat Libby more like a coworker at the ball and less like my date. I was sure if I didn’t, news might make its way back to Mr. Weatly about a certain Svensson brother out with Herbert’s goddaughter. I still had no solution for the fact that the only way he was going to hand over the keys to Herbert’s money was if Libby had a respectable husband or at least boyfriend.

Maybe I can hire someone, I wondered desperately. An actor. Make him sign a nondisclosure agreement. Set up a bunch of shell accounts. Buy him a Scottish dukedom or something.

It wasn’t as if Mr. Weatly was going to dig into it that much, right?

He went to the club and lunched with other gossipy, old upper-class men. If the man Libby was with wasn't vetted by that circle, I knew it wasn't going to pass muster with Mr. Weatly.

It will be fine; you'll think of something. This is what you do. You fix things.

But it seemed impossible.

I tried to relax in the limousine ride on the way over. It was hard what with the fact that my brothers kept regaling Libby with stories about me.

"And then there was this time," Liam said, laughing, while his girlfriend, Karlie, shook her head in bemusement, "that Carl got chased by this llama. I've never seen anyone sprint so fast."

"It was your llama," I reminded him. "You bought a llama on Craigslist, and it tried to attack me."

"Tomato, tomahto."

"No, that is not how that saying should be used."

"How long do we have to stay at this party?" Mike complained.

"Long enough for Greg to have his win then fifteen minutes longer so that he can bask in it and gloat," I remarked.

"I hope you win," Libby said.

"Me too," I said, "because he'll be insufferable if he doesn't."

"Of course, I'll win," Greg said smugly. "Libby's marketing campaign pushed us above and beyond."

When we arrived at the venue, several other people from Svensson Investment were already there, including Mags. The purchase of her fintech company had gone through. I hadn't found any red flags when I did the due diligence period.

She reached up to grasp Greg's jaw. "No point in coming to one of these parties if there aren't going to be any handsome men in tuxes present," she said. "If you hadn't shown up, I probably would have gone home."

My brothers and I all gaped at each other.

Greg didn't let anyone manhandle him like that—well, except maybe Belle. Greg's ex was across the grand ballroom when we all trooped inside.

Libby was giddy at the large mural decorating the ceiling. "It was done by Gustaf Baumgartner," she explained in excitement.

Belle was about as unhappy to see Greg and Mags as Libby was excited about the mural.

"Crawford is at the ball doing security," Mike muttered to me. "Might need to call him."

My brothers and I braced for impact as Belle made her way over to us.

Her sleek dark-blue dress was in direct contrast with Mags's white confection of a gown with all its layers of ruffles, feathers, and crystals.

"Come to wish us good luck for the announcement?" Mags asked, grasping Greg's arm possessively.

Belle's ice-blue eyes flicked between the two of them. Normally, having the six-foot-tall Amazon warrior woman

glare at them was enough to send most women running from Greg, but not Mags. She smirked up at Belle.

“I hardly think selling out your company constitutes being female friendly,” Belle said.

“It’s just business,” the much shorter woman said, “and it’s nice to have a power couple at the helm of a multinational financial organization. Grow or die.”

Belle was probably going to choose die or, rather, kill.

“Besides,” she added. “I’m not into work-life balance, so if I’m going to get married and have kids, I’m not going to have time to date. Wouldn’t you say it’s pretty convenient to have a whole crop of hot guys at the ready?”

“That’s why we bought her company,” Greg said smoothly. “Magdalena always is thinking three steps ahead.”

Belle worked her jaw.

Greg beamed down at Mags.

“Isn’t he sweet?” Mags cooed, running her thumb over my brother’s mouth.

“He is not,” Belle said.

“And I can see why you’re still single,” Mags shot back. “Though, I can’t believe that Greg is. Guess there’s not a woman enterprising enough to snag him.”

“Many have tried,” my brother said magnanimously. “All have failed.”

“Are you serious?” Belle hissed at Greg.

“Why not?” he shot back at her.

“Belle?” One of the Holbrooks waved to her. She fired one last death-ray glare at Greg and stalked off.

“Man,” Libby muttered to me as we left Greg and Mags to talk to one of the board members of the charity, “I need a drink after that and a fainting couch. You could kill someone with that tension.”

“I’m surprised Belle didn’t kill him.”

“If she wants him, she’ll have to go hard,” Libby said as we stood in line for the bar. “Because Mags has Greg in her sights.”

The line at the bar moved quickly. I ordered a scotch and handed Libby her glass of wine.

“Thanks,” she said, beaming up at me. Then she exclaimed, “Oh my god! Brea!”

Mark Holbrook ambled toward us a few steps behind a shorter woman. His girlfriend, Brea, hurried over to us, the train of her voluminous dress in one hand, wineglass in another.

Greg hated the Holbrooks, but Mark was pretty cool. He shook my hand while Libby hugged Brea.

“Look at your dress,” Brea said. “Hubba-hubba!”

I looked around apprehensively. Greg usually kept it together pretty well, but who knew with him, especially with how he was acting lately. One of his oldest and longest grudges, besides his hatred of our father, was his hatred of the Holbrooks.

But while I was looking to make sure Greg was safely on the other side of the ballroom, I saw something even worse.

Is that my mom?

“Excuse me for a second,” I said.

Libby nodded absently while Brea gave an animated description of how she had made her dress.

I felt nauseous. Surely, my mother couldn't be here. Maybe I'd forgotten her face and I saw someone who I thought looked like her.

It wasn't possible. You couldn't just sneak into this type of event. My older half brother Crawford ran a high-end security company, and his company had been contracted for this event. There was no way my mother could have gotten in without him knowing it.

It has to be a mistake. I needed a drink. You're just being paranoid.

I ordered another scotch from the bartender while trying to sneakily watch the tanned, blond-haired woman with the heavy makeup.

"Carl."

A man grabbed my arm and dragged me behind one of the large potted trees in the ballroom.

"What the fuck, Crawford?"

My older half brother, who usually wore boots and heavy leather motorcycle gear, was in a suit for the security job.

"What is wrong with you?" I snapped at him.

He patted me on the head. "Baby brother, you should be happy to see me."

"I thought you were on the West Coast," I said, fixing my tux.

Crawford smirked. The ragged scar that crossed his eye made him look like a villain in a Bond movie.

“I came back in town to watch Greg get his ass handed to him by Belle,” he said. “Imagine my surprise when Greg has what seems to be Belle’s replacement and someone who can give her a run for her money—literally. And,” he added, “imagine my surprise when I saw your mother here.”

“Holy shit, it really was her.”

“Yes,” Crawford said grimly.

“Was she on the guest list?” I asked. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“She arrived with one of the board members,” Crawford explained, “on their guest ticket.”

“What is she doing here?” I insisted.

“You tell me. According to my mother, you were always Athlyn’s favorite.”

“No, I wasn’t,” I said in shock. “She hated me.”

“She hated you least out of the others.”

“She’s not here for me,” I snapped. “She’s trying to get a cut of Libby’s inheritance. I’m sure of it.”

“Guess you better play keep-away, then,” Crawford said.

Shit. I couldn’t let Libby and my mother cross paths. But when I looked around for Libby, I didn’t see her anywhere.

LIBBY

““**Y**ou don’t think it’s too much?” I asked Brea after Mark had gone to talk to a tall, green-eyed, brown-haired man.

“You look amazing in this dress,” Brea assured me.

“Maybe I should have these tattoos removed,” I fretted.

“Sounds painful.”

I stared down the tattoo sleeve on my arm. I wished I had chosen a long-sleeved dress. Every other woman at the ball had clean skin on their arms. Their dresses were also a little plainer than mine. I felt dejected. Even when I tried my hardest, I just couldn’t fit in with this crowd.

“They’re probably all talking about me,” I whispered to my friend.

“They’re all staring at your amazing tits,” Brea assured me.

I looked down. I hadn’t noticed it in the condo, but at the right angle if you looked down my front, you could practically make out my boobs. The feathers disguised just how plunging the neckline of the dress really was.

I self-consciously fluffed them up.

“What if people think I’m a hooker?”

Brea shook her head. “High-end escorts usually have long hair and extensions. They probably think you’re someone’s artsy daughter.”

But I didn’t feel like an artsy daughter. I felt like a fraud.

“Do they have any food here?” I asked desperately.

Brea and I wound our way through the crowd. There was a whole spread of treats along one wall.

“My friend Elsie did the catering,” Brea told me, “and she does a mean grazing table.”

“This is literally my dream,” I said, selecting a sampling of the imported cheese, ripe fruit, and salty salami and piling it on my plate. Another glass of wine later, and we slipped outside onto the balcony that overlooked a small garden where people were milling about.

“So,” Brea said while I ate my weight in cheese. “Did you and Carl do the nasty again?”

I inhaled a breadstick, and Brea whacked me on the back.

“Was it better the second time?”

“Yeah,” I said with a cough and drank more of the wine.

“You did it in his office and in his bed. Seems you guys are really hitting it off. When’s the wedding?” she teased.

Through the large glass windows, Carl was moving among the crowd, shaking hands, talking to people. My heart ached. I wanted nothing more than to be his wife.

“Er, you know,” I said, eating an olive. “I don’t know if we’re putting labels on things.”

“You should put a ring on that,” Brea said, “or at least get a key to his condo.”

“I don’t know if he really, you know, likes me like that, you know?”

“You’re hot and smart, and you just did a successful marketing campaign for his company,” Brea argued. “You’re, like, the perfect girl.”

“I don’t know.” I took a deep breath. “At the gallery, Bitsy said—”

“Screw Bitsy,” Brea said.

“What if she’s right?” I argued. “Maybe I am just the fun hookup, just the girl Carl’s banging because he’s bored.”

“I think he likes you,” Brea countered, shaking me gently. “The way he looked at you like you were a piece of chocolate cake was yummy!”

“Maybe he’s going to get tired of me and move on to someone who makes a better corporate wife. Maybe he wants”—I thought back to what Mags had said—“his other half of a power couple. I’m not that.”

“I think a lot of men just want a nice woman who will be there for them and support them but still have her own interests and isn’t too clingy. That’s totally you.”

“I can’t even cook,” I reminded her. “How am I supposed to take care of him? I can barely take care of myself.”

“He’ll have staff for that.”

“I can’t be a gold digger and just mooch off him.”

“Just don’t get rid of your piercings, and it will be fine! You’re good in bed.”

But I had read enough Brontë sisters to know that just being good in bed was not a long-term way to satisfy Carl. I handed my plate to a passing server and grabbed more wine while I watched Carl from across the room.

He was so perfect.

Ugh, I think I'm in love with him.

You're just infatuated.

Bitsy approached the microphone at the front of the room. She wore an off-the-shoulder champagne-colored dress and her hair in a chignon at the nape of her neck.

“If I could have your attention, please,” she said, “we’ll get the evening’s program started.”

I made my way closer to the front of the ballroom and stood near Belle Frost. She was with several of her other female business partners. They seemed like a cool bunch.

Mags was still standing possessively next to Greg. She gave me a little finger-wave with one hand, the other firmly clamped on Greg’s arm.

That's one way to claim a man.

“Thank you all for coming tonight and supporting women in finance,” Bitsy began and then launched into a speech about the history of the charity and what they had accomplished in the last year.

“Where were you?” Carl asked, coming up next to me and putting his hand on my shoulder.

“Just taking in the architecture,” I whispered back to him.

I half expected him to kiss me, but he just removed his hand and slipped it into his pocket. I wrapped my arms around

myself. It suddenly felt cold in the ballroom. I forced my arms down and straightened up.

Around us, the other couples weren't engaging in elaborate displays of public affection. Maybe that's how you behaved when you were part of this social class. My godfather certainly had never hugged me and could barely bring himself to shake my hand.

But still, it hurt.

What if Carl was ashamed of me? What if he'd rather I be just the hookup and not the woman he brought with him on his arm to business events? Maybe Bitsy was right, and I was delusional that Carl would ever want me.

She saw me and Carl, and her eyes narrowed briefly midspeech. Carl leaned over to whisper in my ear, "Don't change your expression, but when we get home tonight, I'm going to fuck you doggy-style on the floor."

Well, then.

At least you know he's still interested.

"I can't think of anyone else I'd rather be here with," he added.

My heart melted. Maybe I was good enough for him after all.

"So without further ado," Bitsy announced, "the winner of this year's Sponsorship in Finance award goes to Svensson Investment for their commitment to recruiting and promoting women at their company!"

Mags and Greg both walked up to accept the trophy.

"Thank you so much for this honor," Greg said smoothly. "We at Svensson Investment are fully committed to bringing

more women into finance, and we'd like to think that we have provided new tools that other companies can use to attract qualified female candidates."

"You developed that," Carl whispered to me and briefly squeezed my hand. I felt flush with pride.

"I have to say," Mags said into the microphone—or tried to say. "Bring that microphone down." She mock-scolded Greg.

"We may have to get her a box," Greg said with a small smile. "I think probably the only drawback of hiring women is they're just so darn short."

A few feet away from me, Belle seethed. The anger was so cold it burned.

Greg adjusted the microphone for Mags.

"As I was saying," she said, "credit where credit is due. While these boys certainly did their part and looked good for the camera, let's not forget it was a woman who came up with the idea. Libby, give a wave!"

Carl nudged me, and I waved as people applauded.

"Oh my god, I'm sweating," I said.

"Brooklyn Fintech is so excited to be teaming up with Svensson Investment," Mags continued. "And of course, working with this wonderful charity to promote women in finance."

"She's smooth," I whispered as we applauded while a photographer took pictures of Greg and Mags.

"So you're the young woman who finally pushed Svensson Investment into the twenty-first century." A middle-aged woman smiled at me.

“Good evening, Nancy,” Carl said to her.

“I’m not sure I really did all that much,” I told her. “Carl and his brothers are very photogenic. Then it was just a matter of sex sells, and so do pictures of puppies and kids!”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” she said. “Lots of companies have left money on the table in a mistaken belief that women don’t have a sex drive.”

“Mom,” Mark Holbrook said, coming up to her, “you can’t talk about that at a nice event.”

“Nonsense,” his mother said. “There’s a lot of money marketing hot men to women. And good for you for capitalizing on it, Ms. Gilbert.”

She gestured with her wineglass. “Are you single? Because my son’s business partner needs a good match, and I’d love to bring you on at the Holbrook Foundation. Wouldn’t she be nice for Finn?”

Carl glowered next to me.

“I think she’s already taken,” Mark said with a smile.

“Ah, I see,” Nancy said, her eyes twinkling. “Too bad!”

“I don’t know if he’d like all my tattoos,” I said, still feeling a little self-conscious.

“Nonsense! I have a tattoo as well,” she said, lifting up the hem of her skirt to show me the heart on her ankle, “but it’s nowhere near as cool as yours. Maybe I’ll have to get a tattoo sleeve.”

Mark rolled his eyes.

A man who looked like him but slightly older ambled over and handed Nancy a fresh glass of wine.

“I think your mom would look hot with tattoo sleeves,” he said.

Another man butted in. “Finn Richmond,” he said, shaking my hand.

He had gorgeous brown hair and green eyes that thirteen-year-old me would have killed for.

“She’s not doing your marketing work for you,” Carl said. “All of my brothers have first dibs.”

Finn pressed a hand to his chest. “It’s not for me; it’s for the charity I am involved with, raising money for sex trafficking victims.”

“Of course, I’ll help,” I said automatically.

“Fantastic!” Finn threw me a panty-melting smile.

Maybe if it doesn’t work out with Carl, you can shack up with this guy.

Beside me, Carl was tense. He moved closer to me and rested a hand on my lower back.

Possessive much? I was thrilled, though. He did want to let everyone know we were together!

Guess my dress wasn’t as bad as I thought. Mata Hari was never better styled, and my makeup never looked better. Chic artistic was probably more appealing than the grunge aesthetic I had previously sported. I needed to show Carl that I was a stylish, slightly offbeat girl but not someone so out there that they were making sourdough bread with their own yeast infection.

“I tried to find your consulting website online,” Finn said, “but couldn’t. Do you have a card?”

“Er, no website and no card, just my Instagram account. But I mainly post content about art and corgis.”

Finn pulled a card out of his breast pocket with a flourish. “Call me anytime.” He winked at me.

Carl grabbed the card. “She won’t,” he growled.

I snatched it back from him. “It’s for a good cause,” I scolded.

He snorted, and Finn laughed. Carl curled his arm around my hip and turned me away.

“Unfortunately, we must be going. It was nice to see you. I have to go collect my younger sisters.”

“Were they alone this whole time?” I asked him in concern when we were in the car.

“Of course not,” he said smugly. “Two of my half brothers from Harrogate came into town to stay with them. I’d say right now, they are thoroughly trashing Greg’s condo.” He lowered his voice and whispered in my ear, “And that means when we get home, I’m going to have you all to myself.”

CARL

The condo was dark when we walked in.

“No,” I said with my voice a throaty growl.
“Don’t you dare get undressed. I’m going to fuck you just like this, in that frilly gown, right here on the floor.”

Libby seemed taken aback for a moment, then a smile crossed her face. One thing that I really enjoyed about this little minx was how sexually adventurous she was. I shouldn’t have been surprised. My first clue should have been the piercings.

Speaking of those, I yanked her close so that her body was flush up against me—you couldn’t see it in the halter top of the dress, but pressed up to my skin, I could feel the hard points of the nipple piercings.

“Down here? On the floor?” she said archly as if she weren’t begging for it with that sultry look of hers.

I grinned wolfishly at her and bent to whisper in her ear. “I’m taking you from behind.”

“Fuck yeah,” she whispered.

That was all I needed. I would have said that I pushed her down, but honestly, she was already falling to her knees. I did,

too, the fabric of my tux bunching tight as I joined her on the floor.

I had the foresight to fish a condom out of my pocket. Libby already had her back to me, grinning over her shoulder in a devilish way that set my blood on fire.

Unzipping myself was a relief, and I had never rolled on a condom so fast in my life. I pushed her down on all fours and flipped the skirt of her dress up over her back. She wore only a thong, which I easily pushed aside. My fingers encountered wetness.

“You ready for me?” I purred.

In answer, she spread her legs for me. Her chest was heaving, and her muscles under her soft skin were tense with anticipation.

I didn't want to tease her. I just wanted to take her.

So I did, ramming myself in with one hard thrust.

“Ohhh...” Libby groaned as I bottomed out in her, hips lowering to give me access and fingers curling against the carpet.

I reached up and tangled my free hand in her blue hair. Then I set my back to it and gave it—and her—everything I was worth.

I didn't hold back, my thrusts inside her hard and targeted to make her feel every inch of me.

Judging by her lewd moans, she loved it. Her cries pitched up and up, coming to a peak with her orgasm. I felt her tunnel shiver around me as she came.

I closed my eyes and let go.

“You were so perfect tonight.”

“Yeah,” she said, “a piercing on your pussy really turns things up a notch.”

“No—I mean, yes,” I said, my dick twitching. I wanted her again. “But you were perfect at the charity ball. You’re everything to me, Libby,” I whispered, knowing I was stepping over a line that I would never be able to uncross.



WAKING up wrapped around Libby’s body was perfect. I nuzzled her neck and kissed her while my free hand wrapped around to cup one of her tits. I rubbed my thumb over the nipple, teasing the piercing there. She moaned against me, her body arching instinctively to increase the pressure. I gave her what she was asking for and tugged at the ring.

Her eyes slid open, and she gave me a content little smile. Then, wordlessly, she took my wrist and pulled my hand down to the vee of her legs.

With a grin, I set to work playing with her pussy ring—tugging lightly on it with my fingers while my thumb stimulated her clit.

Libby let out a moan. “Stop teasing, Carl. Give it to me.”

I was halfway there. My dick was on board, and with my other hand, I fished out a new condom from the pocket of my discarded pants. “Whatever you want,” I said.

“That’s what I like to hear.” She opened her arms, welcoming me down on top of her and in.

I loved doggy style, but when I took her like this, face-to-face, the angle was such that her pussy ring rubbed against my cock as I took her.

“Fuck,” I groaned. “This is my favorite ring.” It made her tighter, gave me that extra bit of sensation... made me feel crazy for her.

I bent to kiss her, my tongue sweeping her mouth as I increased my pace. Like this, with the sensation of the ring, I wasn't going to win any stamina records. But Libby didn't seem to mind. She tensed and cried out, tightening around me in the throes of her orgasm.

I gripped her close and thrust to completion.

“You're perfect,” I murmured to her. I fully intended to spend the rest of the day with her. We would order in brunch, and then I'd fuck her all afternoon.

But instead of going for another round, Libby swung her legs off the bed. “Do you mind if I raid the clothes you bought yesterday?” Libby asked. It took me a second to register because I was watching her full ass as she headed to the bathroom.

“I guess. Why?”

“I have to go to the gallery,” she said cheerily. “Gotta work!”

“Work?” I pondered that as the shower ran.

She wanted to leave? It was probably because I hadn't been very affectionate at the ball. But I couldn't. Even as it was, I had probably been too intimate, though I'd just slid a hand down her back. If word got back to the lawyer, I was done for.

The shower turned off, and Libby came back out wrapped in a towel. I admired her figure as she slid on her underwear and her bra.

“You have the best fucking tits,” I told her.

She laughed as I wrapped my arms around her.

“I adore you,” I whispered.

She kissed me. “Good, because I’m stealing one of your shirts.”

She took the shirt, a pair of heels, and an overskirt from the rack of clothes that was still in the living room. I had left them there because I had thought it might be nice to go to an elegant dinner. But...

“How late are you working?” I asked as she slipped on the heels.

“Probably around nine,” she said.

“Nine at night?” What the hell?

“Art people work late, and rich people shop at galleries on Sundays,” she said, waving as she swept out the door.

I stood there, stunned. *Maybe she doesn't like me after all.*

I paced around the living room. What had I done wrong? When I'd first met Libby, I couldn't see her going to an actual job and working all day, and in heels and high fashion no less. Her clothing had been eclectic to say the least. Now she was wearing a downright conservative outfit. She was also up earlier than she usually was.

She really had changed. Her godfather would probably be proud, though he'd still hate her hair.

I felt a little sick.

It was because of me. I had been so insistent that she change. Maybe I had pushed too hard? Maybe I had tried to force her to be some idealized version of a woman instead of

just being herself. Maybe I was more like my father than I wanted to admit.

He liked to grind down a young woman's self-esteem, make her doubt herself and second-guess herself so that she would be totally dependent on him. He had even tried that shit with my sisters, and it had been a process to build their confidence back up.

I hated myself for doing it. Because it was clear what I had done.

I had a good reason, though—money.

I just had to hold on a little longer, and then she could go back to her old self. It would be fine.

LIBBY

“Look at us, being the type of woman Carl wants as his wife.”

After seeing how annoyed Belle was watching Greg and Mags at the awards ceremony, I vowed that was never going to be me. I was going to fight hard for what I wanted. “We are not giving up,” I told myself. Even if wearing heels sucked. The toe of my shoe caught on a tree branch on the sidewalk, and I cursed.

A little old lady walking a small white Maltese exclaimed, “My word!”

“Good morning, ma’am,” I said with a wave.

She frowned.

“Get it together,” I told myself. “She could be a potential customer.”

I unlocked the gallery with the keypad code that Gloria had given me and inhaled the smell of art and paint. Maybe one day, I would create the type of art that would have a gallery opening.

Doug settled down on a bed that Gloria had left for him. In between well-dressed people coming in to view the paintings, I sketched out ideas for more Doug-and-Carl comics.

I smiled thinking about Carl. *He said he adored me.*

The door chimed as two women came in. I stood up and greeted them. “Are you looking for anything specific?”

“We just saw the buzz on Instagram,” one woman said, “and wanted to take a look at the paintings.” She pushed her sunglasses up to her head.

“Look away!” I said. “Would you like some champagne?” I uncorked a bottle and poured out glasses then walked the women through the paintings. Even though they had said they were just looking, in the end, both women each bought a piece of art.

I twirled around in the middle of the store after they paid and left. My life was perfect! Carl liked me, and I had a job that I was good at.

“And of course, I have you, Doug,” I said, picking up the corgi and kissing his nose.

The door chimed, and a man in a suit walked in.

“Are you here to look at the paintings?”

He scowled. “No.”

He opened his briefcase and pulled out a set of papers. “Ms. Libby Gilbert? Trenton Desoto is suing you for custody of your shared dog, Doug.”

CARL

I could barely understand Libby, she was sobbing so hard when she called me on the phone.

“Just hang on, Libby,” I said, grabbing my keys. “I’m going to come get you.”

She was slumped on the floor, Doug in her lap, when I ran into the gallery after speeding through the city to reach her.

“Libby?” I said, kneeling down in front of her and cupping her face.

“You,” she spat at me, “you lied to me.”

Holy fucking shit, she found out. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Now, Libby,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady while my mind raced trying to think of a way to spin this in my favor.

But what could I say? *Sorry I was infantilizing you; I had all the best intentions because I was going to take control of your money and not tell you about it, which is totally what you do to someone you care about?*

“Let’s just take a deep breath,” I said slowly.

“Don’t you dare tell me to calm down,” she screeched. “You lied to me. You said you had it all under control, and

now Trenton is going to take Doug?”

“What?” I frowned. “Trenton revoked the lawsuit. I have the paperwork from the court to prove it.” I reached for my phone to pull it up.

Libby threw a slightly crumpled set of papers at me. “He’s suing for custody.”

I frowned as I scanned through the forms. “How can he sue for custody? You bought the dog. You guys never even lived together, right?”

She shook her head.

I kissed her forehead. “Trust me, Libby,” I said, “Trenton is not going to get custody of your dog. I’m going to get to the bottom of this and protect you and Doug.”

But she didn’t seem all that convinced.

I stayed with her the rest of the day at the gallery, making calls and trying to figure out the best angle of attack.

What I couldn’t figure out was, why now? Why did her ex suddenly decide to try to attack her now?

“I’ll have food ordered in,” I told Libby when it was dark outside. I wrapped my arm around her.

“I’m just going to go home,” she said, shoulders sagging. “I haven’t been to my apartment in a few days, and I should probably check and make sure that Gardenia hasn’t turned my bedroom into a microgreens harvesting site.”

I smiled softly.

She still seemed out of it when I dropped her off in front of her apartment.

“I’ll come stay with you,” I offered again.

Libby shook her head. “I just want to be alone with Doug.”

I took her in my arms and kissed her softly. “Please call me if you need anything.”



I WOULD HAVE HAD a meeting scheduled with Josh and Eric, my brothers who were lawyers, first thing; however, Libby had a class Monday morning, and that meant I had class.

Libby was quiet in the car on the way to the campus.

“I’m meeting with the lawyers later today,” I promised her. “You can come if you want, or you can just let me handle it.”

“You mean like how you handled it before?” she said sharply.

I let out a frustrated growl. “Libby, I swear to you, I did not know this would happen. Someone may be manipulating him. There’s no way a rational person would try and claim custody of his ex-girlfriend’s dog.”

When we walked into the studio space, many of the students shot ugly glares at Libby.

“What in the world?” she muttered to herself.

“I can’t believe you would show your face in here,” Bitsy said, crossing her arms, “after what you did.”

“After what I did?” Libby was shocked.

I was tense. What the hell was going on?

This is why you should stick to finance types—people who use logic and reason and not these hysterical artists.

A girl with the large purple glasses put her hands on her hips. “You stole that dog from his loving dog father.”

“Excuse me?” Libby shrieked. “This is my dog that I bought with my own money. Trenton never lifted a finger caring for that dog.”

“That’s not true,” another girl yelled at her. “He’s been on TikTok, posting videos crying about how much he misses Doug. There’s a GoFundMe to help in the custody case,” she told several of the other people in the class.

“I think you should leave,” Bitsy said to Libby, triumphant. “We also believe men are caring and nurturing beings in this classroom, and your values clearly do not align.”



“SHE’S DOING IT AGAIN,” Libby raged as we walked back to the car. “She’s manipulating everyone around me and turning them against me.”

As we walked through the campus, we passed a number of college students who were giving Libby dirty looks. She wrapped her arms around herself and increased her pace. Doug was jogging beside her to keep up.

I wrapped my arm around her shoulders protectively. “We’re going to go to the lawyers now,” I promised.

“Okay,” she said faintly.

“Have you eaten today?” I asked in concern when we were back in the car.

She shrugged dejectedly and said, “I wasn’t hungry.”

I reversed out of the parking lot. Libby leaned her head against the window, her blue hair hiding her face from me.

Around the corner from my brothers’ law office was a café that had soup and sandwiches. I parked on the street, and Libby and I went in.

“They have potato-cheddar-and-bacon soup,” I told Libby. “I know how much you like that. Just don’t give it to Doug, because cheese makes him gassy.”

She smiled like I knew she would.

“I guess I’ll have a Danish too,” she said, “since we’re here. Chocolate-raspberry cream cheese.”

“You want a coffee?” I asked her as the cashier rang up the order.

“Yes,” she said happily. “Caramel iced coffee, large with extra drizzles.”

We waited for our order off to the side. The TV on the wall was playing entertainment news, and the program cut from a report about the Kardashians to a female reporter outside of a familiar-looking gym.

“As millennials put off having kids, there is a growing movement to replace that nurturing behavior with pets. But what happens when a relationship goes south and a beloved pet is caught in the crossfire? We are here with one man embroiled in an ugly custody battle with an ex over a corgi named Doug.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Libby hissed.

There, on the TV on the wall of the café, was Trenton talking to a reporter.

“I just am so heartbroken, you know?” Trenton wiped away a fake tear. “I just feel so bad for little Doug. I know he misses me. Dogs don’t understand when you’re away from them; they think you abandoned them, you know?”

The entertainment news reporter nodded sympathetically. “We are so sorry for your loss, and I know all the viewers at

home are praying for Doug's safe return."

"Thank you," he said, giving a little bow.

"That asshole." Libby's fists were clenched, and she was trembling.

Yeah, that fucking asshole. I was going to end him. One way or another.

LIBBY

I could not believe this was happening. This was my worst nightmare. Actually, it was worse than my worst nightmare, which was falling naked through the sky and then crash-landing in my old middle school right in front of all the mean girls and then all my teeth falling out.

I fretted over Doug while I picked at the food. What the hell was Trenton's deal? Why was he trying to screw me over like this and steal Doug? He didn't even like the corgi, because Doug had chewed a hole in the plastic container of his expensive protein powder.

Sure, Trenton and I hadn't gotten along there at the end, what with the accusations of slander and the lawsuits, but up until then, it wasn't as if he had hated me. He had more so been indifferent to me.

There was no passion, not like with Carl.

A large blond man was pacing around by the window, talking in hushed tones on the phone. Why was Trenton doing this? Was it Ms. Brazilian Butt Lift? Was she behind it? Whoever it was, someone sure hated me.

I pulled out my phone to check on what that homewrecker was up to. Maybe she was trying to chase social media clout.

As soon as I unlocked it, my phone started buzzing with notifications of messages and comments on my social media accounts.

Thinking it would be fans of the Doug-and-Carl comic I had posted last night, I opened the messages. Then my stomach sank.

You fucking bitch how dare you steal that poor dog.

You deserve to rot in hell!!!

You don't deserve that corgi.

#GiveDougBack

There were scores of nasty messages calling me a sociopath and a puppy stealer and saying women like me were what was wrong in the world.

“Oh my god,” I whispered as the deluge of hate filled my phone. Not knowing what else to do, I pressed the power button and turned off the device.

“What’s wrong?” Carl asked me.

“Nothing,” I said quietly, shaking my head.

The door to the conference room opened, and two tall blond-haired, gray-eyed men opened it.

“Sorry, we just got off a call. I’m Josh Svensson; this is Eric Svensson,” one of the men said, introducing himself and his brother.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said faintly, the negative comments still banging around in my head. “Thanks for seeing us.”

“Trenton can’t be serious that he thinks he has any right to that dog,” Carl said as we assembled in the conference room.

“He’s property.”

“Yes and no,” Eric said. “There’s that new ‘personhood for animals’ movement. If the judge thinks he can win brownie points from voters on this issue, then he may rule in Trenton’s favor.”

“But,” Josh added when he saw I was about to cry, “there are a few things in your favor. You weren’t married, you didn’t share a primary residence, and it’s taken him weeks to file this claim.”

“It is ironic that they’re taking a page out of your playbook, Carl,” Eric joked. “Usually it’s your move to stir up a big stink about an issue online.”

“Does this guy want money?” Josh asked. “Because it might just be easier to have him sign a statement that he does not have any claim to the dog in exchange for a few grand.”

“This social media campaign can’t be cheap,” his brother continued. “He needs a publicist on board, and they don’t work on commission.”

“Can you try and make contact with his lawyers and see if there’s any room for a negotiation?” Carl asked.

“I don’t want to negotiate with Trenton,” I protested. “He’s wrong. And I don’t have money to pay him off.”

“I’ll pay him off,” Carl said, resting a hand on my shoulder. “I told you I would take care of this problem, and I will.”



THERE WAS a crowd of reporters and paparazzi outside of the gallery when Carl dropped me off. When they saw the car, they immediately rushed it.

Doug barked at them through the car window.

“You’re not going out there,” Carl said coldly, watching the paparazzi. “They’re here to harass you.”

“I’m going to fight back,” I said, throwing open the car door. “I’m done with letting other people control my life. Screw them, screw Trenton, and screw all those haters online.”

“Libby!” the paparazzi yelled at me. “Do you hate men?”

“Why did you steal Doug?”

“Do you want to make a statement?”

I pushed through them, Doug in my arms, to the gallery door. Then I turned to address the paps.

“I do want to make a statement. You’re impacting business at the gallery,” I snapped, “and you all need to leave before I call the cops.”

“No, they aren’t,” Bitsy said, coming out of the door. “I called them.” Her chin was set defiantly.

Holy hell.

Of course. Of course Bitsy had been pulling the strings.

“I am firmly on team dog dad,” she said to the paparazzi. “Libby has a history of bad behavior when it comes to manipulating men. Stealing Doug from Trenton is the last straw, as far as I’m concerned.”

“She’s lying,” I insisted while the cameras clicked.

“Libby has always been emotionally disturbed,” Bitsy said. In her classically cut designer dress and ballet flats, she looked a bit more presentable than me with my snarl, colored hair, tattoos, ripped jeans, and boots.

“You always hated me,” I shrieked at her. “You hated that your boyfriend was interested in me, you hated that I was better in art than you, and you hated that Carl was interested in me and not you.”

“Because you have nipple piercings and horrible tattoos, so of course he’s interested in you,” Bitsy screeched. “He’s a dumb man, and you snared him in a trap and seduced him.”

“I never,” I roared. “He was making his own choices.”

There was shuffling in the crowd as Carl pushed through and grabbed my arm.

“Libby, let’s go.”

“But she—”

“Now.”

CARL

Libby steamed next to me in the car, arms crossed. I sped through town. What was I going to do? Libby had just stood there and told the entire world that she and I were a thing.

You can fix it, I tried to tell myself. Mr. Weatly may not find out—you don't know.

But the noose was tightening.

First, I needed to do something about Libby.

“Take Eighth to my apartment,” she ordered. “The pizza place I like is on the way. They are right next door to a bar, and you can buy a bottle of wine through a secret window in the soft-drink fridge.”

“I’m not taking you back to your apartment,” I said. “You’re going to live with me until this has all blown over.”

“I’m not living with you,” she cried.

“This is nonnegotiable,” I said sharply, pulling into the drop-off area of the building.

“Why are you punishing me?” she protested. “You need to do something about Bitsy.”

“Libby,” I said too harshly. She didn’t deserve it. This was, after all, completely my fault.

You never should have gotten involved with her. But now I couldn’t imagine my life without Libby.

“I need you safe,” I said, cupping her chin. “Those paparazzi could have become violent. If Bitsy is influencing and finding these people, there’s no telling what they could do.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“The upcoming custody case is going to be fought as much in the court of public opinion as the actual physical courtroom. Any messaging needs to be vetted and part of a large strategy. You can’t just go out there in your pajamas and start cussing people out.”

“Right,” Libby said, throwing open the door, “because you don’t want me out there embarrassing you. You’d rather I act like Bitsy.”

“That’s not what I said,” I called after Libby, unbuckling my seat belt.

But she had already grabbed Doug and disappeared into the building.



GREG DID NOT ACKNOWLEDGE me when I walked into the conference room where all my brothers, including Crawford, were assembled. He was sitting there, making neat notes on a contract in red pen. The rest of my brothers sat in silence.

I did not have the patience for it today. I took a seat.

Walker coughed.

“We met with Josh and Eric this morning,” I said, cutting through the silence. “They are going to try and offer a monetary deal to Trenton to have him sign away rights to Doug.”

Greg paused and looked up at me. “Who the fuck is Doug?”

“Doug is the corgi,” Liam said. “Haven’t you been paying attention, Greg?”

Greg slowly capped the pen and set it down on the table, carefully aligning it with the edge of the papers.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I was under the impression that Carl was going to be teaching a girl how to clean her apartment, show up on time, and dress like something other than a crazed homeless person. In exchange, we were going to bring billions of dollars under management at Svensson Investment. Nowhere,” Greg said, cutting me off before I could argue, “was a custody battle over a corgi part of the deal.”

“He is part of the deal,” I tried to explain, “because—”

“Because why?” Greg taunted.

“Because he’s Libby’s family,” I said.

“Again,” Greg said. “Not my problem. Let the dog go to the boyfriend. All that matters is that you get that money.”

“He’s not going to get it,” Walker informed him, “because now everyone knows that Carl’s been banging this chick. Which is not what you’re supposed to do to your ward, at least according to the Regency romance books our sisters have been reading.”

Greg let out an annoyed sigh.

“You should have known that anything that was even remotely related to our mother was going to be a complete shit show,” Beck reminded him. “It’s hardly Carl’s fault.”

“It’s partially Carl’s fault.”

I kicked Walker under the table.

Greg scowled then smoothed out his features. “Our mother had to get her manipulative nature from somewhere. Turns out it’s genetic. I bet we could keep jumping through hoops for another five years and never see a dime of that money from her great-uncle.”

“Sucks, though. There was some ace property in that portfolio,” Mike said.

“There will be other opportunities,” Liam said. “My girlfriend’s aunt is trying to offload some commercial land.”

“Carl, look into that first thing tomorrow,” Greg said. “As for the Libby Gilbert account, kill it.”

“I’m not going to kill it,” I said, half rising out of my seat.

“It’s irrational and a waste of time,” Greg retorted. “We’re not spending money so that you can spin around in circles. You just told us yourself that this contract is dead in the water.”

“I promised Libby I’d save her dog.”

“I can have him on the first flight out of the country,” Crawford assured me. “We’ll buy a new corgi and swap them out. A few months from now, Libby can ‘adopt’”—he used air quotes—“a new corgi, and all will be well.”



ON MY WAY BACK HOME, I thought about how I was going to break the news to Libby. It was crazy, but I didn't see any other option.

A part of me felt lighter, better. Sure, I was going to lose a bunch of money, but this meant I was free and clear to be with Libby. Maybe I'd have Carl send Doug to a Caribbean island, and Libby and I could go down and visit him.

Her in a little bikini, sex on the beach—I think we both needed a break.

I was feeling pretty good about the resolution until I pulled up to the building.

Several cop cars were outside of the condo tower, lights flashing.

“Shit.” I jumped out of the car, but I was too late.

An officer was walking out of the door with Doug in his arms to load him into the back of a car.

LIBBY

I had so completely lost it on the way to the downtown courthouse that I couldn't even register what Carl and his brothers were discussing in low voices in the car.

"... judge granted an emergency order because he said he was a flight risk."

"He thought *the corgi* was a flight risk?" Carl asked in disbelief. "Are you kidding me?"

"You're named in the statement," Eric told him. "They think you were going to smuggle Doug out of the country because you're apparently her boyfriend?"

"Dude, I thought that—"

"Shut up, Josh," Carl hissed.

He turned to me. "Libby, how are you?"

"Why do they think you're going to take Doug out of the country?" I asked, voice teary.

Carl sighed. "To be fair, I was about to have Doug smuggled out of the country."

"Oh my god," I said, wiping at my puffy eyes. "This is crazy. I feel like everyone has gone crazy. They took my dog."

“We’ll take it up to the Supreme Court,” Eric assured me. “This is clearly a judicial overstep. Dogs are property, and Doug was not a marital asset or part of a shared business.”

“Don’t those cases take years?” I blubbered.

“Er, yes, but,” Josh said, “I doubt Bitsy’s family is going to want to fund the court case until then.”

“Does Greg want to fund the court case until then?” Eric muttered.

“He’s not funding it; I’ll fund it,” Carl stated.

“At the very least,” Eric said, “you can have joint custody, so it’s not like you’ll never see him, Libby.”

I sobbed harder.



I TRIED to get it together as we waited in the lobby of the courtroom. Bitsy was standing on the opposite side of the historic, high-ceilinged space. She and Trenton were whispering together.

“I hope a meteorite takes her out,” I fumed.

I regretted the day I met her. Maybe my godfather was right. If I hadn’t gone to that art school, if I’d done what he had wanted and gone into accounting, maybe my life would have been better. I never would have had Bitsy trying to ruin me. I would have a job.

But you wouldn’t have met Brea. Or Carl.

He was the only bright spot in an otherwise dark time. He had his strong arm around me, hugging me, giving me comfort. Not to mention, Carl had been planning on flying

Doug out of the country. What other man would have gone above and beyond for a dog?

“It’s going to be okay,” Carl whispered to me.

The doors to the courtroom opened.

I felt like I was attending my execution.

There, on a table, was a large mesh kennel. Doug was inside. He barked and wagged his tail when he saw me.

“It’s okay, Doug,” I cried, running to him.

The bailiff stopped me.

“Sorry, sir,” Eric said. “She just got excited to see her dog.”

“She can’t touch the dog,” the heavysset man said gruffly.

“Understood,” Carl told him, leading me to one of the benches that were closest to Doug.

He whined and chewed on the mesh cage.

“All rise for the judge,” the bailiff announced as a short, bald man in billowing black robes took a seat at the judge’s bench.

He put on his glasses and looked out over the courtroom. “We are here for an emergency hearing requested by the corgi’s father.”

His father? This is nuts. I love dogs, and I’m a pet parent, but come on! Trenton couldn’t even take care of a rock.

“Representatives of each pet parent, please come forward to state your case.”

Trenton’s lawyer went first.

“Doug was a beloved member of the family that Libby and Trenton created. When Libby left, she not only slandered Trenton online but also stole Doug away from him. This dog is clearly heartbroken. We are requesting primary custody of Doug and hope that you’ll reunite these two.”

The judge motioned to Eric.

Carl squeezed my hand as his brother stood up to address the judge.

“Your Honor, Trenton was not a pet parent. He wasn’t even a co-owner of this corgi. He doesn’t know when Libby bought the corgi, he doesn’t know how much the corgi cost; in fact, he and Ms. Gilbert weren’t even in a relationship when the dog was purchased. He doesn’t know the corgi’s vet, and he never shared primary residence with Ms. Gilbert. In fact, he has threatened in the past to sue Ms. Gilbert for this dog so that he could sell him. There is no evidence that both parties were co-owners of this dog. Therefore, we request that you deny Mr. Desoto’s request of joint custody and deliver this dog back to his rightful owner.”

“Your Honor,” Trenton’s lawyer interjected. “We understand that there are particulars of this case that should be reviewed. However, we would like to modify the requests for a temporary custody agreement while both sides have the opportunity to prepare for a full custody hearing.”

“Sounds reasonable,” the judge said. “I’ll grant a three-month, fifty-fifty custody agreement on a week-on, week-off schedule. Trenton is to have the first week. Handoffs of the dog are to take place at a neutral location. The dog is not allowed to be taken out of the country. I’ll see you back here in ninety days to present your full case.”

He banged his gavel.

Trenton picked up Doug's cage while Bitsy looked triumphant.

People were talking, but all I heard was a rushing noise in my ears. Had the fire sprinkler system burst?

I had lost Doug. He had always been there for me, and now he was gone.

Doug whined from his cage, trying to get to me.

"It's okay, Doug," I said through choked sobs. "I'll see you in a week."

Doug let out a bunch of angry yipping barks.

"Shut up!" Trenton yelled at Doug, banging the cage.

"Is anyone seeing this?" I asked loudly, a hysterical edge to my voice. "He doesn't care about Doug. How are you going to let him have my dog? He doesn't even like my dog. He just yelled at him. Trenton doesn't care about him at all. Please, Your Honor," I begged, "you can't do this."

"Libby," Carl hauled me back. "My brothers will make a good case. You'll see Doug in a week."

I sobbed into his chest. I wasn't going to make it a week. I had just lost everything.

LIBBY

I spent the night after I lost Doug sitting on Carl's couch with his sisters while they fed me chicken nuggets and pizza and we watched a *Babysitter's Club* marathon. I sipped wine from a novelty mug.

I finally passed out while Kristy was losing her shit on the other tween babysitters.

When I woke up, blinking in the sun, I was alone in the living room. Well, me and the large patch of wine that had spilled on the light-gray couch.

“Shoot!” I hauled myself off the couch and hastily tried to flip it before Carl saw. “Doug, why did you let me drink so much?”

Then I remembered—Doug was not here. He was with Trenton. I was heartbroken all over again. I wrapped the blanket around me and went to look for Carl. He wasn't in his study or his bedroom, and his sisters weren't there either.

I braced myself and turned on my phone to text him. As soon as it connected to the internet, a barrage of news notifications about the custody case popped up.

“My life sucks.” I deleted them all and opened up the texting app. There was a message from Carl saying he had

gone into work. Of course he had—what else was he supposed to do?

My phone rang. I was about to cancel the call, when I saw it was from Gloria.

“I was going to text you,” she sang out, “but I can’t get this dang phone to work. Are you coming in today?”

What was a good way to say, *No, because your granddaughter screwed me over and stole my dog.*

“I don’t think I’m going to be coming in anymore,” I said sadly.

“You were such a good gallery worker,” she cried.

“I just have some personal stuff going on right now.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I just returned from a meditation retreat. It was no phones, no internet, not that I use it anyways,” she said. “But one of the attendees was a woman who works in publishing. I was telling her about the comics you wrote. She wants to talk with you about a book deal. She was going to stop by the gallery sometime today. I was hoping you could be there to meet with her.”

“A book deal?” I started hyperventilating and had to sit down on the couch. It was everything I had wanted. But I didn’t have Doug there to celebrate.

“I don’t know if I can accept that,” I said sadly. “I don’t even have Doug anymore.”

“Oh dear. What happened?” Gloria asked.

I paused before I launched into what Bitsy had done. Was Gloria really going to believe that about her granddaughter? She would probably side with her, and I’d lose what little networking I’d actually done.

“Just... things happened,” I said with a sad snuffle. “I’m still trying to work it out. My lawyers said I’m not supposed to talk about it.”

“Ah, lawyers,” she said. “Why don’t you come to the gallery? I can show you the new artists I’m looking at, and we’ll drink wine. I picked up some excellent bottles from the Hudson River Valley on my way in.”



THANKFULLY, Bitsy wasn’t in the gallery when I arrived. I had given up on trying to dress respectably. I was wearing my boots, a hand-painted sack dress, and a bucket hat.

“Love the dress.” Gloria air-kissed me. She handed me the bottle opener. “Would you do the honors? My wrists aren’t what they used to be.”

As I was pouring the wine out into the two hand-blown wineglasses, a familiar blond walked into the gallery, tottering on impossibly high platform heels.

“Oh, hello, Athlyn,” Gloria chirped. “That painting you were looking at is still here, though we did have a bit more interest.”

“Wonderful,” Athlyn said, then pinned me with her gaze. “Though I actually came to talk to Libby. Unfortunately, I have some disturbing news to give her.”

CARL

I had left Libby asleep on the couch that morning when I left. She seemed like she needed the rest, and I didn't want to disturb her by moving her.

I felt like shit as I sat in my office. My brothers were supposed to be working on the argument for the corgi custody case, and there wasn't much for me to do except wait.

Greg poked his head in.

"I'm busy, Greg," I snapped.

"Really?" he sneered. "What have you accomplished today?"

I glared up at him.

Greg threw a folder on my desk. "This is the property Liam mentioned yesterday. Go out and evaluate it. See if it's worth acquiring. And tell Mike that we haven't decided yet if he's going to put his hotel on it or not. It may be better to flip as condos."

I sighed and grabbed the folder. I didn't want to go out. I didn't want to be at the office. I didn't want to work.

I just wanted to be with Libby. But she wasn't even answering her phone. I tried to call her, but it went straight to

voicemail.

I'll grab lunch and swing by the condo to see her, I decided. After I visit the property.

The property was on the Upper East Side. I recognized the street as I drove down it, looking for the address. This was where that gallery was that Libby worked at.

“When this is all over, I’ll buy Libby her own gallery,” I told myself. “Maybe we can put it at the base of this building, depending on what we turn it into.”

As I was reading the building numbers, I saw in my rearview mirror a familiar blond woman.

Is that Mom?

“You’re stressed; you’re seeing things,” I told myself as I flipped on my signal to turn the corner.

But what if I wasn’t? But why would Mom be here on this street? It was crazy.

Even so...

I did a quick U-turn then headed back down the street and immediately slammed on the brakes. There in the gallery was my mom.

And Libby.

Fuck no. No no no.

“What the hell is she doing?” I yelled.

I double-parked the car and turned on the hazards. A taxi driver yelled at me out of his window as I ran into the gallery.

“I’ll just be a second,” I told him.

He continued to honk his horn.

The bell over the door chimed, then there I was, face-to-face with my mother and a teary-eyed Libby.

It had been years since I'd seen my mother in person. While a normal mother might be overjoyed to finally see her son, my mother turned up her nose.

"Watch him," she said to Libby. "He's getting ready to lie to you. He's just like his father. That's why Carl was my least favorite."

"Is it true?" Libby asked, her voice wobbling.

"I—" I shrugged my shoulders helplessly.

"Were you really using me this whole time to steal money from me?" Her eyes were big.

"Of course not," I said. It wasn't technically a lie, because after all, Greg had said to kill the account. Libby didn't necessarily need to know when exactly that had happened. "I'm not planning on getting any money."

"So there is money," she said sharply.

I winced.

"Athlyn said her great-uncle was very wealthy, Carl, so let me ask you again—what exactly were you getting in exchange for my being your ward?" Libby crossed her arms.

"I'm not getting anything," I promised, trying to sound sincere.

"He's certainly not getting anything now," Athlyn said pointedly and jerked her chin to the door as Mr. Weatly was struggling to open it.

I stood there. No way was I letting him in.

Libby made a noise of disapproval, marched around me, and opened the door.

“My word,” Mr. Weatly said, wiping his brow. “I haven’t ventured this far north in years. It’s changed quite a bit.” He pulled a pair of spectacles out of his pocket, put them on, then peered at me.

“Mr. Svensson.” He frowned. “You were next on my list of visits after Libby.”

My mouth was a thin line as I braced for what I knew was coming.

“For shame, Mr. Svensson,” the lawyer said, shaking his cane at me. “For shame, corrupting your ward. Now who will marry her after they know that she was having relations with her guardian? Herbert is spinning in his grave right now.”

“I agree,” Athlyn said.

“No one is marrying me,” Libby said forcefully. “This is the twenty-first century. I am a grown woman. I have a job; I don’t need a guardian. This is absurd, and you’re disgusting, Carl,” she told me, eyes flashing, “because you manipulated me and used me for what? More money? Like you don’t have enough of it.”

“Carl is a new generation of Svenssons manipulating women,” Athlyn interjected. “He’s just like his father. They’re both diseases on this earth. You deserve that money, Libby. You’ve worked hard for it. You have poor Doug to think about too.”

“Oh my god, Doug!” she shrieked, lacing her fingers in her hair. “I didn’t have to make that stupid deal with you at all if I had just had my rightful inheritance. I could have just paid the freaking settlement, and Doug would still be here.”

“I’m here,” Athlyn said, “and I just want you to remember who told you about the money. I take PayPal, Venmo, or cash. Not checks, I’m afraid. Several banks have blacklisted me.”

“What the hell?”

“If I may clear something up,” the lawyer harrumphed. “Libby, you were never going to see that money. Your godfather specified that you were not to be trusted with the money.”

“Why?” Libby shrieked.

“Because,” the lawyer said stubbornly. “Your godfather thought you couldn’t handle it. He wanted a man involved who could. And that man is not you, Mr. Svensson. As of this moment, I am revoking your guardianship privileges.”

“Libby,” I begged, taking her hand. “I may have started off as your guardian, but believe me, once I fell in love with you, I realized I couldn’t go through with it. You had to get married, and I love you too much to let another man marry you. Don’t worry about the money. I’ll take care of you for the rest of your life. I’ll give you whatever you want.”

I thought I saw her soften.

“Please, Libby,” I said gently. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry too,” she said bitterly. “Sorry I ever met you.” She shook me off. “I don’t want your handouts. I don’t want you to treat me like I’m some little princess doll that can’t think for herself and needs to be protected and kept in the dark.”

“You’re not—”

“You know what I want, Carl?” she said, “I want my dog, and I want my money. I’m done letting men like you walk all

over me. Now get the fuck out of my way.”

LIBBY

“It was an empowering moment, you know?” I said then started sobbing again.

Brea petted my hair in concern. “Sounds like you really twisted his balls.”

“He said he loved me, and he lied,” I cried.

My friend hugged me against her chest.

“I’m so stupid. I actually loved Carl. I actually thought he was my happily ever after. But all he’s done is ruin my life.”

“You’re going to sue him for emotional distress,” my friend said, “but first, we’re going to drink away our sorrows.” Brea picked up the bottle of wine and shook it. It was empty.

“Looks like we need some more forget-me juice,” she said.

“Maybe I should switch to water,” I mumbled.

“Wine doesn’t count if you eat it with pizza and cake,” Brea said, throwing me my shoes.

I dragged myself up and followed her out the front door of my apartment.

I was still in shock from the revelation. I hadn’t wanted to believe it when Athlyn had said she was Carl’s mother then definitely didn’t want to believe it when she said Carl was

trying to steal a literal fuckton of money from me. Which, to be fair, sounded like it wasn't actually ever going to be mine.

Love being screwed over one last time by my godfather.

If it wasn't for the fact that my custody agreement with Trenton meant I had to continue living in New York City, I would have been on the first train out of there.

"Oh my god," I said as we stepped into the dilapidated art-deco lobby of the building. "Carl was paying for the lawyer for Doug's custody case." I started hyperventilating. "He's not going to pay anymore. Oh my god, what am I going to do?"

"Aren't you getting that book deal?"

"I don't know," I groaned. "I left before the publisher showed up."

"We have a plan." Brea shook my shoulders. "We're going to eat comfort food, then we're going to watch Julia Roberts movies, and tomorrow, you're going to ask Gloria for the contact of the publicist. You're going to get a portfolio together, and you're going to land that book deal, okay?"

"Okay," I said, nodding. "I'm going to get that book deal, right?"

"Right. But first, we are going to do some self-care."

But before I could head to my favorite pizza place and max out my credit card on cheese sticks, Trenton approached the lobby door.

"You know what I hate the most about this building?" I grumbled at Brea as Trenton tugged open the door. "The fact that you can't lock out the riffraff."

"*Mi amore*," Trenton declared, holding up a large bouquet of roses. He offered them to me. I took them and dumped them

on the ground.

My ex dropped to one knee and held out a ring box.
“Marry me!”

“What the—are you freaking kidding me?” I shrieked.
“I’m not going to marry you. Where the hell is my Taser?
God, I hate this stupid purse. I can never find anything in it.”

Trenton crab-walked backward.

“But we love each other,” he insisted. “We share a dog.”

“You stole my dog, and I’m going to cut your balls off.”

“You need me,” Trenton cried, picking up the roses.

“I need you dead.”

“You need me for that money.”

I froze.

“How did you hear about that?” Brea demanded.

“I bet he and Bitsy had a little pillow talk,” I said snidely.

“I would never betray you like that, my love.” Trenton pressed a hand to his chest. “Yes, Bitsy and I discussed your tragic situation, but I have always loved only you.”

“You are a terrible actor,” I told Trenton.

“The worst!” Brea shot at him. “And you’re so obviously here for the money, it’s not even funny. It’s just flat-out pathetic.”

“But you can have it all, Libby,” he argued. “You can have Doug and the money. You need a respectable husband to get the money. And I’m your man.”

He flexed his biceps. He was puny in contrast to Carl.

Carl is dead to me.

“So, only one problem with your plan,” I said slowly. “You’re not a respectable man. You’re from Long Island, and you spend all your time in a gym pretending to be an influencer.”

“I am respectable.” Trenton puffed up his chest. “Bitsy said she was going to vouch for me.”

“Bitsy is lying to you,” I told him simply.

“She is not. She cares about me and about us,” he insisted, taking my hand.

I swung my bag at him. “Get off.”

“You can’t seriously believe this,” Brea said. “Bitsy is for sure just waiting for you to tie the knot, then she’ll tell the lawyer that Trenton is a cheap little snake.”

“Which you are,” I told him. “And you have fake muscles.”

“Tramp!” he shouted at me. “I hope you’re alone and unhappy.”

I finally found my Taser and brandished it at him. “Get out of my building, or I’m going to fry your balls off.”

After he left, I wondered, *Maybe I should have just taken him up on his offer.* I could’ve at least had Doug back.

CARL

““**T**here you are,” Crawford said, coming into my living room, several of my brothers trailing him. “Greg thought you might have been crushed under the weight of your own stupidity.”

“He looks like his own stupid stole a truck and ran over him,” Greg remarked.

“Libby found out,” I said.

“Oh, she found out about the fact that you were about to steal a bunch of money from her?” Crawford said dryly. “Imagine that.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Just keep telling yourself that,” he said in disgust. “You get more and more like our father every day.”

“I’m nothing like him,” I snarled at Crawford, jumping up, fists balled.

“The lying,” my elder half brother said, clasping his hands behind his back. “The manipulations. The delusions of grandeur.”

“I didn’t have any other options. The lawyer wasn’t going to give Libby that money.”

“Based on how she got Greg’s claptrap of an initiative to hire women, I’d say she’s a smart cookie,” Crawford said, grabbing a water from my fridge.

“Fuck you,” Greg spat.

“Seems like you could have just told her what was up and come up with a way to get that money. Then split it. Then everyone wins,” Crawford said, tipping the water bottle back, totally unconcerned by Greg’s anger.

I closed my eyes and ran a hand through my hair. Liam smoothed it back down, and I swiped at his hand.

“I didn’t want to lose her,” I mumbled

“You what?” Greg turned on me.

“I love her, and I didn’t want to lose her. She’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” I said sadly.

“To be fair,” Liam said. “She’s the only real girlfriend you’ve ever had.”

“You can’t love from a place of fear,” Crawford said sagely.

“Look at Mr. Philosophical here,” Greg said. “You’re better off without Libby. She was making you soft and weak.”

“No,” I countered. “She made me happy and made me see the world differently. Being with her felt like being in the desert after the rainstorm when the flowers bloomed and you knew they were only going to be there for a few hours, and so every fiber of your being focused on those little bright spots of color.”

Greg scowled. “If you’re going to try and win her back, you better do it soon. Everyone in this city has already heard that a relationship with Libby comes with a huge amount of

money. There's going to be a line of males wanting to date her."

Fuck.

"I heard two of the Richmond brothers are already getting their yachts polished."

"They better not go after her," I grumbled.

"You better plan a grand gesture of all grand gestures," Walker said.

Greg narrowed his eyes at me. "You are not buying a yacht."

"No," I said, "I'm going to go steal a dog."

"That sounds like the opposite of what you should be doing," Liam said slowly.

"I'm going to steal her dog. Crawford." I clapped him on the shoulder, and he smirked. "Are you with me?"

"Sure, why not? It's been a slow evening."

"You can't take Crawford to go steal a dog. He's going to blow up a street," Greg argued.

"I can be stealthy when required." Crawford gave a toothy smile.

"You need to do some social engineering," Greg countered.

"Does anyone even know where this dog is?" Liam asked.

"I'll find it," Walker said, pulling out his laptop.

"This is my secret mission," I reminded them. "All of you cannot be involved."

“Sit down, little brother,” Mike told me, shoving me onto the couch. “Nothing like a brotherly bonding activity of stealing someone’s beloved pet.”



“Ah, the smell of old New York money!” Crawford said as we stood outside of the elaborate Upper East Side residential building where Bitsy lived.

“There’s no way we’re getting Doug out of there,” I said.

“I have a plan,” Crawford reminded me. Crawford pulled the cap of his maintenance worker’s uniform down low over his head.

“Why would a maintenance worker be here in the middle of the night?” I hissed at him.

“I told you, because the old woman in number 17B needs her light bulb changed.”

“The building has maintenance staff.”

Crawford turned up the collar on his beige jacket. “This is a special light bulb.”

“We’re all going to jail.” I threw up my hands. These luxury residential buildings were fortresses. And we were going in through the front door.

I tried to be cool as ice as we walked up to the entryway.

Crawford saluted the doormen, who frowned when they saw us. The concierge hurried over.

Greg adjusted his cuff links.

“Mrs. Hughes asked that we stop by to replace a light bulb,” he said imperiously while I tried to copy his authoritative demeanor. Inside, I was a mess. This was my

only chance to save Libby. But what if she was still angry at me even after we rescued Doug?

“I’ll have to call her and confirm,” the concierge said, sounding suspicious.

“She’s in Monaco,” I said in the same bored, affected tone Greg had used. “It’s the middle of the night there. She was very insistent that the light bulb be changed now. It’s in one of her chandeliers,” I added.

“She called us specifically,” Greg told him, “and asked us to accompany the maintenance man.” He side-eyed Crawford, who rolled a toothpick in his mouth. “And ensure nothing is damaged.”

“Hmm,” the concierge said. “Do you need a key?”

“We have one already,” Greg said, pulling a decoy out of his pocket.

“Elevator’s that way,” the concierge said, motioning behind him.

And then we were in.

“What if Mrs. Hughes comes back and they ask her about this?” I hissed at Crawford as we rode the elevator up. “She won’t remember. They’ll think it was suspicious.”

“Trust me,” Crawford said. “I’ve worked with enough of these types of rich people whose only pastime is to spend money. They never remember what they spent money on. She’ll come back with thousands of dollars of clothes she won’t remember buying. It’s not out of the realm of possibility that she won’t remember ordering a maintenance service.”

I tried to remain calm as we headed down the hallway. Instead of going to 17B, we went to 17A—Bitsy’s condo. Her

Instagram had shown her out at a gallery opening that evening.

Crawford picked the lock easily and ushered us inside.

“Doug?” I whispered while Greg crept through the dark apartment.

Using a flashlight, we swept through the rooms, looking for the corgi. I heard faint barking and opened a door. Inside was a bathroom holding a small cage, over which was thrown a heavy blanket.

“That fucking bitch,” Crawford fumed. “The dog could have suffocated.”

“She probably did it because of the barking,” I said, looking for the latch.

Crawford snapped pictures as proof.

Doug was even loopier than normal when I pulled the blanket off the cage and released him. He licked my hands happily then raced out into the living room and peed all over a very expensive Turkish rug.

“Serves her right,” I said.

Doug barked at me and wagged his stubby tail.

Crawford opened up the fake toolbox we had brought to smuggle Doug out in. It was like trying to put an octopus in a bottle. Doug did not want to go back into another box.

“Doug, please,” I begged.

The corgi growled playfully at me.

“Hurry up,” Crawford urged.

I finally tipped Doug on his back and slammed the lid shut. But he kept on barking.

Greg was peering out an open window.

“She’s back,” he said, pointing.

I hurried over to the window.

There was an Uber down below, hazards blinking. Bitsy was stepping out of the car.

“Shit. Let’s move.”

I wheeled the still-barking Doug out into the hallway while Crawford quickly locked up. The elevator doors closed just as Bitsy’s elevator opened. Doug must have smelled her, because his barks turned into snarls.

“Now, Doug,” I said as the elevator lurched down to the lobby. “You have to stay quiet.”

“He can’t understand you,” Crawford said, brow furrowed in concern.

“I’ll buy you a box of donuts,” I begged the corgi.

His growling and barking stopped.

“See?”

“Maybe he’s passed out.”

“Showtime,” Greg said.

“Evening, gentlemen.” My brother was authoritative as we swept through the lobby then out the front door.

As soon as we were around the corner, I opened the box, pulled out the dazed-looking corgi, and carried him to the car.

“Do not,” Greg stated as I slid into the back seat and cracked a water bottle for Doug, “buy that dog any donuts. I don’t want him puking in my car.”

“I wish Bitsy would have stayed away a little longer,” I said as we drove through town. “She’s going to know that Doug was stolen and call the police.”

“No,” Greg said smugly, “she’s going to see that he escaped out of the open window.”

“And what? Flew the fuck away?” Crawford snorted.

“No, he could have used the fire escape.”

Next to me, Doug messily lapped up the water. I wondered if Bitsy had even fed him. He was clearly thirsty.

“What’s she going to do, call the cops on a corgi she’s not even supposed to have? Hardly.”

“So what are we going to do with him? Pretend like we found him wandering around?” I asked.

“Not us but a Good Samaritan. We’ll hire an actress to find him.”

“Terrible idea, and it’s the weakest link in the plan,” I said. “Anyone you hire for money is going to either be a continuous blackmail payment or flip for the other team.”

“I don’t know—what do you suggest?” Greg’s voice oozed contempt.

Crawford pointed, grinned, then rolled down the window. “Looking good, ladies!” he yelled out at Belle and her cofounders, Dana and Emma.

Belle was about to throw something at our car until she recognized Crawford and smiled. Then she saw Greg and scowled. “You have some nerve.”

“We have come to ask for a favor,” Crawford said as Greg pulled up alongside them.

“No,” Belle said.

“Please,” I begged as I jumped out of the car. “We just need you to pretend you found this corgi and make a big stink about it on national TV. Everyone knows you hate Svensson Investment, so no one will be suspicious.”

“What’s in it for me?” she countered.

“Knowing that you saved this adorable face from a lifetime of being stuck in a small cage that he can’t even turn around in.” I held Doug up to my face.

Doug panted at her, then he sneezed and sprayed water all over Belle.

“Terrible timing, Doug.” I took out his pocket square, flicked it, then patted Belle’s face.

“I’ll pass,” she said, snatching the handkerchief from me.

“How about,” I offered, lowering my voice, “I feed you intel about Mags and Greg’s relationship?”

“He’s in a relationship with her?” Belle hissed.

I smiled awkwardly. “It may or not be headed that way, but I can certainly keep you abreast of developments if and when they happen.”

Belle snatched the corgi out of my arms.

“Much appreciated, ma’am.”

Doug licked her face.

“Also, he wants a box of donuts.”

“Love a well-executed plan,” Crawford said. He fiddled with Greg’s car radio.

“Stop messing with my settings,” Greg complained.

I felt a weight lift off my shoulders. Once Libby had Doug back, she was going to be all forgive-and-forget, and she was going to be so happy that I had rescued her dog that she was going to give me another chance.



I WAS WAITING in the conference room the next afternoon for Belle to go live to talk about finding Doug.

This is it. Then I can go see Libby.

“Uh...” Walker was across from me on his laptop. “Libby is the one with blue hair, right? Likes art?”

“Yeah,” I said, frowning.

“I just found her on a dating site,” Walker said, turning the laptop around. “I think she might be done with you for good.”

“I—” I was shocked. I closed my eyes then opened them. “I refuse. I will not give her up this easily.”

LIBBY

“**S**ure, no problem,” I said, trying not to sound as hungover as I felt the next morning. “I’ll just wait to hear from her, then.” I sighed and slumped down on the couch in Brea’s office.

“No luck with the publisher?” she asked me sympathetically.

I turned my phone back off. It was vibrating with nonstop harassments and notifications about Doug and Trenton.

“Is it too early to start drinking?”

“That bad, huh?” Brea said as she took out a pitcher. “Leftover cocktails from the wedding I was doing a couple days ago.”

“Just give me the whole pitcher.”

She poured me a glass and plopped a booze-soaked cherry in it.

I took a long sip then said, “Gloria, of course, didn’t have this woman’s number, but she said to just call over to the publishing house and tell her that she sent me. As if that was going to work. The girl on the phone clearly wasn’t going to pass on a message.”

I hung my head in my hands and swirled my drink around in the glass.

“Why can’t I ever get a break?” I sighed. “Actually, no, I don’t need a break. I just need the universe to stop taunting me with things like the perfect man, an inheritance that will help me save my dog, a book deal, or a gallery job and then yanking them away and humiliating me. I’d rather just exist in my own bubble of sadness than have the hope that I can reach up and grab the stars.”

Brea hugged me. “You know what you need?”

“More alcohol in this cocktail?”

“Well, yes, because they do need to be freshened up a little.” She poured some more whisky into the cocktail glasses. “But you need to go on a date.”

“That is the last thing I need.”

“You’re not trying to find a husband,” Brea corrected, opening up her laptop. “You’re going to go on a date with a guy that is just happy that an actual living, breathing girl wants to go out with him. He’ll fawn over you all night. It will be a confidence booster. Now, look sexy.”

I did not look sexy. I was wearing a T-shirt with a print of *The Scream* painting on it, black paint-splattered pants, and my hair wasn’t combed; I had just stuffed a headband over it.

Brea snapped my picture. “Smile!”

I scowled. “If a guy wants to date me, he’s getting the real me, not a fake version.”

Brea sighed. “We’re going to be scraping the bottom of the barrel.” She copied the photos to her laptop then started a new profile on a popular dating site.

“Name: Libby Gilbert. Female. Looking for a man. What are your hobbies?”

“Drinking, drinking, and drinking.” I raised my glass.

“Painting, photography, and trying new restaurants,” Brea wrote. “What are you passionate about?”

“Alcohol.”

“Why don’t you go make some popcorn while I finish your profile?”

I melted butter while the bag of popcorn popped in the microwave. Yes, I added extra butter to my microwave popcorn. On my list of terrible transgressions, I felt like that was pretty far down.

I shoved a handful of the buttery, salty snack in my mouth as I walked back to the large reclaimed-wood table in the sunlight-filled office. The food was making me feel a little bit better. So was the bottle of wine I had found in the fridge. I poured us each a glass and looked over Brea’s shoulder.

“You are making me sound way better than I actually am,” I accused her.

“Correction,” my friend said, sipping her wine, “I am giving them the you when you’re having a good day, i.e., you managed to wake up before ten, you shaved, and are wearing something cute.”

I skimmed through the profile. Brea had made me sound like I was a fun, flirty, artsy girl instead of an art bum that liked to sit on the couch in my pajamas and my comforter and eat stale cereal out of a box while I sketched.

“Done!” Brea said brightly. “It’s posted. Now we wait for your rebound to come along.”

Her phone chimed with a calendar reminder. “Oops, we have a bride coming in. You can stay upstairs if you want, Libby.”

I felt like I had already imposed on the Weddings in the City group. They ran a high-end wedding-planning company and did not want an art bum hanging around while they were trying to convince the mother of the bride with a multimillion-dollar wedding budget that they should for sure take the upgrade and have live peacocks at their wedding.

“I actually have a meeting myself,” I lied.

“Did the publisher call you back?” Brea asked in excitement.

“Er, no,” I said, wracking my brain. “I have a meeting with my godfather’s lawyer, Mr. Weatly.”

“Is he going to stop being such a woman-hating misogynist and give you your money?” she asked, snapping her fingers in an aggressive manner.

“We’ll see,” I said, gathering my bag and heading to the elevator.

Where was I going to go for the next few hours? I literally didn’t have any money to sit in a café.

I hated myself for it, but I missed Carl. I missed cuddling next to him on the sofa while he made snarky comments about the movie I had badgered him into watching. I missed lying next to him in bed. I missed the late nights in his office, sitting barefoot on his couch while music played softly and the rain pattered against the window.

You don’t miss him. It was fake. He was taking you for a ride, and you were too dumb to see it. Ugh, I was too dumb for all of it.

Screw Carl. I should go straight down to Svensson Investment and tell him what a piece of shit he was. I wanted to ruin his life like he had ruined mine. But I was sure he had probably blacklisted me. I would be arrested before I set foot in the lobby.

I fumed as I started walking away from the Brookview Hotel, where Brea had her office. Carl was still ruining my life from beyond the relationship grave. What I should have done is lie to Trenton and tell him of course I would be his fiancée then kick him in the balls as soon as I had Doug. Sure, I would have had to move to Vermont and live in a hut in the woods, but my apartment leaked when it rained, so I was basically already an outdoorswoman.

A part of me hadn't said yes, though, because I was still hung up on Carl. It would have felt like cheating even though Carl had never cared about me.

Maybe he did?

"He didn't," I told myself as I stomped down the sidewalk.

Maybe I would be willing to entertain an explanation about the money, especially if the apology came with a cut of the percentage. I was shallow. I could be bought. Not to mention, from my years of dealing with my godfather, I wouldn't put it past him to not entrust me with an inheritance.

Besides, it wasn't as if I was ever really counting on an inheritance. You couldn't miss something you never expected to have in the first place.

But I did miss Doug. And I didn't want the money to go shopping; I needed it to save my dog. Because of Carl, Doug was gone.

I found myself in front of a slightly familiar building. Hand-painted letters on the door read *Weatly Law*.

“Maybe it’s meant to be. Or maybe she’s desperate!” I sang out under my breath.

I just needed a little bit of money. I mean, how much would Eric and Josh charge to continue working on the doggy custody case? A few thousand? Surely, Mr. Weatly would give me that much.

I probably should have worn something more respectable if I was going to go to this person’s office, hat in hand. I smoothed down my paint-flecked pants as much as I could. The walk hadn’t done me any favors, and I was sweaty and hot when I walked into the musty lobby and up the stairs to the office.

The little old lady was slowly typing on the typewriter. It looked like she was still working on the same memo she had been the last time I was there.

I cleared my throat.

She slowly raised her head.

“Hey, hi,” I smiled, hoping her eyesight was bad enough that she wouldn’t see that I was not dressed like a vintage Barbie. “Is Mr. Weatly in?” I asked hopefully.

Mrs. Manchigo slowly raised herself up.

“No need to get up.”

“Let me see if he’s in,” she said, slowly creeping past me.

I hovered, hoping she wouldn’t fall. Wouldn’t that be just my luck?

“Mr. Weatly. There’s a client here.”

“I’m not taking new clients.”

“He says he’s not taking new clients,” Mrs. Manchigo stated.

“Mr. Weatly,” I said, sticking my head into his office, “I’m Herbert’s goddaughter.”

He peered at me then frowned. “You’re hardly dressed for public.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

“This is just a costume,” I lied. “I was auditioning for a play.”

Mr. Weatly was horrified. “Good gracious!”

“Mr. Weatly,” I said, sitting across from his desk. “I just wanted to see if I could please have some of the money my grandfather set aside. I need to rescue my dog, you see, and I don’t have any money to pay the lawyers. I just need a few thousand dollars. You said he had billions.”

“The rules of the will were very clear,” he said, blinking at me.

I was crushed. “Can’t we bend the rules?” I begged.

“Absolutely not,” he said forcefully. “You need to find a respectable man, someone who is not Carl Svensson.” He cleared his throat. “His mother told me all about him, how he’s just like his father—cruel and manipulative.”

“Carl’s not cruel,” I said sharply, hating myself for defending him. “He’s kind and intelligent, and yeah, maybe he can be kind of aloof, but he’s so wonderful with his little sisters.”

“He took advantage of you.”

I smirked. “Actually,” I said, “there were a few times I took advantage of him.”

“No wonder your godfather went to an early grave with this behavior.”

“To be fair, he was a hundred and three, so...”

“Shameful behavior,” the lawyer repeated, the folds of his skin on his neck shaking.

“My behavior isn’t shameful. Yours is shameful,” I yelled, finally losing it. “You and my godfather are determined to drag everyone back into the past as opposed to moving forward. So you know what? Shame on you. Shame on you for not being respectable, and shame on you for your petty behavior.”

I grabbed my bag and stomped out of the office.

“Way to go, Libby,” I told myself. *You just blew your last chance.* I fantasized about putting on a *Tomb Raider* Lara Croft outfit and ninja-ing my way through town to rescue Doug.

But who was I kidding? I couldn’t even run half a mile.

The sun beat down on me as I embarked on the long walk back to Brea’s office. She was just wrapping up a meeting when I returned. The bride looked at me askance.

“I’ll just wait out here with the food delivery,” I said so that the bride wouldn’t think I was going to, like, hang out there.

I hid in the stairwell until the bride and her entourage had gone.

“Sorry,” I told Brea.

“No worries!” She jumped up and down. “You got a dating match, and he’s actually perfect!”

I skimmed the profile—artsy, bearded, dark hair.

Should be blond.

No, we are done with blonds.

Also, how could I date when Doug was out there, scared?

You need money, I reminded myself. Nail this guy down and then drag him back to the lawyer’s office and proclaim him as your boyfriend. I just need enough of that cash to pay for the lawyers for Doug, and then once I have my dog, I can dump this guy by the wayside.

“His profile says that his favorite thing to do on a Saturday is lounge around and read, preferably with a dog. He sounds exactly like your soulmate,” Brea told me.

“I thought he was supposed to be a rebound?”

“He says he’s looking for a low-maintenance girl. I’ve been chatting with him, and he really appreciates that you like to show your own style and also aren’t afraid to be comfortable. He says you seem very real.”

“The irony,” I said dryly.

Brea stuck her tongue out at me. “I’m a good wingwoman.” She waggled her eyebrows. “So are you going to go on the date?”

I took a deep breath. The universe was giving me one last chance.

I had to take it.

CARL

“No, of course finding the corgi has nothing to do with the Svenssons,” Belle scoffed on television. “Greg Svensson is a moron. And so is that judge who gave the corgi to someone who wasn’t going to take care of him in the first place. I’m very glad that the judge at least came to his senses and reversed his decision, unlike Greg, who doubles down on his mistakes.”

“That’s good news for those of us who like them big, dumb, and hot. Also, did I mention big?” The female reporter winked at the camera.

Belle pressed her lips together. “Don’t encourage him.”

“At least Belle didn’t say you had a small dick,” Beck said, turning off the TV. My brother snickered.

I was slumped in my seat. What the hell was I going to do? Libby had moved on from me. Apparently, effortlessly so, if her dating profile was any indication. In her picture, she looked carefree and, well, like she was when I first met her. She wasn’t wearing any expensive couture clothes. She was wearing her old paint-splattered, creative art clothes. She looked amazing.

I had crushed her spirit.

“I’m just as bad as Dad. Mom was right.”

“The only thing our mother was ever right about with any consistency was sniffing out where the alcohol was hidden,” Mike said, resting a hand on my shoulder.

“All right,” Walker said, “I have a fake profile here for you.” He slid the laptop in front of me.

“What? No.” I looked up at him. “I was going to use my real profile and message her, you know, like, a fun, what’s it called? Meet-cute?”

“So she can block you, dude?” Liam shook his head. “Listen to your older brother.”

“He’s like a year and a half older than me.”

“Trust me. This will work,” Walker insisted. “I am the king of apologies. Greg, take note.”

“No.”

“You’ll show up to the date, and she’ll be expecting someone named Laser who is an artisanal urban zucchini farmer, but you’ll be there instead. She’ll have her dog back by that point, and you can tell her you love her and miss her and are going to buy her the moon, and she’ll be so happy that she’ll take you back.”

“Sounds like a good way to get arrested.” I scowled.

“Could go fifty-fifty,” Liam concurred.

“Has anyone started a betting pool yet?” Mike asked.

“Bro,” Walker said, “it’s working. We matched, and she’s messaging me!”

He and Liam fist-bumped. “Score!”

I read over Walker's shoulder as he and Libby exchanged rapid chat messages. It was another dagger to my chest. Libby sounded upbeat, flirty, and happy.

"She really doesn't miss me at all," I said.

"Of course she doesn't; you were a complete dick to her. You're just as bad as Dad. You manipulated her and were going to steal her money." Beck snorted.

"I'm going to make it up to her—buy her a gallery and a nice place to live. That should be enough, right?"

"Totally!" Liam was confident.

But what if it wasn't?

"Dude," Liam said to Walker, "tell her to meet for a date at that new restaurant where everything is served in an everyday household object. I bet she'd really like that, and it's artsy."

"I think this is a bad idea," I said abruptly. "Call off the date." This was creepy and stalkery. I needed to find a way of convincing her to talk to me other than orchestrating a fake date.

"It's going to be fine," Liam said. "Trust me. She probably already saw the news report and met with Belle for the corgi handover. Libby's going to be high on endorphins."

There was a rapid knock on the glass door of the conference room. Marnie stuck her head inside. She looked concerned.

"Uh, Greg? There is someone here to see you." Her eyes flicked around nervously. "I could tell her that you're out."

"Don't lie for that asshole," Belle said, sweeping past Marnie and into the conference room. In her arms was Doug, on his back, his tongue hanging out.

My stomach dropped. “He’s not supposed to be here,” I said slowly.

The corgi farted.

“Jesus Christ!” Liam gagged. “Someone throw a chair through this window so we can get some air in here.”

“Belle, what are you doing?” Greg demanded. “This was not part of the plan.”

The corgi, eyes still closed, sniffed, sneezed, and then woke up with a snort.

Belle set him down in a chair. “I was supposed to do a good deed and then the corgi goes home with his dog mom. But she didn’t answer her phone or any of her emails, nor was she at her apartment or her place of work. I am covered in dog hair. This suit is ruined. I left my fridge open for ten seconds, and that dog ate an entire wheel of brie.”

“He can’t eat cheese,” I said, petting Doug.

“I want a new car.” Belle looked expectantly at Greg. “Mine needs to be burned from the smell.”

“Welp,” Liam said after Belle left. “I think we need to postpone the date until tomorrow, until we can find Libby and get her hyped up on those sweet, sweet corgi cuteness hormones.”

“Good idea. Doug is looking a little worse for the wear.” I picked up the corgi. “I’m going to give him a bath, make him look presentable, probably feed him a digestive biscuit, then maybe I’ll surprise Libby tomorrow morning with him, and she’ll take me back.”

“Good plan,” Walker said, “except that you already have a date with Libby in two hours. Good luck!”

LIBBY

“I just think you should make a good first impression.” Brea held up a dress. “This is a nice restaurant, and you don’t want to be refused entry,” she coaxed.

“If he doesn’t want me the real me, then he can keep walking.”

“The real you is a bum and smells like barbeque sauce,” Brea said. “Go wash your face and put this on.”

She shook the dress at me. It was a cute fifties-style dress with a flared skirt. The print was bold with multicolored bright circles. It was totally my style.

When I came back out of the bathroom, Brea applauded. “I made this for an offbeat bride who wanted it as her wedding reception dress, but then her mom complained, and I designed a white dress instead.” She tied a matching scarf around my hair as a headband.

“You look super cute! I’d go with you to stalk you and your date in the restaurant for moral support, but we have a huge meeting in a few minutes,” Brea explained, clearing off the table. “The fiancé is paying for the wedding and wants his mom to have a say. Of course, the bride doesn’t want a full-on

Versace-themed wedding like the future mother-in-law is demanding, so we're going to have to come to some sort of consensus."

"Godspeed."

"Good luck on your date!"



I TRIED NOT to let myself be overwhelmed by sadness and exhaustion. "If this date doesn't go well, we can find someone else who will want to pretend to marry me for a handout," I reminded myself.

I forced myself to plaster on a smile when I walked into the restaurant. But I needn't have bothered. My date wasn't even there.

"Can't even show up on time," I complained to myself then cringed. I sounded like Carl.

Guess he was more of an influence than I wanted to admit.

It was probably rude to order before your date got there, but I needed a drink, and if he was bothered by that, he could go jump in a river.

I ordered the Bad Day at Work cocktail with gin, fresh-squeezed clementine juice, and seltzer.

Should have called it a Bad Day at Life.

I was sitting at the bar, sucking down my cocktail, when there was a commotion at the hostess center. I hunkered down over the drink. It had come with little straws that a refined young woman would have just used for stirring then discarded, but I used them to drink the cocktail like a milkshake.

“Sir,” the hostess was saying loudly. “Sir, you cannot bring that dog in here.”

Oof. I liked dogs, but I definitely didn’t want someone bringing them into the restaurant while people were trying to eat. Unless, of course, it was a service dog.

The dog started barking.

And that’s why you can’t bring them in the restaurant.

Someone cursed. There were screams and the sound of small feet racing across the polished concrete floor.

“I’ll take another one of these,” I told the bartender.

Hope my card goes through. Otherwise, I’m going to be washing dishes after my date.

The bartender let out a strangled curse and pointed, “Watch out!”

I looked down to see a corgi barrel into my legs and flop backward. I stared at him in shock. “Doug?”

I started bawling as Doug went crazy, jumping into my arms, letting me hug him, then racing around me in circles while whining and wagging his tail so hard his whole body shook.

“Sir, you need to remove that dog. He’s disturbing our patrons.”

“Yes, of course. My apologies.”

Polished imported Italian leather shoes stopped in front of me. Then Carl bent down.

“Libby,” he said. His eyes were concerned as they searched mine.

I wiped my hand over my face.

“You have Doug?” I couldn’t believe it.

“I guess you didn’t see the news,” he said. “Doug mysteriously went missing out of his guardian’s apartment and was found cold, alone, and dirty wandering around Central Park. Good thing Belle Frost was out jogging and saw him.”

I squinted my eyes at him. “That was fortuitous.”

“Yep,” he said.

“*Sir.*” The hostess was irate. “Remove that dog.”

Carl scooped up Doug then helped me to my feet.

“My drink,” I said, my voice still sounding hoarse.

The bartender set it down, and I grabbed it.

Carl’s eyes widened. “You’re just going to have me walk out of here, alone, with Doug?”

Doug was attracting a crowd of people who wanted to pet him. The hostess was incensed.

“One second!” I held up a finger, and I drained the cocktail in one go. “Whew!” I reeled. “That was a lot.”

Carl automatically pulled out his wallet and handed a fifty-dollar bill to the bartender.

“You don’t have to—”

“I don’t think I should start off my big apology gesture by not paying for your drink,” Carl said wryly.

“Well, two drinks.”

“That’s your second?”

“Don’t judge me,” I said, falling into the easy repartee with him. It was like we had never been apart.

Carl just laughed softly. “Never change, Libby.”

When we were outside the restaurant, he set Doug down on the sidewalk. The corgi immediately flopped on top of Carl's feet. It was adorable.

I smiled. Then I scowled.

"Wait. I'm still mad at you," I told Carl, shaking my finger at him. "You lied to me. And you hurt me. You also brought my dog back, so I guess can't be mad at you for losing him in the first place. However, to be fair, you solved a problem you created."

He held up his hands.

"Yes, I know," he said, "and I'm very sorry. I'll of course make it up to you, whatever you want, Libby."

He took my hand and gazed into my eyes. "Libby, I know we might have started out in a pile of trash in your bedroom —"

"Hey!" I hit his arm playfully. "That was art!"

He gave me a small smile. "I know when I first saw you, I said that I was going to make you a better person. But really, you made me a better person. I can't imagine my life without you. I've fallen hopelessly in love with you. Libby, I know I screwed up. And I'm so sorry. But when Mr. Weatly said that the only way for that money to be released was for you to get married, I realized there was no universe where I wanted you married to anyone else except me. I'd rather have you than all the money in the world. Please, Libby, give me another chance. I'll never hurt you again. I love you more than you can know."

Gah! Nothing like a handsome man in a suit begging for forgiveness. I knew I should be mad, knew I should stick to

my guns, but what the hell? What's one more impulse decision? Also, I'd just shotgunned two very strong cocktails.

"I love you, Carl," I said, "and I missed you, and I'm glad you're just an uptight corporate douche on the outside and not on the inside, where you're soft and squishy and love puppies and children!"

I leaned in and kissed him, and he picked me up and swung me around.

"So, you're really going to give me anything I want?" I murmured, kissing his face while he held me in his arms.

"Anything," he promised. "You want your own gallery, your own condo? I can even buy you land for an art retreat."

"That all sounds great, but what I really want is a giant wheel of cheese."

His mouth opened, then he closed it. "A what? Why?"

"Why not?" I said.

"How about I make it up to you another way?"



IT WAS OFFICIAL: I loved this man. I was absolutely crazy in love with him, and I was going to show him in the most carnal way possible.

We nearly fell into his bedroom, kissing. As soon as the door was closed, he pushed me up against it. His hand found its way up my shirt and started playing with my tits, paying extra special attention to my nipple rings.

"Have I mentioned how much I love these things?" he asked with a teasing smile that I wanted to lick off his face.

“Have I mentioned how much I love your cock?” I countered and cupped him through his pants, feeling that he was already hard for me.

“I could stand to hear it more often,” he joked.

Then he turned serious. “I love your piercings, but I love the woman attached to them even more.”

I blinked rapidly, pushing back the threatening tears that his honest confession brought on.

“I love you too,” I echoed. “Now show it to me.”

I should have known better than to throw down a challenge like that to Carl. The man was determined and started tearing at my clothes as if he were starving for me. That was fine because I wanted his big cock in me, like, yesterday.

It didn't take long for us to get naked, and soon, we were tumbling onto the bed together, a tangle of limbs. Carl rubbed his big dick between my pussy, stimulating me through the ring. As he did, he sucked on my neck and played more with my tits. I was in heaven, but I wanted more. I wanted everything he could give me.

“I love you,” I panted again for good measure. “Now fuck me.”

The groan he made was so deep it was felt more than heard. I grinned back at him as I spread my legs and welcomed him in.

Carl paused only to roll on a condom. Then I sighed in pure relief as he entered me in one smooth thrust. I was wet and ready for him, and my pussy was aching to be filled.

Fill it he did. Carl started out with a slow, almost painfully intimate pace. His arms bracketed on either side of my head,

and he peppered my face with kisses as he fucked into me.

I groaned and arched with every movement, and soon, his pace increased. Each stroke brought me higher and higher. He reached between us to touch my clit and tug gently at my ring.

That was it. I broke with a cry, my climax hitting me like a wave. He came a few moments later, and I welcomed his release inside me.

I lay half on top of him.

“I want you to be mine forever,” Carl murmured, kissing me softly.

I kissed him harder.

“That sounds amazing, but remember I come as a package deal. Are you ready for a corgi stepson?” Doug was in the living room, barking at the doggy TV YouTube video I’d put on for him. “I can’t believe you stole him from Trenton,” I remarked as I padded up to Doug.

“Not Trenton, Bitsy,” Carl said, reaching down to his clothes on the floor and pulling out his phone.

My mouth dropped open as I scanned the picture. “That bitch! Poor Doug.”

“He peed all over her expensive carpet,” Carl told me.

“Good,” I said.

“Speaking of,” Carl added, “I’m buying you a better apartment. But not anywhere near that building.”

“Nuh-uh. I want a giant wheel of cheese. We can go pick it up after we visit Mr. Weatly.”

“I’m not spending another minute in that office. I can feel myself aging. It’s like a wormhole.”

“We won’t be there long.” I kissed Carl. “I’m going to tell him I made my own choice and screw him and his bigotry.”

CARL

“I just don’t see why you need to do this. You’re just going to get angry,” I told Libby as I parked the car in front of Mr. Weatly’s office.

“Damn right I’m going to get angry,” she said, slipping on her sunglasses and stepping out of the car. “He and my godfather started all this drama in the first place, and now I’m going to finish it.”

For the occasion, she had worn one of the loudest outfits I had ever seen her in. It was a bright-green velvet dress with a large feather coat—feather as in it looked like someone had gone out and shot an exotic bird from a six-year-old girl’s fantasy world, skinned it, and made it into a jacket. It had a thick layer of pink feathers that flew off her every time Libby moved.

I sighed as I inspected the interior of my car. It looked like the exotic bird had crawled in there and died.

Doug and I hurried after Libby as she, determined and pissed off, stomped up the stairs, leaving a whirlwind of feathers in her wake.

“Hi, Mrs. Manchigo,” she said. “I have come to speak to Mr. Weatly.”

“I’ll make coffee.”

“There’s no need,” I told her as she hobbled over to the ancient coffeepot. Then I bit back a curse and ran after Libby, who was on a warpath to Mr. Weatly.

Libby slammed the door to Mr. Weatly’s office open, and he blinked up at her.

“I just want to let you know,” she told him while he stared at her in shock, “that I am resigning from my godfather’s will. I will not be married off like a goat, I will not be belittled, and I will not be silenced. I am an unrespectable artist, and I am proud of it. Also—” She grabbed me by the tie and pulled me in for a kiss. “I’m banging my hot guardian, and I’m about to get Jane Eyre tattooed on my left butt cheek.”

I sucked in a breath and prayed that Mr. Weatly wasn’t about to have a stroke.

“That is all,” Libby said. “I don’t care what you do with all my godfather’s assets. You can put all that money in a pile and burn it.” Then she whirled around to step out and almost crashed into Mrs. Manchigo, who was tottering up with a tray of coffee.

I pulled Libby out of the way right before she sent the coffee service flying.

“Whoops! Well, there goes my bad-bitch exit.”

I wrapped an arm around her and kissed her cheek. “I still think it was a badass exit.”

“Wait!” Mr. Weatly gasped out, shuffling after us. “Wait.”

“Doesn’t anyone want coffee?” Mrs. Manchigo asked, following after us.

“You can’t do this to me,” he said, slightly out of breath from hurrying the few feet out of his office. “I’m supposed to retire! I can’t try and figure out who to give this money to. The estate is supposed to go to Libby, and then I’m supposed to get my payment. I want to buy a house in Martha’s Vineyard and sit on my porch. Herbert specifically left a very long list of people the money’s not supposed to go to. This is going to be a disaster. I’m going to die in this office.”

“Jeez,” Libby said.

“You should have thought of that before you put all these hoops in place,” I told him with a shrug. I grabbed Libby’s hand. “Let’s go get your giant wheel of cheese.”

“Now, now,” Libby said, “let’s not be hasty.” She turned to Mr. Weatly. “I’m open to negotiating.”

“What happened to make art, not money?” I asked her.

“Art is expensive. Have you been to a craft store lately?”

“Well, you two seem like you’re in love. Are you getting married?” Mr. Weatly asked pointedly.

“Absolutely,” I said.

“Oh, really?” Libby said.

I smiled at her. “You’re going to be my wife.”

“No arguments here.”

“Then I now pronounce you respectable,” the lawyer said, waving a hand over me in a papal blessing. “Carl, you can come sign for the money.”

“Eh,” Libby said, holding up a hand. “I’ll take all the money and the property. Not Carl.”

“There are terms in the will,” he hemmed.

“Are there? Usually, there’s some wiggle room based on the opinion of the executor of the will,” I stated.

The lawyer sighed. “I’ll give you a big enough cut to buy your dream home and have a stipend. And you too, Mrs. Manchigo,” Libby promised.

“I like your jacket,” she told Libby. “I want a house painted that color.”

“Done,” Libby said.

“I’ll put out the coffee while you sign the paperwork,” the elderly woman said.

We followed the two elderly people back into Mr. Weatly’s office. I sat down gingerly on one of the creaky chairs.

Mr. Weatly slowly assembled the paperwork.

“Don’t worry,” Libby said, patting my hand. “You can still keep the endowment under management at Svensson Investment, along with the property.”

“What are you going to do with the rest of the money?” I asked, frowning.

She gave me a wide-eyed innocent look. “I’m going to give it to Belle to manage since she found Doug.”

“I—wait, what?”

LIBBY

““ **A**nd in conclusion, Ms. Gilbert,” Greg Svensson said seriously, “that’s why Svensson Investment is the perfect fit as your financial manager.”

I pursed my mouth then pulled out the wads of dollar bills I had stashed in my coat and threw them up in the air. They cascaded over the table of the restaurant. Carl’s little sisters let out peals of laughter, and Doug jumped and barked, trying to catch the fluttering paper.

Carl shook his head.

Yeah, turns out when you offer to pay extra, the restaurant will let you take your dog in.

“I’d say do a striptease,” I told the Svensson brothers, “to really sweeten the deal, but I’m getting that from Carl tonight anyway.”

Carl smirked. Greg was incensed. “This is not a joke. There is a lot of money at stake,” he said.

I pulled down my sunglasses and raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I know, and that’s why I’m entrusting my future with Artemis Investment. Nothing like girl-boss power!”

“At least she’s letting us have the endowment,” Carl reminded his brother.

But his brother just scowled deeper.

“Hey,” I reminded Greg. “If you don’t turn that frown upside down, I can give the endowment to another firm.”

“We’ll keep negotiating,” Carl promised. Then he jerked his chin.

Belle was entering the restaurant.

“Why is she invited?” Greg demanded. “This is a family event.”

“She’s family,” I insisted. “She rescued my dog.”

Greg sucked in a breath.

I bit back a laugh.

Doug ran over to greet Belle.

“Why is there money all over the floor?” Belle asked.

“Because,” I said, “when the queen enters the room, things of value should carpet her path.”

Belle was thoughtful. “I could get behind that.”

The girls ran to Belle to greet her.

A woman in an artsy New York black dress, ankle boots, and large round yellow glasses walked in with Gloria. I had rented the whole place out and invited all my friends and, of course, Carl’s family.

“I thought that was you with all that blue hair,” she exclaimed, walking up to me and wrapping me in a hug. “And is that the famous Doug?”

Carl gave me a questioning look.

“This is Victoria from the publishing house,” Gloria said happily. “I brought her along. You need to make a book of those Doug-and-Carl comics. You had me positively in stitches with the last one!”

“We’ll do a big book-launch party,” Victoria gushed. “It will be corgi themed. We’ll have a big social media campaign.”

“I think I might be able to help a bit with that,” I said. “I want to mail everyone a big corgi-themed gift box to promote it, you know, something that will look good on Instagram? It will have cupcakes and stickers and little corgi bath bombs and corgi macarons.”

Muahaha! Finally, I would be the one to have influencers shill my product.

Victoria went off to talk to Gardenia and Isla, who were having a lively conversation about the best method to make a nude body cast.

“Oh my god,” Brea exclaimed, running into the restaurant. She fell to her knees before the giant wheel of cheese while in the background, her boyfriend, Mark Holbrook, and the Svenssons glared at each other.

“This is my child, and this is my other child,” I said, patting Doug then the wheel of cheese. “I’m going to name him Bert. I have a whole art series planned about him.”

“I love it!” Brea exclaimed, clapping her hands.

One of the waiters came by and offered us craft cocktails. I picked one with a little corgi stirrer. Carl sauntered over to me, and I took out a wad of cash and threw it in the air in front of him.

I grinned at his startled reaction.

“Are you going to do that everywhere we go?”

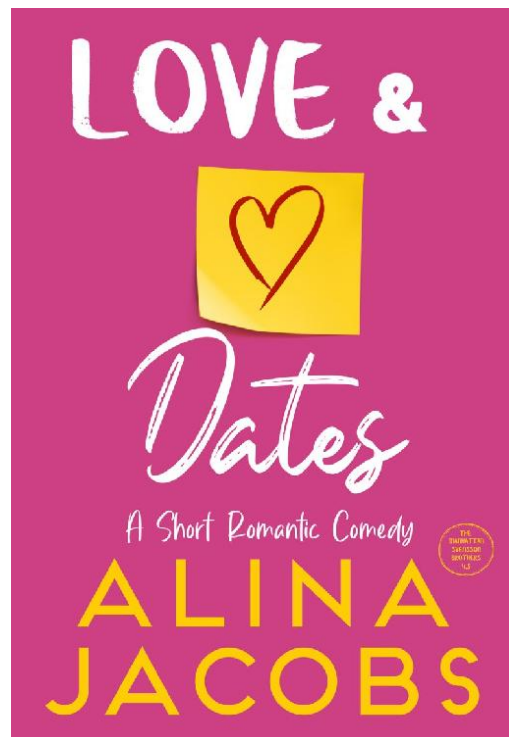
“No,” I told him, wrapping an arm around him. “I’m going to start throwing condoms in the air whenever you walk into a room, but I forgot to stuff my pockets with them. From now on, I’m only going to throw cash when I walk into a bookstore.” I blew him a kiss. “Love you!”

He responded by giving me a much steamier kiss.

“Libby, I love you, but if you throw condoms at me,” he growled, “I’m going to have to spend all night with you in my bed.”

“Sounds like an amazing date!”

SNEAK PEAK



SYNOPSIS

This is a Libby and Carl bonus short story. Libby and Carl go to a launch party. Will it be the worst date ever?

LIBBY

““**W** hooo!” Brea tossed handfuls of shredded cheddar cheese over me. “This girl has a college degree.” She threw another handful of cheese up in the air, and it rained down over my black graduation gown and mortarboard hat.

Doug, the corgi, nosed around in the grass, hoovering up cheese.

Carl sighed and picked him up.

“You’re going to get fur on your clothes,” I warned, brushing at his bespoke suit.

Doug licked up shredded cheese from my shoulder.

“Why did your friend throw cheese on you?” Carl asked.

“Why not? It’s better for animals than rice or birdseed and more environmentally friendly than glitter or confetti.”

“Oh, shoot,” Brea said, looking up at the sky. “Pigeons.”

Doug barked as we scattered away from the birds.

“Okay, so it may not be my best idea, but you can’t deny the entertainment appeal,” I admitted as I was dive-bombed by birds.

“I’ll blow bubbles at you for your big party tonight,” Brea promised.

I beamed. My book was officially being released tomorrow, and this evening was a launch party, where I would be signing books for people.

“I hope people show up,” I said nervously. “What if I’m the only one there?”

“I’ll be there,” Carl assured me and leaned down to kiss me. “And so will my family, so you’ll have a big crowd whether you want one or not.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I just hope people like the book. What if the critics pan it?”

“Oh, they won’t,” Carl said simply. “You’ll have very good reviews.”

“You can’t be sure,” I argued.

“Yes, I can. I already paid for them.”

My mouth dropped open. I felt a little sick. My boyfriend paid for good reviews of my comic book? Maybe it wasn’t that good.

“You can’t just do that,” I protested.

“Of course I can,” he said, cocking his head. “Magazines and newspapers have more and more in the last decade come to rely on advertisements to keep afloat. All I had to do is tell them I’m going to put in for several full-page, very-expensive ads for my company and then mention that oh, by the way, my girlfriend has a book coming out. Most of them get the hint.”

“Oh.”

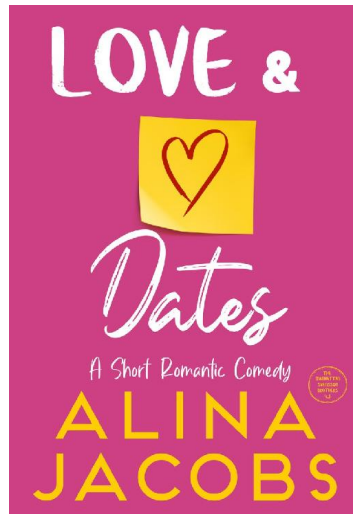
He was smug. “Everyone will say nice things about it.”

“Well,” I said slowly, still feeling crushed, “I guess that’s good.”

READ LOVE & DATES

This is a BONUS short story that takes place after *Love, Hate, and Terrible Dates*. It is given away for free to mailinglist subscribers.

<http://alinajacobs.com/maillinglist.html>



FAMILY TREE

Author note: These are some of the Svenssons that show up in this story. They are listed under their respective mothers and are from oldest at the top to youngest at the bottom with their associated companies.

Father - Leif Svensson

Harrogate Svenssons

Wife #1 – Merla Vee

Remington (Remy) – Founder, The Rural Trust

Hunter – lawyer

Gunnar – Founder, Romance Creative

Mace – CEO, Svensson Pharmatech

Archer – CEO, Greyson Hotel Group

Garrett – CFO, Svensson Pharmatech

Weston – CEO, ThinkX

Blade – COO, ThinkX

Parker – CTO, Svensson Pharmatech

Manhattan Svenssons

Wife #2 – Athlyn

Greg – CEO, Svensson Investment

Beck – CFO, Quantum Cyber

Mike – COO, Greyson Hotel Group

Walker – COO, Quantum Cyber

Liam – COO, Platinum Provisions

Carl – Managing partner, Svensson Investment

Seattle Svenssons

Wife #3 – Amayra

Salinger

You will meet the rest soon!

Boston Svenssons

Wife #4 – Mary Beth

Crawford

Josh – Svensson & Svensson law office

Eric – Svensson & Svensson law office

Wilder – Svensson Investment

Ansel – lab-grown meat

Gryff – lab-grown meat

You will meet the rest soon!

Rhode Island Svenssons

Wife #5 – Sueanne

Tanner – Train company

You will meet the rest soon!

Younger Svensson brothers

(there are more but are not yet named in the books, so I didn't include them because it's a lot!)

Wife #6 – Brenna

Tristan – college-aged kid

Eli – college-aged kid

Isaac – high school-aged kid

Calvin – high school-aged kid

Ronan – high school-aged kid

Theo – middle-school aged kid

Peyton – middle-school aged kid

Andy – elementary-school aged kid

Wife #9 – Idonna

Bruno – high school-aged kid

Otis – middle-school aged kid

Ellis – middle-school aged kid

Orlando – elementary-school aged kid

Scout – elementary-school aged kid

Oscar – elementary-school aged kid

Arlo – elementary-school aged kid

Wife #10 – Payslee

Adrian – college-aged kid

Nate – middle-school aged kid

Billy – middle-school aged kid

Henry – elementary-school aged kid

Wife #11 – Kimberly

Davy – pre-school aged kid

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A big thank you to Red Adept Editing for editing and proofreading and my lovely typo hunting team!

And finally a big thank you to all the readers! I had a great time writing this laugh-out-loud romantic comedy!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

If you like steamy romantic comedy novels with a creative streak, then I'm your girl!

Architect by day, writer by night, I love matcha green tea, chocolate, and books! So many books...

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