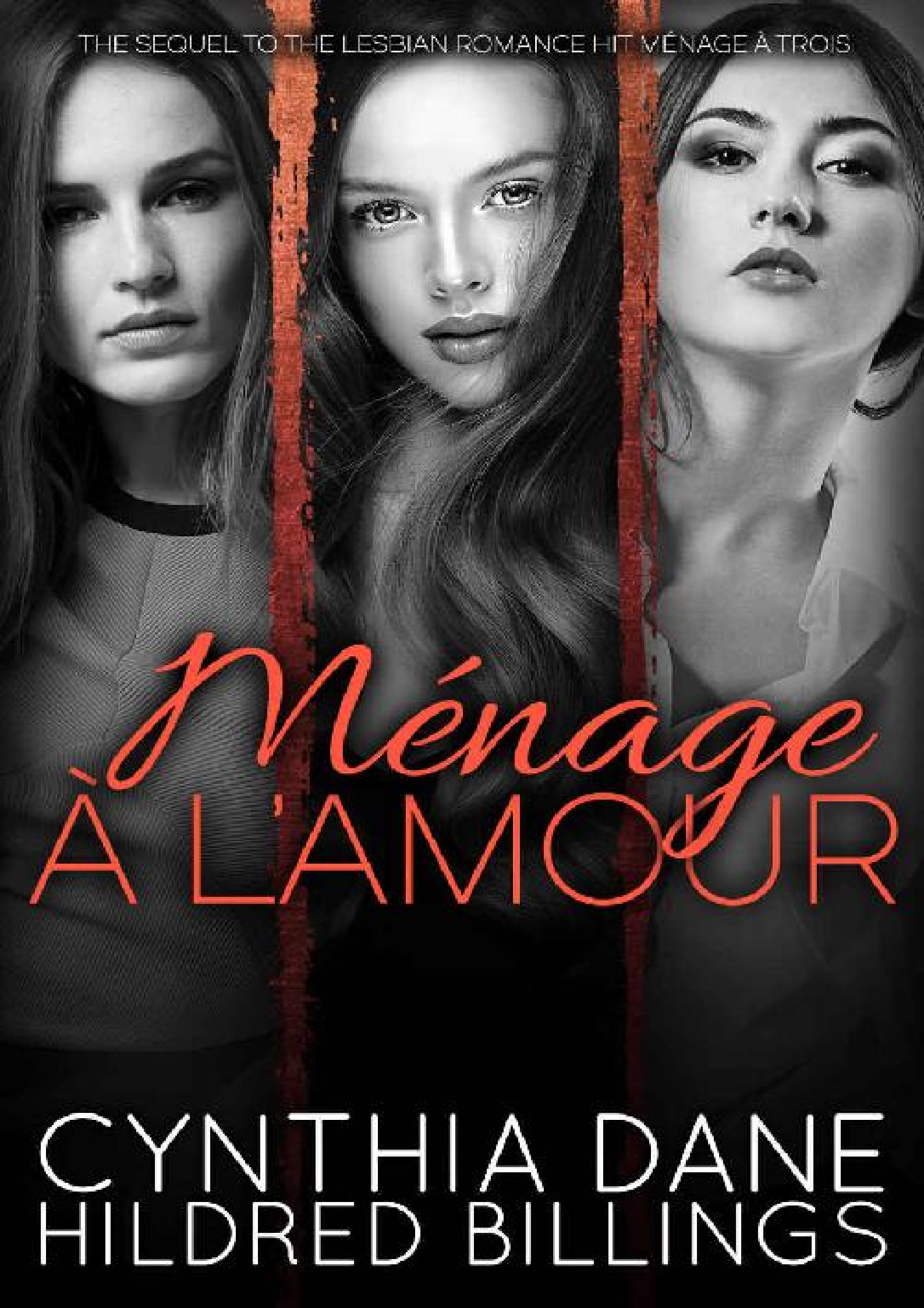


THE SEQUEL TO THE LESBIAN ROMANCE HIT MÉNAGE À TROIS

A black and white photograph of three women with long hair, looking directly at the camera. They are positioned side-by-side, separated by vertical red lines that look like torn paper. The woman on the left has a serious expression, the woman in the middle has a slight smile, and the woman on the right has a neutral expression.

*Ménage*  
À L'AMOUR

CYNTHIA DANE  
HILDRED BILLINGS

# *Menage a L'Amour*

CYNTHIA DANE, HILDRED BILLINGS



BARACHOU  
PRESS



# *Contents*

Copyright

Keep Up With Hildred

1. Rebecca

2. Caitlyn

3. Jane

4. Rebecca

5. Caitlyn

6. Jane

7. Rebecca

8. Caitlyn

9. Jane

10. Rebecca

11. Caitlyn

12. Jane

13. Rebecca

14. Caitlyn

15. Jane

16. Rebecca

17. Caitlyn

18. Jane

19. Rebecca

20. Caitlyn

21. Jane

22. Rebecca

23. Caitlyn

24. Jane

25. Rebecca

26. Caitlyn

27. Jane

Epilogue

Free Exclusive Story!

Join Us on Facebook

Also Available

## **Ménage à L'amour**

Copyright: Cynthia Dan & Hildred Billings

Published: 11th November, 2022

Publisher: Barachou Press

This is a work of fiction. Any and all similarities to any characters, settings, or situations are purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in retrieval system, copied in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise transmitted without written permission from the publisher. You must not circulate this book in any format.

## *Keep Up With Hildred*

Keep up with Hildred's latest releases by joining her mailing list! Behind the scenes, first looks, and even some free snippets!



PART 1

MENAGE A L'AMOUR





# CHAPTER 1

## *Rebecca*

“I’m sorry.” Rebecca shuffled papers on the desk before slamming them into a leather briefcase. As the clasps snapped into place, she switched which shoulder the office phone rested upon. “It really isn’t possible. She’s out of the office for the rest of the week. There’s nothing that can be done.”

The exasperated man on the other end of the line wasn’t having it. *What does it matter to him?* He was an assistant! To someone who had made it clear he didn’t care if he spoke directly to Jane Wong, the woman whose desk and this briefcase belonged to. Rebecca was one of two people who knew the four-digit code to the case, Jane not included. *It’s a terrible code, by the way.* 1982. Guess who had been born that year?

“Best I can do is have her call you when it’s most convenient,” Rebecca continued the phone conversation against her better judgment. It was almost 5:30, and her stomach roared for dinner. Right before she received this call

on Jane's office phone, she had received a text from home that claimed hot and fresh chicken soup was for dinner. *I can't wait. Holy shit.* Rebecca's candy bar lunch didn't last her very long, but what was a girl to do when she was representing not only one but *both* sides of Adams & Wong in the office? "No guarantee when that will be, though. As I said, she's out of the office. It was an emergency."

She finally shook the persistent assistant. *By hanging up on him.* With a huff, Rebecca slammed the receiver into its base and shrugged into her sweater. Briefcase in hand, she donned a facemask and swept through Jane's office one more time to ensure she didn't forget anything before heading home.

The goal was to effortlessly hustle out of the office, get in Jane's car, and drive back to the condo before her stomach exploded from disuse. *My blood sugar is crashing!* That was the only explanation for why she felt so woozy when locking up Jane's office – and why she swore she saw someone who should *not* still be there when she turned around.

"Ms. Pruitt." Constance-Grace, the head of HR at Adams & Wong, stood in Rebecca's way. Most of the office had cleared out for the evening, but not Constance-Grace! *This can't be good.* Over the past two years, Constance-Grace had spearheaded a campaign for better work-life balance among the office's employees. That meant going home at five, sharp. "Can I speak with you for a moment before you head out?"

"Oh... I'm really needed at home." Rebecca, whose voice was already on the quiet side, struggled to be heard through

her N95 mask. *Can't risk possibly spreading the germs from home...* “Ms. Adams needs me to help with—”

“This will only take a moment. I could send an email to Misses Adams and Wong, but I'd prefer the human touch through you if it's all right.”

*Great.* This must be *really* important. Sighing, Rebecca passed Jane's briefcase between her hands and said, “Go on, then.”

“It's about Ms. Appleby.” The form was soon lost from Constance-Grace's shoulders. “I'm afraid she's put in her two-weeks notice.”

Rebecca almost dropped the briefcase. “Excuse me, *what?* I... I thought she went back to California for a wedding! Wait, was it *her* wedding?”

“I'm afraid that's none of our concern, Ms. Pruitt. Between you and me, off the record...” Constance-Grace lowered her voice, although there was no one else in the office. “She does not intend to return from California, and since she cannot be an effective assistant while working remotely, she has decided to resign.”

Rebecca's head throbbed. Here came the hunger headaches. “I can't deal with this right now. I've got to get home.”

“Thought you should know.”

Rebecca thanked her through clenched teeth and hustled out the door before anyone else stopped her. *What a week.* Rebecca wasn't even supposed to work in the office like this

anymore. Not since her relationship with both Adams *and* Wong went public three years ago, and she also resigned as their assistant to not cause a stir with... HR. Of all people. Since then, she served as a part-time assistant to her girlfriends, mostly helping them with overtime work and when traveling abroad. Ms. Appleby, also known as Rachel, was the primary full-time assistant for the past two years. She and Rebecca worked in quiet tandem. *She gets paid. I get the vacations.* Unfortunately for Rebecca, Rachel had taken time off work for a wedding right when the household came down with the flu. That left Rebecca to deal with everything since she was the only one who avoided the plague unscathed. *A far cry from three years ago, when I puked my guts out in the condo.* Back then, her girlfriends had babied her. Now she was *their* nurse.

Now she had to tell them the bad news.

First, though, she needed to get home and put some of that homemade chicken soup into her stomach. That meant traversing the VIP parking lot beneath the building, hopping into a posh Jaguar that she would never buy for herself, and driving across town to the riverfront condo she shared with two of the world's most eclectic lesbians.

She didn't let fatigue catch up to her until she was in the elevator.

"Please tell me there's food." She led with that when she walked into the condo. Caitlyn Adams, dressed in her cotton

pajamas and wearing her long blond hair back into a frizzy ponytail, was there to meet Rebecca. “I am *so* hungry.”

Caitlyn closed and locked the door so Rebecca could put down the briefcase and remove her shoes. She immediately took off her sweater and tossed it into the coat closet before hurtling toward the kitchen.

Or, at least, she would have if it weren't for the pathetic whine coming from the comfiest couch in the living room.

“Becca, darling? Is that you?”

Jane's strained voice cut right into Rebecca's soul. *Crap*. She turned around at the fringe of the kitchen, where the enticing smells of a hot dinner cajoled her senses. *Soup and... bread!* Her two favorite things! *Fuck!*

Except she could never say no to a sad, sick, and pitiful Jane, who currently perked her head up from the couch, sweat on her brow and a wet T-shirt clinging to her tiny frame. *My God, has she ever looked so...* So like someone Rebecca needed to smother? Now?

“I'm home.” Rebecca turned on the charm as she removed her facemask and sat on the edge of the couch. She loomed over Jane, who clutched a blanket around her chest and slammed her head back into a pillow. “Are you feeling any better?”

“I feel like *yáuh behng*.”

Rebecca didn't need to be semi-fluent in Cantonese to know that Jane had given up her usual wit and snark to lay here

crying about how miserable she was. *The sicker she gets, the more adorable she is, honestly.* Jane, who always claimed to never get sick, was the first hit in the chest by the flu she and Caitlyn picked up at a weekend retreat in the mountains. While Caitlyn was laid up for exactly one day and back on the mend the next, Jane had occupied this couch for the past four days, her fever going up and down like a pogo stick whenever someone got a thermometer in her mouth. Rebecca had put off going into the office until it couldn't be avoided any longer. As soon as Caitlyn was well enough to take care of things at home, Rebecca trudged to a job she wasn't paid to do. *Putting up with Constance-Grace. That's my job.*

“Don't listen to her,” Caitlyn's scratchy voice killed the pitiful mood lingering between Jane and Rebecca. “She had plenty of energy to eat ice cream and yell at the TV earlier. I couldn't hear my mother on Zoom with this one going on about Maury.”

“You're watching *Maury*?” Rebecca asked.

“It is good TV when you're sick, love.”

“Uh-huh.” Rebecca pushed aside Jane's sweaty hair and sighed. “Have you had dinner yet? I hear there's chicken soup, and I'm starving.”

“I don't want your heavy American food! I'm *sick, sòh jyū.*” Usually, Rebecca was not a fan of being called “silly pig” in her girlfriend's native language, but damn if it wasn't adorable right now. “I want boiled pork liver with ginger.”



Caitlyn scoffed at them. “Since when do you eat pork liver? *Boiled*? You’re never allowed to make fun of Midwestern cooking again. Boiled. Absolutely nuts.”

“It’s good for you when you’re sick, Cait-*a*,” Jane weakly said, her eyes slowly closing. “Chicken soup is too salty.”

With her arms akimbo and eyes wide, Caitlyn looked right into her partner’s face and said, “I cooked that myself all afternoon. I Zoomed with my *mother* back in Iowa to make sure it was her exact recipe that we always ate when we were kids. You’re gonna eat a bowl, even if I have to hold you down and shove it in your mouth myself.”

“*Bo, yāu séung!*”

While Jane turned over on the couch and continued to release her simpering tirade of what passed for Chinese around the condo, Caitlyn rolled her eyes. She waited for Jane’s pathetic tantrum to end before saying, “I don’t have to be fluent in Cantonese to know what half of that meant. ‘Over my dead body?’ That’s what we’ll have on our hands if you don’t eat, *love!* You’re still sick. You need to eat. We don’t have any bloody pig’s liver! Boiled or fried!”

“Fried! *Tse!* What is wrong with you? I’m sick, not American! Not everything is fried, Cait!”

Caitlyn spared Rebecca a scathing look. “This is what I’ve been dealing with all day. As you can tell, my patience is thinner than usual.”

Rebecca shook her head. “You have my utmost sympathy, but I haven’t forgotten what *you* were like that first day when you were both moaning and sweating.”

Blood drained from Caitlyn’s face. “Hmph... some things can’t be helped.”

That was indeed true. Like it couldn’t be helped when Rebecca’s stomach growled so loudly that Jane’s eyes snapped open, and Caitlyn jumped where she stood.

“I’m really hungry,” Rebecca sheepishly said. “Can we eat dinner? It smells good, Cait.”

That instantly brought Caitlyn back down to Earth. As she tucked some stray hair behind her ear and turned around, she said, “I’ll serve it up. You can tell me if I should have added more salt. I couldn’t believe how much my mom told me to add... no wonder everyone in my family has hypertension.”

“She boiled that chicken, you know.” Jane grabbed a rag off the floor and slammed it against her forehead. Rebecca had no idea what that accomplished, but she was in no position to criticize a sick woman. “Can’t boil me pig liver, but she can boil a chicken.”

Rebecca patted her girlfriend’s hand. “Do me a favor, huh? Eat at least *some* of the soup. Sounds like Caitlyn’s worked on it all afternoon, and it’s her mother’s recipe. You always said Christie makes the best American food.”

“This is true... only she could make me eat beef fried like chicken.”

“With gravy.”

“Yes. With gravy. So weird.”

Rebecca stood up. “I’m going to change my clothes,” she announced to the whole condo. “When I get back, I want soup, and I want this one sitting up to eat soup with me.”

As she walked to her room, fighting with one of her earrings, she heard Jane say to Caitlyn, “When did she get so bossy? This is all your doing.”

Nevertheless, Jane had complied by the time Rebecca returned. She even ate some of the soup, which couldn’t get in Rebecca’s stomach quickly enough.



“Thank you for doing the dishes.” Caitlyn sat at the island counter, where she leaned against her hand and watched Rebecca scrub the giant pot that had held three days’ worth of soup for three people. “And thank you for going to work for us today. I don’t know what we’d do without you. I honestly don’t know where my energy has gone. I felt like I could have cleaned this whole apartment when I got up today.”

“You’re still recovering. Go easy on yourself.” Rebecca directed the faucet into the pot and waited for it to fill with water and soap. “Both you and Jane got hit by that bug pretty hard. At least you’re on the mend.”

“Mm, I hope so.” Caitlyn yawned before closing her eyes. “I hate to ask this, but could you get Lin into the shower?” She

meant Jane, who was sometimes called by her Chinese name when in the confines of home. *Then again, only Caitlyn calls her that.* To Rebecca, the woman who turned in her suits and briefcase for a blanket and washcloth was always Jane. “I’m wiped. I think I’m gonna go straight to bed and shower in the morning.”

“Why not wait for her to be up in the morning?”

“Because she reeks. She hasn’t bathed in two days and has been sweating ever since.”

“Fair enough.” Rebecca loaded the last of the bowls and plates into the dishwasher. It powered to life after she added some detergent and turned the dial. “Do you think she’ll be embarrassed when her fever finally breaks for good?”

“Not at all. I know this is your first time with her when she’s sick, but she always acts like the biggest baby. You’d think she had never experienced being ill before. She gets lucky and usually avoids the worst of it. That whole family is privileged enough to have those kinds of genes.”

“You sound like you’ve been around the viral block a few times.”

“I used to get sick all the time as a kid.” Caitlyn yawned again. “Not as much as an adult, but back then, it was strep throat this, chicken pox that. Would rip through the whole family once or twice a year. I remember my mom still making dinner and taking care of everyone. Me, Dad, my siblings... only now do I realize she had usually been sick, too. I never

guessed it. Even when she had the flu, my mom was the sweetest person in the world.”

“And always made chicken soup?”

Caitlyn perked up. “What did you think, huh? Not too bad.”

Rebecca finished drying her hands and leaned across the counter. “You’ve come a long way since you tried your hand at cooking back in 2020.”

“I’ll never be my mother,” Caitlyn said with a sigh, “but if I can feed my family without everyone gagging and spitting it out, I consider it a win.”

“Your soup was definitely several steps above that.”

“What’s the highest step?”

Rebecca took Caitlyn’s hand. “Gordon Ramsey.”

Caitlyn slowly nodded in understanding. “I will never top that. I’m fine with it.”

“By the way.” Rebecca figured this was as good a time as ever to address the elephant she had been carrying in her gut ever since she ate her dinner. “Constance-Grace had some news for me when I left the office tonight.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” Rebecca filled the electric kettle with water and waited for it to boil. In the meantime, she got out a mug for herbal tea, and when she gestured to Caitlyn, she received a shaking head. “It’s Rachel.”

“Is she stuck in California?”

“Worse. She’s not coming back at all.”

Caitlyn tilted her head in confusion. “I can’t deal with games and dancing around the subject, Becca. Not right now. You have to be direct with my brain’s current state.”

“She filed her two weeks’ notice. She’s gone. Not coming back. Don’t know why, and I guess it doesn’t matter.”

The kitchen would have been silent, except Rebecca made too much noise digging out her herbal tea of choice. A mighty sigh resounded behind her. “I should have seen this coming,” Caitlyn said. “Before she went on vacation, she kept talking about how her dream had always been to live in a cabin in the Californian woods. Isn’t that where her friend’s wedding was? Ugh. I don’t know.” On second thought, she wanted some tea, too. “Sounds like a problem for future Caitlyn to solve.”

Rebecca agreed although she didn’t mention how much she dreaded having no support in the office for at least another day. *Back to it tomorrow.* Rebecca couldn’t make any business decisions on her girlfriends’ behalf, but she could reschedule meetings and answer questions. Something easier to do from Jane’s office than here at home, where she usually did remote work when necessary. *I always loved it when Jane came back from the office, came straight into the office, and gave me a shoulder massage for a day well done.* The pandemic was only kind in that one specific way. Ah, and Caitlyn taking up cooking as a hobby. *Jane went stir-crazy, and Caitlyn embraced the solitude.* Rebecca was caught between them, grateful to not be alone.

Besides, they had Rachel for most of it! Rachel, the woman who did most of the admin work for two of the city's biggest venture capitalists!

"You'll be a dear and help us hire someone new, right?" Caitlyn asked when they sat with their herbal teas. "Maybe we should hire a guy this time. Except Jane would be too relentless for most of them."

"I'll contact the union tomorrow," Rebecca reassured her girlfriend. "They'll send over a temp ASAP, I'm sure."

"If we can find anyone. Even at the rates and benefits we offer, it's not as easy to find good help these days."

"Trust me, if I put the word out, at least one qualifying person will knock down our door for the job. You guys have a good reputation."

"It helps that we've made two of our assistants our girlfriends by now."

Rebecca snorted, blowing steam off her tea. "Two out of how many?"

"Don't ask me to math, Becca. I'm barely awake right now."

After they drank their bedtime tea, Rebecca saw Caitlyn to her room and wished her a good night. As soon as the door closed, Rebecca crossed the condo and found Jane already in her room, spread across her bed and a snore on her lips. *I have half a mind to leave her like this.* Except Jane would be sore if she woke up in this position. *Both definitions of sore.* Rebecca

wouldn't have any of that. So she woke Jane up enough to get her under the covers and her head on the pillow. The shower would have to wait until morning, after all.

“You're such an angel, love,” Jane croaked. “You and Cait. I'm sorry I'm such a baby.”

There was no sense responding when Jane drifted back off to sleep almost immediately. *Besides, she's not muttering in Malay, and I don't understand any of it.* Jane often reverted to a non-English language when she was too exhausted for anything with Latin roots. *Or Germanic, for that matter.* The Cantonese came from growing up in Hong Kong. The Malay was in honor of the nanny who raised her – and probably took care of her like this when she was a little girl.

Rebecca had learned a sizable Cantonese vocabulary since first getting into bed with Jane. The Malay, however, continued to elude her.

“You'll be better soon.” Rebecca said that while squeezing Jane's side. Snore filtered into the air once more. After turning off the light and flicking on the humidifier on Jane's nightstand, Rebecca embraced the silence of the condo. She took her time cleaning up the dirty tea mugs before shutting everything off for the night and finally retreating to her room.

She took off her clothes, put her red hair up in a twist, and plugged a pair of Bluetooth earbuds into her head. While delightfully sweet samba notes hit her brain, she drew herself a bubble bath and unearthed a bag of chocolate-covered pretzels she kept all to herself.



Her phone stayed on her bathroom counter. It forced her to bob her head and eat her pretzels in the bath... with peace.

## CHAPTER 2

## Caitlyn

She wasn't proud of how long it took her to get back into the office. This was a woman who prided herself on being "ready" no matter the occasion, after all. *When was the last time I was this sick, anyway?* The most frustrating thing wasn't being sick at all, but how she seemed so much better after the first day, only to take forever to shake the last of her infection. She was willing to lose a weekend if it meant being back at peak performance on Monday. Unfortunately for her, Caitlyn was only good for doing things around the house while Rebecca went into the office and Jane whimpered on the couch.

"You're leaving me!" Jane, who had more energy two days later but still wasn't going anywhere, peered over the top of the couch while Caitlyn slipped on a pair of heels and checked herself over in the foyer mirror. "What am I supposed to do without you *and* our Becca? I'm being abandoned. Don't you see that I'm a puppy, Cait-a? See? You can't leave me."

Caitlyn thought about redoing her hair and makeup, but she was already three hours late to work. “You will live. Imagine that your puppy self is in a top-notch boarding facility. You’re hardly trapped in the shelter, Lin.” She checked her smartwatch. *Should I take a taxi? Or my car?* Taxi was better. That way she could carpool home with Rebecca. “Turn on Maury and bask in the best of American daytime pop culture.” ‘90s kid Caitlyn believed that Maury had nothing on Montel Williams, though. Or The Gameshow Network, for that matter.

“The telly doesn’t make up for you, love!”

Caitlyn approached the couch. She offered a soft kiss to Jane’s forehead before standing up straight again. “I’m starting to like helpless, pitiful Jane. Just wait. When you’re finally better, I’ll have you crawling on all fours, bringing me slippers and the newspaper when I get home from work.” She turned around. “Like a puppy!”

“I walked right into that one, didn’t I?”

“Eat some of that soup!” Caitlyn pulled her coat out of the closet. “Love you, Lin!”

She didn’t hear what Jane cried out in Cantonese. Caitlyn was fluent enough to understand, but what was the point of going back in to make Jane repeat herself? *The power. That’s the point.* With a smug smile, Caitlyn took the elevator down to the lobby and asked the concierge to call her a taxi to work.

Rebecca was not expecting her that day. Neither was Constance-Grace, who did a double-take from her desk in the corner of the main room.

“Ms. Adams!” Constance-Grace was out of her seat before Caitlyn reached her office, conveniently located across the hall from Jane’s. “Ms. Pruitt didn’t say anything about you coming in today.”

“I felt much better this morning.” Caitlyn stopped in the middle of the room if only to give HR the time of day. “Now, what’s this I hear about Rachel putting in her notice?”

“Rebecca told you, hm? It’s true. We’ve got a young lady here from the agency. She’s around here somewhere... as soon as I find her, I’ll introduce you.”

“Lovely. Where’s Rebecca? Oh, and I want to schedule a meeting with you this afternoon so we can talk about Ms. Appleby. Jane will want a full report when I get home.” In truth, Jane knew nothing about Rachel quitting. Both Caitlyn and Rebecca decided it best to wait until Jane was ready to work again. *No sense in stressing her out.* Jane was too good at hiding her stress, anyway. She would put on a smile, say a few upbeat words, then work herself half to death and drink a shot of whisky to get to sleep. *When you know a woman long enough...* Shit, they had been married! Caitlyn knew every dirty secret and bad habit. Unfortunately, that went both ways.

“Ms. Pruitt is at lunch until 1:30,” Constance-Grace said. “Should I send her to your office when she arrives?”

“Only if the new girl is with her. What’s her name?”

“Who? Oh! Ms. Reinhold is around here somewhere like I said. In fact, she might be on her lunch as well.”

“Send her in as soon as you see her.” Caitlyn continued toward her office. “Remember! I want to speak with you later about Rachel!”

As soon as she was in her office, the door closed and quiet calming her, Caitlyn sank into her chair and admitted the only defeat of the day: she was tired and sore. Although the worst of her flu was behind her, she might have overdone it a bit.

Before her was a list of things to do and people to call that Rebecca had accumulated over the past few days. *If I get started right now, will it make me get home faster?* Already, Caitlyn yearned to eat more soup, watch TV, and take a nap. So it went.



“She has her reasons.” That was all Constance-Grace said when she met with Caitlyn two hours later. Within those hours, Rebecca swung open the door, gawked at Caitlyn, and retreated to Jane’s office – there was too much to do, after all. “You know we don’t require employees to give a reason for resigning if they don’t want to.”

“Still, it’s quite sudden, and couldn’t have happened at a worse time.” Caitlyn shook her head. Her texts to Rachel had gone unanswered. *I doubt I’ll ever hear from her again.* Onward and forward, as Caitlyn’s mother would have said. “With Jane and me getting sick right when business is booming, and poor Rebecca picking up the slack in our absence...” Caitlyn opened one of her desk drawers and dug

out a Tylenol. Her mineral water got it down her throat. Constance-Grace said nothing.

“Ms. Reinhold is doing well so far. Obviously, I won’t tell you who to hire, Ms. Adams, but we can hire her after her probationary two weeks or hold a round of interviews if you’d like.”

“I’ll discuss it with Rebecca. She’s the one I’d want to conduct most of the interviews with you. She knows how things work around here better than anyone.”

Constance-Grace twitched. Surely, she didn’t think *she* knew better than Rebecca? *I’d eat my beauty queen tiara.* Still, a formal employee – let alone the head of HR – should be on the interview team. *She’s basically the head administrative secretary around here, anyway.* It was a small company. Big enough for an HR department, but small enough that Constance-Grace filled multiple roles to earn her generous salary.

Then again, they had downsized a bit during the pandemic...

“We’ll figure it out,” Caitlyn said. “For now, I’m back, and Rebecca will fill in where necessary. As soon as she’s able, Jane will return as well. The flu really got her.”

“Send Ms. Wong my regards.” Constance-Grace stood up and took her leave.

Caitlyn didn’t have much time to breathe. Between answering emails that had languished over the past few days

and swapping confused looks with Rebecca, there was the matter of Ms. Reinhold, whoever she was.

It turned out that the union, as it was colloquially known, had sent over a young woman who couldn't have been older than grad-school-aged. When Caitlyn discovered that the perky brunette in a Calvin Klein blouse and Mary Janes was the new assistant, she almost balked. *No way. I'm old enough to be her mother!* So, that wasn't true, but it might as well have been for as old as Caitlyn felt when Sammie Reinhold poked her head into the office and said that Constance-Grace had sent her.

Rebecca was right behind her.

"I've already brought her up to speed on the internal system," Rebecca said before Sammie had the chance to introduce herself. "She's a quick study."

That was already a resounding review for the girl who hadn't stopped smiling since she sat down and waved at Caitlyn. *Are her teeth real?* Caitlyn had spent enough years in the pageant circuit to spot veneers from a mile away, but crowns sometimes fooled her. Still, those teeth were impressively straight and white. If they weren't veneers, they had still cost a pretty penny and some time to get that way. Caitlyn could respect that.

"It's great to have you here, Ms. Reinhold," Caitlyn said. "Things are a bit chaotic lately, what with Jane and I getting sick and our former assistant suddenly leaving. Did your group inform you about what all goes on here?"



“Oh, I’m well aware of what Adams & Wong are known for around here.”

Caitlyn had not expected it: a Midwestern accent so thick that she was instantly transported back home to Iowa. *Not that we talk like this...* This? This was Michigan. North Dakota. *Minnesota!* States that Caitlyn frequented when she got her feet wet in the pageant circuit as a teenager. While she had never made it to the national stage, she knew plenty of girls from the region who did. They always turned up the accent when in front of the mic.

“Where are you from, Ms. Reinhold?”

Sammie’s eyes lit up. “International Falls!” she declared. “Right across the border. Tammy-Faye’s from there, you know.”

Like Caitlyn wasn’t allowed to forget the Midwestern accent, she also wasn’t allowed to ever, *ever* forget the face and voice of Tammy Faye Bakker, who had been a staple on the TV in Caitlyn’s grandparents’ house. *My grandma cried the day Jim went to jail.* What strange memories to have in her New England high-rise office.

“Won’t Jane eat you up like a crumpet?” Caitlyn said through her practiced beauty queen smile. Rebecca instantly picked up on it and shuffled her belongings in her lap. “She loves accents. Our Becca here is from Virginia.”

Rebecca looked up from her papers. “Huh? Oh, I don’t have an accent. Not like Jane.”

“No, nobody has an accent like Jane’s.” Especially when she was drunk. Or sick. Or angry. “You might be a close second around here, though. Ms. Reinhold.”

“I’m really looking forward to meeting Ms. Wong,” Sammie said with a giant smile. *If that’s genuine, then she should get out of administrative work and become a Minnesotan beauty queen.* Caitlyn kept that opinion to herself, though. “You know, when the head of the agency said that there was a sudden opening here, I jumped on it like red on a tomato! So far it’s been a lot of fun.”

Rebecca’s lips curled into her mouth; Caitlyn nodded. “I have no idea when Jane will be back in the office. She’s still rather ill,” Caitlyn said. “Until then, Rebecca and I are happy to have you around. We could use all the help we can get right now, especially with work ramping back up in this crazy world of ours.” Caitlyn wasn’t lying, either. While their line of work hadn’t gone by the wayside during the pandemic, the lockdown had provided plenty of people the opportunity to work on their “million-dollar ideas.” Except they needed people like Adams & Wong to help them fund those ideas once prototypes were created and websites launched. *It helps we got in early with some apps that are big now.* Unlike some of their high-class friends, Caitlyn and Jane had only become richer. While Jane threw money at her home country in the hopes of mitigating disaster there, Caitlyn tucked more of hers into family trusts and charities both in New England and the Midwest. Her mother was the only one who knew about the trusts. *She keeps me up to date on who has babies, who wants*

*to go to college, and who is having trouble making house payments.* Caitlyn insisted on remaining anonymous – it was bad enough that extended family thought she was already a walking ATM. Yet her mother didn't mind being Santa Claus to the family.

But this also meant the company could afford more help again after laying some assistants off in early 2020. If Sammie kept up the good work she had shown on her first day, she was looking at a permanent position at Adams & Wong, complete with benefits and a retirement plan. Yet Caitlyn already considered the idea that they hire someone else as well. *If we hire Sammie, Rebecca can focus on helping Constance-Grace hire others.* Caitlyn hated putting so much on her girlfriend's shoulders, but Rebecca always insisted that she didn't mind – as long as she knew a big vacation came sooner rather than later.

After relaying instructions for the rest of the day, Caitlyn dismissed Sammie, who trotted off with an excited giggle in her throat. Rebecca made to get up as well, but Caitlyn asked her to stay behind for a few more minutes. However, Caitlyn said nothing until she was sure the door to her office was shut.

“She's got a lot of energy,” Rebecca drolly said, her elbow leaning against her chair and her hand disappearing into her mess of red curls. “Maybe that's what you need around here.”

Caitlyn hid the sharp pain suddenly striking her temple. *Last thing I need is Rebecca chastising me for not staying home.* Rebecca was good at that. The more comfortable she became

around Jane and Caitlyn over the past three years, the more likely she was to speak her mind. Granted, Caitlyn *loved* women who weren't afraid to express themselves, but Jane had not been prepared. "*Two of you? Is this what all Americans are like?*" Caitlyn could still hear those words in her head, although it may have been from when Jane was going the most stir-crazy under lockdown.

"In a silly way," Caitlyn said, "she reminds me of Olivia."

Rebecca lifted her head. "Really?"

Perhaps Caitlyn shouldn't have mentioned her ex, the former assistant who suddenly left her and Jane one day. "Maybe I don't mean to compare them, exactly," Caitlyn explained. "This whole thing with Rachel suddenly quitting with hardly any notice has me thinking about Olivia again. It's funny. I haven't thought about her in a while." Certainly not as much as she used to.

Rebecca pondered that while wrapping some of her hair around her finger. "I don't know what Rachel's deal was. Wouldn't be surprised to find out that some better opportunity came up for her back in California. There was that ex-boyfriend she always went on about living there."

"Yes, as I said, she's making me think of Olivia." How could Caitlyn avoid those thoughts? *When the woman you love leaves you for an arranged marriage, you feel a certain way.* Especially when the groom was one of Jane's relations! There were a few things that Caitlyn struggled to understand about life and love in Hong Kong, where she was living when Olivia

was her biggest confidant. The ability for a woman to simply break it off and go marry someone else that she barely knew was up there. *I had hoped I wouldn't think much about her again.* Yet here Caitlyn was, tormented by the sudden memories of one woman who offered next to no closure.

Rebecca got up from her chair and rounded the corner of Caitlyn's desk. "For what it's worth," she said, inciting her girlfriend to lean back in her seat and make room on her lap, "I think things can only continue to get better from here."

Caitlyn welcomed Rebecca with open arms. As they settled together in the large, creaking office chair, Caitlyn wrapped her hand around Rebecca's side and closed her eyes. Together, they sat in blissful silence while a few minutes lingered on.

It was only then that Caitlyn realized how damn tired she still was.



Caitlyn left the office an hour before Rebecca, who promised it was all right. In return, Caitlyn vowed to pick up the household's dinner from their favorite Italian hole-in-the-wall. While Caitlyn could have had it delivered – and waiting for her when she returned, no less – she had learned so many lessons during the pandemic. Mainly, that she didn't trust half the delivery people in town to *not* eat at least one breadstick out of the bag.

She groggily lugged two plastic bags full of food into the lobby of her condominium, almost unaware of the concierge

calling for her attention.

“Ms. Adams!” A middle-aged man in a three-piece suit and sporting a handlebar mustache had a voice that pounded across the lobby. When he noticed how encumbered poor, recovering Caitlyn was, he left his post and offered to help her carry one of the bags. “Welcome home! How is Ms. Wong doing?”

Caitlyn blinked away the crusty sleep from her eyes. “I suppose she’s doing fine. I haven’t seen her since this morning. Why?”

The concierge pulled a large envelope out from the confines of his jacket. “This came for Ms. Wong today. Registered mail. I signed it on her behalf, but it looks so important that I wanted to ensure it got directly into a household member’s hands.”

Caitlyn placed her bag on the floor and took the large white envelope. “I see.” She held her breath when she saw the initials “USCIS” on one of the stamps on the far side of the envelope. *I know that one well enough by now.* The only reason she did was because she had been there for every one of Jane’s visa issues back in the day. “Thank you. Wendall, was it?”

“Yes, ma’am.” The man picked up the other bag. “Allow me to help you to the elevator.”

By the time Caitlyn regathered her things and made it home, she had almost forgotten a giant envelope was tucked beneath her arm. It didn’t help that she entered her condo to find Jane,

dressed in nothing but a sports bra and cloth shorts, doing yoga in front of the TV.

Because, well, that was *always* a damning sight to behold.

## CHAPTER 3



## Jane

The thing that annoyed Jane the most wasn't that it took her a whole week to recuperate from the flu. It was that, once she was ready to rejoin the working world, it made more sense for her to tackle things from the home office instead of driving downtown like she was wont to do.

“What a beautiful bouquet of bollocks.” She kicked up her shoeless feet on her desk, leaning back in her chair as she stared at the ceiling. Before her, the large computer monitor prompted her to start reading emails. Somewhere in the condo, Rebecca made them tea. *At least she's kind enough to help me here at home today.* Apparently, a new girl was prancing around the main downtown office. Bollocks, indeed! Jane loved meeting new people, especially if they worked for her.

She did love Rebecca, too, though. Seeing her enter the home office with a tray of tea was almost as good as watching her sashay in while wearing nothing but a sheer negligee.

Ah, that was how Jane knew she was feeling better. Anything that made her tingle like that again was a boon in her

book.

“Don’t forget you have a decent pile of mail.” After serving the tea, Rebecca adjusted the blinds behind Jane and gathered some folders from the low shelf separating Jane from her view of the river. “I think Caitlyn took care of some of it already, but I have some here that are addressed to you and haven’t been open.”

“You spend one week speaking Welsh, and suddenly the post has a problem with you.” Jane kicked her feet off the desk and readjusted her posture. With no meetings and no intention of going out for anything but a walk in the evening, she got by with linen pants and a loose shirt that helped her feel dressed for success but would never pass muster in her real office. *At least I don’t want to introduce my lunch to the loo anymore.* Those first two days had been the worse. Out of the three of them, Rebecca had no symptoms, and Jane vomited no fewer than four times. Caitlyn was infuriatingly stuck between both extremes – no retching, but she was too sick to get out of bed as well. Cumulatively, their fevers were hot enough to accelerate global warming. *After that much vomiting, it will be a miracle if either of them kisses me again.* Jane didn’t look forward to it, no matter how many tins of breath mints she went through.

Rebecca handed her the normal-sized envelopes, while the giant one slid across the desk. Jane paid that one no mind as she opened an invitation to a Christmas gala and sniffed through a bill that she didn’t recognize. *Something to ponder*

*later*: On the bottom of the pile was a slightly fancier envelope with professional calligraphy sticking out of the top.

“Looks like the wedding venue has changed.” Jane pondered whether the bride or the *bridegroom* had written this notice. “Isn’t it odd that the RSVP only includes two of us? Granted, it was probably made out to Caitlyn and me, but you’re as likely to go as my +1 as she is.”

Rebecca picked up the card after Jane placed it on the desk. “The Mann-Chen wedding?”

“That’s the only one we’re attending this season. A Christmas wedding in California. Can you believe it?” Jane had no stock in Christmas, but she knew how important it was to most of the people she saw – let alone lived with. For years, she had spent Christmas either working in Hong Kong or sitting in a cozy house outside of Des Moines. *Caitlyn’s family knows how to party, at least*. Food, drinks, songs, and presents. Jane almost missed it those past two years. The plan was for the three of them to return that Christmas, but the wedding of Erica Mann and Natalie Chen delayed them by a few days. *Who gets married one week before Christmas? People like us, apparently*. Oh, and Californians. They had all the good weather for winter weddings.

“Do you want me to go ahead and change the schedule?” Rebecca asked, her American accent putting such a rough “ch” sound in a word that should have been more euphonic. “I’m assuming you’re still going, regardless of the venue change.”

“I bloody can’t well get out of it.” Jane picked up her phone. Someone from Hong Kong had attempted to call her, but before she investigated, she was reminded of the Christmas wedding. “Even if the bride is American, her family isn’t. My own family would have nightmares if they knew I upset the Taipei Chens because I didn’t show up to Lewis Chen’s daughter’s wedding. Especially if it’s gay like me!”

“I shall update the schedule, then.”

Jane glanced at Rebecca, who diligently pulled out the work tablet and punched something into an app. “You know you don’t *have* to do that, right? You’re your own woman. I know how to update my *schedule*.”

Rebecca did not pick up on the proper pronunciation of “schedule.” “It’s easier if I help you. Takes about two seconds to update the schedule, but you’re prone to forgetting.”

“You know me so well, love.”

“Speaking of being my own woman, though...” Rebecca put the tablet back down on the desk. “I must use the bathroom. Be right back.”

Jane hardly paid her any mind. Instead, she grabbed the giant white envelope from USCIS. What did immigration want with her? Had she forgotten to cross a T or dot an I when she last renewed her visa?

She ripped open the top and pulled out a piece of paper stamped with official letterhead and signed by whoever had their name on the bottom. Already, Jane hated it.

*“To the individual whose name appears on this document...”*

It took Jane more than a few minutes to realize what she had in her hand. Because she was still sick? Because she was tired? God only knew, because most of it was gibberish until she realized that yes, even a rich bitch like her could be in trouble with immigration.

“Becca?” Jane instinctively stood up, the letter still in her hand. “Rebecca, love! Could you please come here as soon as you’re finished in the loo?”

“What is it?” Rebecca lingered in the doorway.

“Read through this, would you?” Jane shook the paper in her girlfriend’s direction. “I think I’ve lost my mind because it does *not* say what I think it does.”

As soon as Rebecca took the paper, Jane scrolled through her phone contacts, on the hunt for her lawyer’s number.

“Uh, Jane?”

She was already on hold with her lawyer’s office. “What do you think that’s about, hm? Because I don’t know about you, but I always stay on top of...” Someone picked up on the other end of the line. “Hello, Peter! Do you have a few minutes to spare?”

After she explained the situation, her lawyer promptly said, “You know I don’t specialize in immigration issues, right? I wouldn’t want to give you poor counsel.”

“It’s not like I have anyone else to call at the moment, Peter! I’ve got US CSI NCIS or whoever telling me that my visa might be suspended due to ‘falsified’ claims on my last renewal application! Tell me, Peter, am I the type of woman to falsify anything? Only thing I lie about is how much I love my family. I hardly think that counts as grounds for deportation!”

Rebecca gasped. “You’re not getting deported!” she hissed.

“You’re right. I make this country too much tax revenue for them to kick me out on my arse. Not to mention my father’s connections with certain senators...”

Her lawyer interrupted her thoughts. “Let me put you in touch with one of my colleagues. If he can’t help you with your immigration troubles, he’ll surely know someone who can. Don’t worry, Jane. I’m sure it’s a simple misunderstanding that someone will help you clear up within the month.”

Although she took the number, Jane was not confident that everything would be as all right as Peter assured her. *I don’t need this right now.* She read over the letter again. This time, she noticed that she had two weeks from the post date to respond. Since she was sick... shit, she only had three days to respond!

“It’ll be all right.” Rebecca cleaned off the excess mail from Jane’s desk. “We’ll go over this with Caitlyn later. Maybe she’ll know what to do or who to call.”

“Oh, God. Cait.” Jane’s hands slowly ran down her face. “One more thing for us all to obsess over, innit?” Great. Now

she was talking like some of her friends from Cambridge. *My mother would faint to hear me say “innit.”* That reminded her... hadn't someone from her family attempted to call her before this whole debacle?

Rebecca reassured her that everything would be fine. Yet Jane was so preoccupied with a piece of paper that she almost forgot to respond to the emails languishing in her inbox or to return work calls with a chipper voice that apologized for being laid up over the past week.

Nobody could know that a knot formed in her stomach. Nor could anyone figure out that she was potentially in big trouble with the US government over something she had not done. *Do they think I'm daft enough to lie on any applications?* For God's sake! She hadn't gotten this far in life to *lie* on something as important as a visa form!

Rebecca always knew what to do. That's why the next round of tea was decaf, and Jane's favorite biscuits sat prettily on the plate. At least Jane had Rebecca. And Caitlyn, as soon as she returned home.

Two extra minds were always better than one... right?



“It doesn't look good.” Caitlyn turned over the paper. The three of them sat at the island counter, Jane finally collapsing beneath the weight that had followed her through work and dinner. Rebecca had cooked, but it was Caitlyn who poured wine when she got home and filled the air with a report of a

meeting she had suffered alone that day. Jane didn't have the heart to interrupt her and talk about her troubles, but they always hovered above her head, like a giant boulder about to drop at any moment.

Rebecca picked up the paper after Caitlyn put it down. Jane sat on her side of the counter, hand plastered against her face and fingers digging into her short hair. "What do you think they could be talking about?" Rebecca asked. "Jane's one of the last people I imagine lying about anything on an official document. It's like asking if she has skeletons in her closet."

"I am the picture of perfect behavior," Jane said.

Caitlyn rolled her eyes.

"No commentary necessary, Cait."

"You say that, but I know how you operate." Caitlyn topped off her wine and offered some to the others. Both shook their heads. *I don't have the stomach for wine right now.* If Jane were to drink anything, it would be something... stiff. She had a feeling her body was not in the mood for that, either. "You can be very serious about doing things correctly one minute, and the next? You're signing your name on anything put in front of you. Once you've decided you want to move on to the next part of your day, you don't pay attention. You think I don't remember what happened when we got married?"

Jane scoffed. "What is that supposed to mean? I took the wedding very seriously! It was my first and only one, after all!"



“That’s not what I meant. I meant when we were formally and publicly engaged. Immigration was all up our asses to ensure you weren’t in it for the green card.” Caitlyn glanced at Rebecca. “Can you imagine what she was like? My God.”

“Let me guess... lots of jokes that the agent could have easily taken as fact?”

“She told them that her favorite thing about America was how blatant the corruption was.”

Rebecca shot Jane a startled look.

“First of all, I didn’t say that.” Jane drummed her fingers on the counter. “If I recall correctly, I mentioned that the American government has admirable transparency to it. We all know what every member of congress is thinking. Your supreme court? Clear as glass! Don’t get me started on your presidents...”

“The only reason you got away with it is because you’re loaded,” Caitlyn said with chagrin, “and because of your posh accent.”

“Being from Hong Kong probably helped,” Rebecca said.

“What does Hong Kong have anything to do with it? If you want to talk about immigration privileges, let’s start with Singapore.” What Jane would give for Singaporean citizenship! But nooo, her parents had to from Hong Kong, with her ancestry tracing back to northern China. *I’ve got the same genetic origin as most Singaporeans, but do I get to be from the lion city? No.* Yes, Jane was aware that millions

around the world would kill to have her passport, let alone her family. She didn't care. Not right now, when they discussed her emigration to the United States.

"We're not talking about Singapore," Caitlyn said. "We're talking about you."

"All right, *Mum*." Ooh, Caitlyn hated being called any variant of "Mom," and Jane knew how to push that button. "I'm not sure what we're doing, having a good ol' go at dear ol' Jane, but if this is all you two have to offer right now..."

Caitlyn saw the bottom of her wineglass. "You know we want to help you sort this out. Last I checked, you weren't going for American citizenship, anyway."

Jane made such a face that she immediately regretted it. Especially when Rebecca recoiled from the disgust seeping across the island counter. "Sorry. You know that Hong Kong doesn't allow dual citizenship, love. No offense to this fine country, but I have no reason to give up something as niche as Hong Kong citizenship. Especially since I don't know if we'll spend the rest of my life here. We've already had a home base out of Hong Kong before. Trust me, it's good that there are different citizenships at this table." Hers came in handy when Caitlyn went with her to Hong Kong, and it came in handy now that Jane was the foreigner. "If I get deported, though, that would be terrible for our business! Do you think I want to go back to Hong Kong for *work*? The money to be made is here! Or Canada. Should we move to Canada? I hear Vancouver and Toronto are lovely."

Caitlyn reached across the counter and took Jane's hand. Something about that gesture instantly set Jane at ease.

"It probably has to do with our divorce," Caitlyn softly said. "Last time you lived here with me, we were married. That made the visa side of things much easier to handle. Now things are more complicated, even if you have money and run a successful business here. Let's see what the lawyer has to say. You called him, right?"

"Yes, yes. He's fitting me in tomorrow. He made it very clear that my free consultation is waived for the *pleasure* of seeing him before my time is up. Anyway, Peter assures me he's the best immigration lawyer in the city. I suppose we'll find out."

"Make sure you go with her," Caitlyn said to Rebecca. "She might open that mouth."

"Shouldn't you come with me? After all, you're my nanny, now aren't you, Cait?"

Jane was grateful that her partner didn't take the bait. For as the evening wore on and the three of them went their separate ways to prepare for bed, Jane regretted pushing either Caitlyn or Rebecca away. *The Lord knows I need them.* As Jane put on her pajamas, she remembered when things like immigration and visas were so much more straightforward. *Student visas are the easiest. My God, take me back to those days.* She was no longer attending boarding school or university in England, though. Nor was she married to a bodacious American who handled the immigration papers so Jane could cut her teeth

across the pond. *If I thought the immigration people here were a pain in the ass before...* She remembered the interviews quite well. She also recalled the men in suits sniffing around her and Caitlyn's old apartment as if they would discover immigration fraud out in the wild. For some reason, it was more preposterous to people that two women could honestly fall in love. *We learned to change the story of how we met...* Gone were the simple tales of Jane bumping into Caitlyn and her friend in a Chicago bar. Oh, they left out the part that Jane and Caitlyn's first dalliance included a third woman in a hotel suite. *Selling a story that we were eternally in love...*

Wasn't there some truth to it?

Jane couldn't sleep. Long after the hot shower, the herbal tea, and binaural beats thumping in her headband, she realized that the only way she'd get any sleep that night was if she spent it with someone.

It wasn't unusual in that house, anyway.

"If you're looking for some carnal reassurances," Caitlyn said from her favorite side of her bed, "you might try Rebecca. I'm still out of service from that flu."

Jane said nothing as she pulled back the covers on Caitlyn's bed and crawled in beside her. The two of them lay side by side, Jane attempting to recall what it was like to only be with one person. *Damn, it's been a long time.* She and Caitlyn had been playing the menage game for longer than they had ever been a monogamous couple.

While Jane lay on her back and listened to Caitlyn's humidifier on the nightstand, the body next to her rolled over and snuggled against her arm. Caitlyn often slept with her hair in a ponytail – something Jane thought must be uncomfortable, but her partner insisted was the only sensible way to sleep.

“It's gonna be okay,” Caitlyn said with a slight Midwestern drawl.

“What makes you think that's what I need to hear?”

“You only get in my bed if you want sex or comfort. Not always in that order, huh?”

“What can I say?” Jane scoffed. “It's been a big week. When I haven't been punishing my poor bathroom, I've had my bottom smacked by immigration. I can only take one thing at a time, Cait. Honestly, you jest about sex, but right now I'd rather receive some mail that states nobody will harass me about anything for the rest of my life.”

Caitlyn was silent for a moment. “Tell the truth when you speak to the lawyer tomorrow.” She curled her arm across Jane's chest and nuzzled her nose forward. “It'll be fine. You haven't done anything illegal, and you pay all your fees and submit your forms on time. As you said, you have a successful business and generate some good tax revenue for the state. Worse that happens is you're inconvenienced for a while.”

For some reason, that didn't make Jane feel like sleeping. “Like you wouldn't be shivering in your Prada shoes if we were in Hong Kong and the situation was reversed. To top it all off, we have Becca in the mix now. What will we do if we

have to be interviewed again? What if the government sniffs into our 'alternative lifestyle' as they love to call such things?"

"Then we deal with it. Besides, I doubt it will come to that. You're not here through a spousal visa. Even if you were, you've done more than enough to qualify for your entrepreneur visa. Which one is it again?"

Jane shrugged. "I don't bloody well know. There are so many different kinds. It has an E in it. E for entrepreneur? I don't know!"

Caitlyn silenced her with a kiss on the cheek. "Know what I think you could use?" she whispered. "One of my patented pageant massages."

As much as Jane wanted to roll her eyes, she had to admit that it sounded good. All afternoon she had hoped someone – either Caitlyn or Rebecca – would offer some much-needed physical love. It didn't have to be sex, but Jane would be a bigger liar than immigration ever took her for if she said physical touch wasn't her main love language.

"Come on." Caitlyn patted her partner's stomach. "Roll over."

"Ah..." Jane propped her chin up on the pillow as two thick thighs landed on the small of her back. "I do love it when you spread your legs around me, Cait."

Two strong hands gripped Jane's shoulders. Almost immediately, the stress melted away from her body. "I know."

Jane wished she could claim she said something witty in return. Instead, she instantly drifted off to sleep now that her body no longer carried the weight of her fate in her flesh.

She hadn't realized how desperately she still wanted to sleep.

## CHAPTER 4



## *Rebecca*

Jane's last-minute visit with a new lawyer did not sit well with Rebecca, who still reeled from the possibility that one of her girlfriends might be in legal trouble with the federal government. *I can't imagine what it is.* Jane was one of the most honest women Rebecca had ever met when it came to taxes and payroll – probably because she stood a lot to lose. *She's definitely more honest than most of her family.*

Still, another matter irked Rebecca, and it was a sentiment she shared with Caitlyn before she darted off to the office that morning.

“Why she's lagging on getting her permanent residency, I have no idea.” Caitlyn said that while looking over her shoulder. Jane was still in her bedroom, but that didn't mean her supersonic hearing wouldn't catch Caitlyn in the gossiping act. “It's something we discussed when we first moved back to America, but after her entrepreneurial visa went through, it never came up again. God only knows why.”

Rebecca had a few ideas, but she did not express them. Not that morning when everyone was getting ready, and not now when she joined Jane at a downtown law office that was as unfamiliar as it was striking.

“You’re sure this is the best immigration law office around?” Jane hissed as they sat in the waiting room. “It’s so tiny, I feel like a biscuit still in the wrapper.”

Rebecca traded glances with the secretary, a thirty-something man in a silk shirt and tie. He went right back to playing solitaire on the computer. Nevertheless, Rebecca noted the expensive furniture, the tasteful light fixtures, and the stunning view of the city’s CBD. *I can almost see the office from here.* Two portraits hung on the wall in front of her: on the left was an elderly man in a fitted suit and the kind of mutton chops that frightened small children, and on the right was the man they were seeing today. *He looks capable.* Rebecca’s preliminary research on the way to the law office deduced that the younger of Downey & Son ran the whole place. Dad was still alive, but Rebecca doubted they would ever see the eighty-year-old man.

They were called back a minute later. The secretary held open the door to Kevin Downey’s office, and the man himself studied a pile of papers through intimidating bifocals. Such a stern expression smacked Rebecca on the cheek, but Jane was her usual affable self as she stepped forward and offered to shake Mr. Downey’s hand.

“You must be Ms. Wong.” Although Kevin’s voice was not so deep that it surprised Rebecca, she did not expect the gravitas. This was a man who stood up to give a speech at a wedding, and no matter how flattering he was, everyone held their breaths. “Please. Have a seat.” He didn’t notice Rebecca until Jane sat down. “And you are?”

“This is Rebecca Pruitt, my assistant.” When Kevin continued to stare at them through glassy blue eyes, Jane continued, a slight frog in her throat, “And my confidant. Trust me. Anything you tell me is something I’m telling her, anyway. My ex-wife would have joined me, but someone had to stay in the office.”

“I see.” That was that for Kevin, who proceeded to ignore Rebecca’s presence while talking to Jane. “I’ve looked over your documents, including the correspondence from USCIS. I think I might know what your issue is.”

“Cutting right to the chase! I love it.” Jane’s grin was not shared by either Kevin or Rebecca. “Tell me, what’s the problem, Mr. Downey?”

“You were granted entry to this country via an entrepreneur visa that you originally applied for and received in late 2018.” A paper snapped in front of Kevin’s face. He squinted through his bifocals. “You renewed in 2020, as required, but all paperwork was delayed that year... hm, it says it went through in early 2021. Now they have found an issue. There are several reasons this could be so, and they did not tell you in the correspondence.”

“Clear as mud, as usual.”

Kevin did not appreciate Jane’s candor. “I’ve seen issues like these before. Usually, we’re looking at falsified info, and they don’t care if it’s intentional or not. I have a copy of both your original application and the renewal form. It seems everything lines up, including the number on your Hong Kong passport.”

Rebecca held her breath. Jane must have sensed a bomb about to drop as well, for her shoulders stiffened and her lips disappeared into her mouth. “That’s right,” Jane said.

“Let’s observe some of the facts of your business – you began Adams & Wong with your partner, ensuring a 50% stake in the enterprise. Including pandemic-related layoffs, you have always maintained a minimum of ten employees on your permanent payroll. You are bringing much more money than you are spending, and the IRS finds no fault with your tax returns. If I dig deeper and read between the lines, however, I think I’ve found our problem, and it has to do with your former marriage.”

Jane silently nodded, as if she understood exactly what Kevin said. *Yeah, right.* This was what Jane did when she was uncomfortable. *The more she doesn’t understand, the more she pretends she does.*

“Everything was done on the up,” Jane said. “I assure you. After the divorce, I resided in Hong Kong as I was advised by my lawyer at the time. When Cait and I got back together, it was still a while before we decided to go into business

together and move to America. That was when I applied for the visa. Independently.”

“Yes, well, I’m not implying the government still thinks you’re here on a spousal visa. If anything, I think what we’re looking at is them anticipating declining your next visa renewal.”

Jane rubbed her temples. Rebecca stared at the ceiling. She didn’t know what to say.

“God help me,” Jane muttered. “You gleaned all of that from a toothless letter?”

“I also took the liberty of calling a contact of mine in the local immigration office. After I briefly discussed your situation, he said he believes you’re about to be told that very thing – no more entrepreneurial visa when you go to renew at the end of this year.”

“Which is in two months! I may not have had my visa renewed on time because of the pandemic, but trust me, they made it clear that it was retroactive, and I still had to renew again at the end of 2022.”

“Yes, that’s how it generally works. Which means we need to clear up what the problem is with immigration now... or look into alternatives for you to stay in the United States.”

Jane swallowed. “Alternatives?”

“Yes, Ms. Wong. If you are denied this specific visa, we must quickly find you another one that you qualify for. Now...” Kevin referenced a folder that looked like one of

Rebecca's cheat sheets from work. *That's exactly what it is. He's got every possible visa under the sun in there!* Not to hand out, of course, but to reference. Some of the text was big enough for Rebecca to read upside down. "I've already eliminated student and dependent visas. I don't think we can do any of the other work visas, either, as you are not an employee of your partner's firm. That means we have some options, but I don't think you'll like any of them."

"Or we could work on getting me the visa I already have!"

Rebecca placed a reassuring hand on Jane's arm. "Both myself and Caitlyn are citizens of this country," she said to Kevin. "Will that help Jane in any way?"

"Oh, sure, but as I said, I don't think she'll like any of the alternatives. Tell me, Ms. Wong – what is the number one thing you value when applying for a different visa? Is it to maintain immediate control of your company? To keep making and investing money? Or is your priority to do whatever it takes to stay here, physically speaking?"

Jane furrowed her brows. "It is *my* business, too, after all. I give this country plenty of money! But..." She glanced at Rebecca. "First and foremost, my family is here. While taking them back to Hong Kong with me is an option, that doesn't help our livelihood any, now does it? So, excuse me for asking you to cut to the chase, but I'd like to know what's on your mind, Mr. Downey. What is my best bet at staying with my family?"

A sigh held down the desk. While Kevin folded his hands over his documents and settled his gaze on both Rebecca and Jane, the answer was clear in his eyes – especially when he acknowledged Rebecca for the first time since asking who she was.

*Oh, no...*

“I can help you transfer to a spousal visa as soon as you get the ball rolling on your end. Obviously, my professional advice is to marry someone you’re in a relationship with, but you’ve done this song and dance before. You know what it entails.”

Jane was speechless for a few seconds. Rebecca continued to bear the brunt of Kevin’s gaze. *Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no.*

“You want me to marry one of my girlfriends.” Jane smacked both hands on the arms of her chair. “Is that what you’re saying? How will I be able to work? I can’t work with your standard spousal visa! I’m not a dependent, Mr. Downey, I am the CEO of one of the city’s most successful, and quite frankly most *powerful* venture capital firms!”

Kevin ignored her rising emotions. “I’m sure you’re familiar with filing for a work authorization card. In the meantime, we can continue exploring other avenues. It may not even come to this. We still need to respond to the correspondence and see where it goes from there. Your current visa does not expire until the end of the year. I’m confident we can get you a grace period, but... yes, it’s my specific counsel that, should you be denied the renewal, getting married to an

American citizen is the fastest and ‘easiest’ way to keep you in this country. In good standing, anyway.”

Rebecca did not appreciate the literal use of air quotes when Kevin said “easiest,” as if it would still be a trial for the ages. *It will be. God. What are you going to do, Jane?* How would they describe this to Caitlyn?

“What about a permanent residency?” Rebecca asked. “You know, a green card?” Her knuckles smacked against Jane’s arm. “You were always talking about getting a green card. It’s not like you’ve talked about going back to Hong Kong for more than the occasional visit!”

“Yes, yes, what about the green card?” Jane asked. “Can’t I apply for that instead? The Lord knows I’ve bloody well invested *millions* of its ugly money into this country. Shouldn’t this be the route to take?”

“It will once again depend on what their grievances for your visa renewal are. But yes, that is an avenue to explore if you’re ready. It would allow you to reside and work here, of course.”

Jane held her forehead in her hand. “Mr. Downey, I am tired. I have just recovered from a terrible bout of the flu. I need you to explain in the plainest terms possible what I *should* do next. My priority is to not only stay in the country’s good graces but to remain with my family. Can you help me with that, or not?”

“You are talking to the right man, Ms. Wong. I’ve helped with a number of these cases over the years, although they are all unique. Right now, I advise you to go home and talk over



the options with your family. Then, we wait to hear back from USCIS after I file the response. Now that you have me on your side, they can't push you around as easily."

"I should certainly hope not. As I said, I own an incredibly successful business and pay millions in taxes. Your government should be kissing my bloody feet!"

"Jane." Rebecca stood up, putting herself between her girlfriend and the lawyer. "Let's go. We'll talk this over with Caitlyn, and—"

"Oh, that sounds so riveting. You know, I've always wanted to ask Caitlyn to renege on our divorce to save my fucking skin."

Rebecca pretended she hadn't heard that. "Should we stop by the office? Caitlyn's there."

Jane sighed. "Thank you, Mr. Downey. Your consul is quite helpful, I'm sure. You must forgive me. This is incredibly stressful."

"I am aware. It's my finding that while money can grease wheels and make the powers at be more sympathetic, it's not everything. Some people are made examples of. I don't necessarily think that's your case, but we can never be too sure until we hear more."

Jane shook his hand. Rebecca offered a curt nod. The two of them exited the office before Jane said something stupid.

She managed to keep it together until they were back in the car, Jane behind the wheel, and Rebecca finally releasing the

tension from her body.

“What a bloody farce!” Jane slammed her head back and grunted. With both hands bracing against the wheel, she closed her eyes and quipped that she’d love to go back to being sick. At least she didn’t have to deal with the government’s bullshit when she was sick.

“I’m sure it will work out all right. It must be some simple misunderstanding. If there’s anyone I know who doesn’t screw around with the government, it’s you, Jane.”

Rebecca’s words had the intended effect. Jane melted into the driver’s seat, hands dropping down into her lap as she lost a good five inches off her height. Since she was a woman of little physical stature, Rebecca wondered if the car was about to swallow Jane whole.

“You’re a light in the fog, love.” Jane turned her head toward Rebecca. “I’m sorry I’m so flustered today. That ridiculous talk almost had me speaking Cantonese, because I was so upset I had forgotten all other languages. I’ve been speaking English for as long as I can remember.”

Rebecca held her girlfriend’s hand on the center console. “I love you.”

Blush touched Jane’s cheeks. “My goodness, what is that for? You’re going to make me cry, Becca. I can’t handle tears right now. I’m in my forties and prone to being emotional for no good reason.”

*Could've fooled me.* Few people believed that Jane was as old as she was. Not only did she look younger, but she had an infectious personality that brought down the tension in any situation. Jane attributed it to being the youngest child in her family. “*Once you're the baby,*” she had explained to Rebecca when they were drinking one night, “*you're always the damned baby. So, go with it, okay?*” That had fallen on deaf ears. Rebecca was an only child.

“Oh, and I love you, too.” Jane chuckled when she caught the look on Rebecca’s face. “What? Didn’t you think I’d say it?”

“I knew you would, but I also know you’ve got a lot on your mind.”

“Yes. Now I have to figure out how to break this news to Caitlyn. Actually... damnit, let’s not say a word until we know more. Caitlyn doesn’t need this on her shoulders right now. There’s plenty to catch up with at work. If she asks, tell her that the lawyer is taking care of things, but we don’t know much yet. Oh, and my visa is still good through the end of the year, so there’s time to sort it out.”

Yet Rebecca didn’t feel better when she saw Jane planting her hands against her scalp, groaning. “What is it?”

“The bloody thing expires right before Christmas. Which is reminding me of that wedding we have to go to out west. My God. There’s too much going on!”

“We, huh? I don’t recall you asking me to be your +1 to the wedding.”

“Who is going to go with me, huh? Caitlyn? She can’t stand weddings. She barely suffered through her own. Besides...” Jane shrugged. “You make a great party date, love. People fawn over you, and you love it.”

“I think you want your assistant to go with you because it’s more convenient for you.”

Did Jane pick up on Rebecca’s sarcasm? Apparently. Either that or her laughter was in honor of the complicated feelings inside of her. “You’re not my assistant, Becca. You’re my girlfriend. Never forget that.”

“Is there really a difference in this arrangement?”

Their fingers locked together. “Of course there is. Trust me when I say that shagging your assistant complicates matters. Better for you to have the most important title while I pay someone else to watch after my schedule for me.”

“That makes sense, especially since I’m not being paid for all the work I do.”

“You’re paid in love and adoration.”

“No wonder immigration is on your ass. You’re paying your employees in sex.”

Jane thought that was so funny that she only cursed once when attempting to back out of the parking garage.

## CHAPTER 5

## Caitlyn

Nobody told her anything. When she asked Jane how it went, she got the expected, *“Everything’s fine, love! Don’t you worry about it.”* Which was classic, avoidant Jane. So Caitlyn tracked down Rebecca and asked for the “real” information. *“The lawyer is looking into it, but he thinks it’ll be fine.”* That was it.

The hell it was.

Yet Caitlyn had no time – and no leverage – to get them to talk. She was finally holding meetings again, both in the conference room and over the internet. She also had plenty to fill her appointment book now that she was back in regular action. By her side was Sammie, too, who had Caitlyn speaking with her latent Midwestern accent whenever she wasn’t careful.

“Ope!” Sammie giggled after bumping into the corner of Caitlyn’s desk. “It bit me, and I still didn’t see it! I need glasses, doncha think?”

Caitlyn offered her usual smile. *Jane used to call it my Queen's Smile.* Took Caitlyn forever to realize Jane had meant Queen Elizabeth II, *not* a beauty queen smile. *Then again, to-may-to, to-mah-to.*

“You’re not the first person to get bit by my desk.” Caitlyn loved angular furniture, as proven when she bought this monstrosity with its sharp edges. What would it say to the office if she had to buy baby-proofers to keep her staff and guests from hurting themselves? “Do you have those notes from the meeting?”

“Right here, Ms. Adams.” Sammie presented Caitlyn with a plastic folder containing her typed-out notes from that morning’s meeting with a start-up looking for funds. Caitlyn already had a feeling she knew which way to go in the yes/no department, but she wanted to run the highlights by Jane first. Sometimes, Jane saw potential where Caitlyn was daft. Nobody would say that Caitlyn was who made the company the most money. That honor went to Jane. Yet in return, Jane couldn’t run the office on a day-to-day level even if she applied herself.

“Thank you.” Caitlyn flipped open the folder and immediately appreciated the organizational skills deployed by one young woman. “You’re quite good at this, Ms. Reinhold. Thank you for your hard work this past week.”

“Oh, it’s nothing! I used to help my mama organize the weekly church functions back home in Independence Falls. Lutheran, of course!”

Caitlyn hadn't asked, but she also knew that it was a knee-jerk reaction for any Midwestern talking about church to mention what denomination it was. *Ask me how I know.* Technically, the Adamses of Des Moines, Iowa were Presbyterian, but not the ones that broke off in the '60s and started what quickly became known as the "cult church" to everyone who knew how to whisper. Caitlyn learned, all the way back in the '90s, to mention exactly what cross-section she attended church at, so nobody in her school or community center would know she was part of *those* Presbyterians. Granted, she stopped going to church in middle school due to hitting the pageant circuit, but her mother always appreciated Caitlyn's cooperation.

Only now did she realize how silly it was for her family to be so on board with pageantry.

"Where did you say you were from again, Ms. Adams?" Sammie asked before turning away from the desk. "Indiana?"

Caitlyn looked up from the notes. "Iowa."

"Wow. From the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes to the Hawkeye State! Is it true that Iowa is completely covered in cornfields?"

Caitlyn decided to humor her for a few seconds. "And the children that inhabit them."

Laughter erupted from Sammie's mouth. As if on cue, she bumped into the corner of Caitlyn's desk again. It didn't stop the mirth from filling the office.



She did, however, almost bump into Constance-Grace on her way out of Caitlyn's office.

"Excuse me!" Sammie composed herself before leaving. Constance-Grace, however, approached Caitlyn as if she were about to tell on someone.

"Yes?" Caitlyn did not look up from Sammie's notes.

"You'll be pleased to know that we have ten qualified candidates for the assistant's position already. When would you like to start scheduling interviews, Ms. Adams?"

"Right." She had already forgotten about that. "Next week, if any of them are available. Check-in with Rebecca. I saw her wandering around. Remember, I want her assisting you."

"Of course." Constance-Grace was about to leave but turned around again. "Oh, that reminds me. When I asked Ms. Wong about what qualifications she prioritized in the candidates, she said 'an Olivia type.' What does that mean?"

Caitlyn was already on the precarious edge of losing interest in her work. Now that the name "Olivia" was dropped, she couldn't think about anything else but her past.

"Olivia was our assistant back in Hong Kong. She did not come abroad with us." Caitlyn didn't mention why.

"I see. Suppose that doesn't explain much, then."

"Focus on what is needed most around here. Honestly, you know better than Jane does. Thank you, Constance-Grace."

The head of HR showed herself out. Caitlyn sighed in muted defeat. *Damnit, Jane.* Why did she have to make a quip about Olivia to someone who didn't know about her? She must have known that Caitlyn was the sorest about that breakup. *Besides, all she was saying was that she wanted something docile, punctual, and organized.* Sammie was punctual and organized, but nobody would call her "docile." Not like Olivia, who easily slipped into the corner of a board meeting and disappeared until she was spoken to. While Caitlyn wouldn't say she had always loved that about her ex, she had loved the thought that she was the only one who knew Olivia was there – like a possessive flash of lightning crashed into her soul.

Rebecca was close, though. She was closer to Olivia than to Sammie. Although, at this point, Caitlyn didn't know if she could say *anyone* was like Sammie. *At least she brings some energy to the office.* As long as she didn't offend any guests, she would be fine.

"I'm grabbing us a late lunch," she said that to Jane, who had left her office door open. "Do you want anything from the sandwich and salad place downstairs?"

"As loathed as I am to call it that, the Oriental salad is my favorite, love."

Jane never looked up from her phone. Caitlyn didn't ask if her partner wanted anything before tracking down Rebecca and taking her order. *One pepperoni pizza panini coming right up.* Caitlyn grabbed her sweater and purse. The only other

person she said goodbye to was Constance-Grace, who diligently typed away in her office.

The crisp autumn air hit hard that year. After a long summer of record-breaking heat and humidity, Caitlyn was happy to feel like she was in New England again, *not* languishing in Hong Kong's heavy summer weather. *It's the one thing I miss the least.* Caitlyn was no stranger to heat and humidity growing up in the Midwest, but she was used to it ending eventually. Even if it meant pounds of snow dumping on her head during the winter – something she could safely say never happened to her in Hong Kong. But she was a proper daughter of suburban America, and that meant tights, blouses, and the occasional pair of slacks in the office, no matter what the weather. It didn't help that Jane and everyone else set the same standards with three-piece suits and nothing but a handkerchief to signal that yes, it was hot in Hong Kong. *My first year there, I melted.* By the time she left again, she swore she'd never live there again, if only because of the weather!

*Give me chilly air, browning leaves, and pumpkin spice any day of the week.* She didn't care how "basic" she looked in her baggy sweater and boots.

Since it was the end of the lunch rush, she only had to wait a few minutes before placing an order for an Oriental salad, a pepperoni pizza panini, and a roast turkey sandwich for herself. A work text came through her phone the moment she paid, and she stepped outside to respond while waiting for the take-out lunches to be ready.

“...I’ll put you in touch with my partner as soon as I’m back in the office,” she texted the head of the startup they were meeting with that Friday. “Thank you for your pa...”

Later, she would be grateful that autofill put in “patience” before the text was sent. Because Caitlyn was so distracted by the voice behind her that she swore she had passed through a portal in time.

“...You don’t have to buy me lunch,” a demure voice with a slight British accent said. “I’m not that hungry. The jetlag is still calling me back to bed.”

Caitlyn whipped around. Although she beheld the sidewalk behind her, she saw nobody, least of all the last woman to have broken her heart. *I’m going mad.* She fanned herself as sweat beaded on her forehead. *I swear that was Olivia.*

Yet that was impossible. Olivia was in Hong Kong, with her husband and child. That was the whole reason she broke it off with Caitlyn and Jane after they decided to return to America. *To have Jane tell it, not only did she stop fooling around with Olivia long before me, but it was also her family that arranged the match!* Caitlyn still fumed if she thought about it for too long. Being left out of important events and ignorant of pivotal information was one of the best ways to alienate her. For a long time.

So why in the hell would she hear Olivia here? Now? Of all times and places? *My brain is playing tricks on me. It’s because I’ve been thinking about her lately.* Nothing more than wondering how she was doing and reliving those days

that could have only existed in Hong Kong. The few times they saw each other since the breakup, Olivia had assured Caitlyn that she was happy and secure in her decision to marry a man she barely knew. Caitlyn had moved on – with Rebecca, no less. So why was this happening? Did she still have a fever and was hallucinating half of her day away?

To be sure, Caitlyn looked up and down the sidewalk. The only people she saw were a businessman glued to his phone and a teenager carrying his skateboard instead of riding it through pedestrian traffic. The door to the restaurant opened, but it was an elderly woman shuffling out with her walker. Caitlyn was truly hallucinating Olivia's voice!

She picked up her food from the end of the counter and shook whatever plagued her out of her head. *I need coffee, probably.* She hadn't been drinking as much those past few months. Maybe this was her body's way of railing against her unfortunate decisions.

Caitlyn trekked back to the office, careful to not tilt the food in the bags. She focused on the appreciative looks on Jane and Rebecca's faces she was sure to procure the moment she walked through the office doors. *If I can't do anything else, at least let me feed my family.* That was Caitlyn's mother channeling through her, but she didn't mind. There were worse people to emulate in that cruel world.

The doorman to the office building tipped his hat and let her through. Caitlyn said a curt hello, her focus on getting into the elevator before Rebecca's panini created more condensation in

the takeout bag. Yet while she passed the front desk in the lobby, a woman in a large black hat caught her attention.

Especially when that woman called out to her.

“Caitlyn-*ah!*” Long black hair fanned around the woman’s shoulders as she spun around quickly enough to knock over the receptionist. “*Wa*, it’s you! Long time no see to my favorite sister-in-law!”

Caitlyn almost dropped Jane’s food. Which was apt, since that was Jane’s older sister Lilian coming straight for Caitlyn – hideously bright and unnatural teeth and all.

## CHAPTER 6

## Jane

“Oh, no. Absolutely not.” Jane refused to open her door and only addressed Caitlyn through their phones. “You send that banshee back to Hong Kong. What is she *doing* here?”

“She claims that she’s sent you multiple messages and voicemails about her ‘surprise’ visit.” Based on Caitlyn’s voice, she already had enough of entertaining Lilian Lam, Hong Kong’s loudest, most insufferable socialite. Jane would know. She had dated the others.

“That’s beside the point!” Had Jane received such messages from her sister, the only woman on the planet who ever, *ever* got under her skin? Sure. Like most of Lilian’s thinly veiled threats, though, they bore few teeth. This was a woman who marched off to destroy someone’s social life only to get distracted by a cake in the bakery window. *Two hours later, she’s flying high on sugar and wondering what she was so mad about earlier.* Unfortunately for Jane, that often meant her sister declared she was on the verge of visiting that corner of



America, only for her to go to Hawaii instead. “Lilian’s pastime is sounding like she’ll be on your doorstep in two days. How often does that happen, though?”

“Well, she’s here. She’s already crushed Rebecca in a hug the size of the Pacific Ocean. The only reason I got her off our asses is because I sicced her on Sammie, and the two of them are in the break room laughing it up like old chums. Even Constance-Grace is speechless.”

“For once!”

“Jane, come on. Your sister is here. She wants to see you. Indulge her here at the office so you can shake her later. She doesn’t know where we live, right?”

“Ah...”

“*Jane.*”

She flinched in her seat. “What do you want from me, love? I’ve sent her packages before! You have to put a return address on those things.”

“That’s what we have a PO box for! So your family can’t stalk us!”

*Hmph.* Jane didn’t have to take this. As the adage went, “*Nobody can talk about my family this way except for me.*” Although Caitlyn had been put through the wringer by the Wongs more than once. Namely, when Jane brought her home to Hong Kong and announced she was marrying the American beauty queen. *My mother cried and locked herself in her room. My father didn’t talk to me for a month. My older brother*

*pretended I didn't exist.* Lilian was the only one who responded, and it was to scream how excited she was for a wedding. Oh, and did Caitlyn have any beauty tips to share with the family? They sorely needed help.

“All right, all right.” Jane closed her eyes and reoriented her thoughts with a deep breath. “I’ll let her in. Tell her I was finishing up an important call and I’ve cleared my schedule for the next hour.” She glanced at her watch. Shit. She still had work to do after this.

“I’m way ahead of you.”

Caitlyn hung up. Jane had no choice but to pocket her phone and prepare for her big sister’s arrival. *How old is she again?* People often thought Jane was the older sister, but the reality was harsher. Lilian wasn’t only a few years older than the baby of the family: she was more youthful, more invigorated, and *more*. Everywhere the Wongs went as a family, Lilian stood out the most. People expected their mothers to look aged but sophisticated. Their older brother and father were both stoic men who kept to the introverted shadows of every room. Jane? Most people assumed she was a man as well. When they found out she was a woman, only then did heads turn.

“*Sai múi!*” That saccharin-drenched endearment slapped Jane across the cheek the moment she opened her office door and received a whiff of Lilian’s perfume. “There you are! I’ve missed you so much! Come here, come here!”

Leave it to Lilian to also be the big hugger in the family. This was the same woman who sent her kids off to boarding

school before crushing them the same way when they finally returned. *You'd think she loves her family or something.* Jane was never sure. Love, like money, was a currency among most of the people she knew back home. That went double for Lilian, who always – *always* – had an ulterior motive for everything.

“Your skin is so clear!” That was the next thing Lilian exclaimed when she finally released her sister and helped herself to the angular couch near the window. “The air here must be so much fresher. I’ve been having a devil of a time keeping my youthful looks in check ever since that pesky pandemic arrived in Hong Kong. *Wa*, how long has it been, *múii?*” Lilian dabbed her eyes with a silk handkerchief while Jane closed her door to the curious onlookers of her office. “Like, three years! You haven’t seen how much my children have grown in that time. I can hardly believe it myself.”

Jane kept her hands in her pockets – and kept her distance from the woman primping on the couch. *I can't believe it. There she is. Madonna of White Fir, in the flesh.* She referred to the family estate back in Hong Kong. Nobody ever appeared at its wrought iron gates and thought, “*Wow, that middle child sure is quiet.*” Or ugly, for that matter. Throughout Lilian’s teen years, she had several male suitors gazing wistfully through the bars of White Fir’s fence. She ended up marrying their father’s middle-aged business partner.

“How are the squids?” Maybe if Jane got the small talk out of the way, her sister would beat it. “I can barely keep up with how many you have, honestly.”

“Oh, they’re wonderful! Cecelia will be attending boarding school for the first time this year. I wanted to send her to London – you know, where we went – but my mother-in-law wants the grandchildren closer to home until high school. So, Taiwan it is. But it’s a great school. Has this genuine white picket fence around the perimeter, and not a nun in sight. Oh, and Giselle has taken up ballet and is an absolute natural. Her instructor says that she has a real shot. I don’t know what *at*, but she goes to lessons five times a week now. You’ll also be happy to hear that baby Jasper is talking now. We were so worried about him for a while. It’s an absolute travesty he had to learn such important skills while the pandemic was going on. You know how Mother always said that to raise multilingual children, you must have multilingual nannies? It was a huge mess getting the right Malay nanny. Don’t get me started on one who speaks Arabic! That’s my husband’s idea, mind you. They’re pushing for more business in Qatar and Kuwait, so he wants Jasper to learn Arabic. He’s a baby. It’s a miracle he already speaks Cantonese, Mandarin, and some Hokkien. English is next, of course. Before I left for America, I vowed to only speak to him in English from now on.”

Jane was already exhausted. Then again, what else did she expect? “I’m glad to hear that everyone is doing well.”

“Unfortunately. I’m still waiting for my mother-in-law to crawl back to her ancestors.” Lilian fought with an unruly earring currently caught in her long hair. “The woman is eighty-five. I was promised that most of the family doesn’t live long past eighty, yet here she is, still telling me what to

do. I thought she'd back off after Jasper was born since she never stopped crowing about a grandson." Lilian finally untangled her earring from her hair, scowled at it, and dropped it into her clutch. "Speaking of mothers, ours is doing well. She sends her regards."

That was the first thing to surprise Jane. "She knows you're here?"

"Of course. You think I could hop on the family jet without her permission?"

"Thought you'd take your husband's."

"Hmph. He needed it for a business trip to Singapore. Besides, I do prefer our family's Gulfstream. The seats are made of real leather. Frank's is that cracking faux leather that sometimes gives me a rash if I'm wearing anything above the knee. Which is always." With a smile and a sigh, Lilian curled her hands around her knee and batted her long eyelashes at her baby sister. "Tell me, *sai múi*, what is going on with you here in America?"

Jane was suddenly aware of how awkward she felt standing before her sister as if they were both in trouble. When she sat down in her chair, however, she was uncomfortably close to the woman who preened as if she were about to go on stage at a charity gala. *Maybe that's why she's here.* Jane would get an answer out of Lilian... eventually.

"You picked the right time to come visit." Jane leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. "Not only is the weather more manageable to the locals' standards, but I recently got

over being ill. There is a flu going around this city, so make sure you wash your hands before touching your face. You know how it goes.”

“Indeed. I’m glad to hear you’re feeling better now, Jane. I know how you can get when you’re sick. Don’t think I’ve forgotten since we were girls.”

Jane didn’t bite that bait.

“I’ve already seen dear Caitlyn and Rebecca. They both seemed to be fair in face and in bright spirits. How you’ve managed to keep both of them happy, I have no idea, but I appreciate you making it work. Between you and me, Mother and I have a bet over whether it lasts. She doesn’t believe in you as much as I do.”

“She wouldn’t be our mother if she fully endorsed our life decisions. I’m sure there are things you’ve done that drive her up the wall, Lili.” Jane knew exactly what she was doing when she said that. *You may have done everything Mother asked of you, but she’s always detested your outgoing personality and inability to shut the hell up.* To the point that Willow Wong refused to get her daughter tested for ADHD when the family doctor politely – and privately – explained the symptoms and suggested that Lilian’s social life would improve even more if she learned to manage it. *Then again, I should take my advice.* “Why are you here, anyway? I don’t buy it’s for a quick getaway to visit your dear old sister, no matter how much you adore me.”

Lilian snickered into the back of her hand. Her long-sleeved black dress wrinkled when she laughed like that. *I bet she'd get redder than a rose if I told her.* Now was not the time for petty, sisterly issues. *I need to get to the bottom of this. I have enough on my plate without her meddling in my affairs.* God, if Lilian found out about the visa fiasco...

“Why is it so impossible to believe that I wanted to see my sister?”

“Fine. How long are you in town? I have a lot happening, so...”

“As long as I desire. My girls are busy with their own school lives, and the nannies can take care of Jasper when Mother isn't around to spoil him. Besides, it's been so long since I could travel as much as I have this year. I have to make up for lost time.” Lilian smoothed her hair with her fingertips. “Believe it or not, I *am* older than you. I figure I have about five years before I start looking like mother used to.”

“Which is...?”

“Are you telling me you don't remember when Mother had to transition from hair like mine to what she has now? She didn't always have a perm. God, she hacked it off into the most depressing bob. I think you cried when you saw her! You claimed you didn't recognize her.”

Jane shrugged. “My memories of childhood remain fuzzy. Anyway, I suppose we should arrange dinner. I'm assuming you came alone, so I'll have Becca call around and see who can fit in four at the last minute.”

“No need for that!” Lilian hopped up from her seat. “I only dropped by for a few minutes. I’ve got my own things to do, after all.”

Jane tilted her head. “I see. Don’t let me keep you. You’ve always been a busy woman.”

With a grin as wide as her interests, Lilian twiddled her fingers and showed herself out of her sister’s office. Even when she was gone and the room was quiet again, Jane didn’t believe for two seconds that was the last she’d see of Lilian for the next few days. *She’s up to something.* This woman, as spontaneous as she was wont to be, didn’t simply leave her children and husband behind in Hong Kong on a whim. *Okay, sure, it can be a whim.* Except Jane didn’t live in a big event city, or a place where wealthy foreigners flew for the sole purpose of luxury shopping. It would have been one thing if Lilian stopped here on her way somewhere else, but she made it sound like she had holed up in a hotel and didn’t intend to leave for a while.

Nothing sounded more dangerous than that. Lilian’s lack of discretion was only matched by her ability to keep her own deepest secrets close to her heart. Jane had known the woman her whole life, after all, and there were *still* some things she had never guessed about Lilian Wong, a woman who spoke first so nobody had time to figure out who she was.

*Exactly what I need right now.* Jane had her own stash of Tylenol in her desk drawer. She raided it now.



It didn't kick in until her sister's perfume faded from the room.

## CHAPTER 7

## *Rebecca*

**B**ecca agreed that there was too much going on to shift focus to Lilian Wong's (Lam's? She could never remember which name the socialite went by) appearance. By Jane's request, she dug as deep as necessary to unearth where Lilian stayed. The hotel was, of course, one of the best in the city. And, thankfully, too far from the riverfront condo for Lilian to "accidentally" find them. Becca dropped a note with the building concierge that while security was not necessary should Lilian show up uninvited, she was not to be sent up or given the unit number for the Adams & Wong household.

It was bad enough she knew where the *office* was, but at least that was information publicly accessible by Google Maps.

*There's enough on my plate as it is.* When she expressed that to Jane, she received a laugh, followed by, "*I said the same thing!*"

That didn't make Becca feel better, though. For one thing, she was now in charge of hiring a new assistant to help

Sammie in the office. Constance-Grace muttered something about how “Not being on the payroll doesn’t mean you don’t play by the rules” before dumping a stack of paper applications in front of Becca. When she wasn’t arranging interviews, she parried the news from Kevin Downey, the lawyer who had a shot at helping Jane’s immigration woes.

Maybe.

“I’ve secured us an appointment at the branch office early next week,” Kevin said over speakerphone in Jane’s office. Becca was there, but one of her jobs was to lock the door and ensure nobody – least of all Caitlyn – came in. “My contact who looked over your paperwork confirms my suspicions. It appears that they have an issue with your renewal, and they’re not budging on the preemptive decision. I’m not sure what you’ve done, Ms. Wong, but they don’t like it. I hope you’ve thought about your alternatives.”

“Bloody bastards,” Jane muttered after the call ended. “Can’t get a straight answer out of any governing body. So what is it? Did I accidentally spell my name Wang on some form? Has someone in my family pissed off the American consulate in Hong Kong? We won’t know until we go to the appointment, I suppose.”

Becca penciled it into Jane’s planner. Right beneath the tablet were two more applications for the assistant’s position. *I can’t deal with all of them.* Word had gotten out that Adams & Wong were hiring. For every woman applying through the local guild was another off Indeed. *For every stellar resume,*

*there's another applicant who makes you scratch your head.* It wasn't a simple matter of knowing who to immediately bin and who to pass on to the second round of consideration. Some sucked Becca in, wasting her time when she realized that their experience amounted to "I made it all up."

"You know," Becca said, looking up from her lap, "you need to tell Caitlyn."

Jane mussed her own hair, her large watch momentarily getting caught in her half-inch bangs. "*Aa*, don't make me think about it. You know how she is, Becca. She'll worry herself sick if she knew I was having immigration issues."

"It will quickly become her problem. If you don't say something and she finds out we've *both* kept it from her..."

Jane held up her hand to silence Becca. "I know, I know. She'll make me check myself into the Tower of London for my own sanity. This isn't our first time doing this dance. I simply wanted to keep her from worrying herself silly. Yet here we are. I suppose we should tell her tonight since the meeting is Tuesday."

That was something else Becca had to do that week. Since Lilian appeared out of the blue, Becca was tasked with finding appropriate restaurants and other venues for the sisters (and the rest of Jane's American family) to dine with their visitors. Not exactly the easiest thing to arrange at the last minute. Only yesterday, Becca had called around to four separate restaurants looking for a place for a private Friday dinner. Eventually, she looked Caitlyn in the eye and asked, "Is the Golden Palace too

on the damned nose? Will Jane kill me?" Caitlyn told her to do it if that was the only place available.

She had yet to tell Jane where they were dining that night.

"Have you told Lilian when to meet us yet?"

Jane looked into the bottom of her coffee cup. Becca made a note to get Jane more to drink. "No. Why?"

"Our reservation is at six. Tell her to come by 6:30. We'll tell Caitlyn in the meantime."

"Six? That's not enough time to go home and freshen up."

"You look great." Jane always did, regardless of what suit she wore to work that day. "Caitlyn and I will survive in our workwear."

"The fact you're here working when you should be at home eating bonbons kills me inside, love. Stop fretting over my legal issues and my sister. You've done enough by keeping this place running while Cait and I were ill."

Becca offered her a wan smile. "I signed on for this when I moved in with you two. Things will settle down. Hopefully by Thanksgiving."

"That's weeks away!"

"It'll be here before you know it."

"Don't tell me that. It means my visa expires a month later."

Becca sighed. "It *will* be fine, Jane. You've gotten yourself out of tighter spots, I'm sure."

“I get myself into quite a few of them as it is.” One eyebrow waggled in Becca’s direction. “Anyway, where are we eating tonight? If you tell me, I can get used to the idea of eating with my sister there. In these clothes, no less.”

Becca might as well hold her breath. “Golden Palace. I swear, it’s the only place with a private room available tonight.”

The labored look on Jane’s face was better than what Becca expected. *That’s how exhausted she still is.* When Jane wasn’t putting on a smile and playing friend to everyone who came here to do business, she was dealing with lawyers, immigration, and family. Not always in that order, which was the problem. *She can handle lawyers. She can stomach family. Immigration? We’re pushing it.*

“Golden. Palace. Bloody fuck.” Jane slapped her hand onto her desk. “Lilian will think I’m mocking her by taking her out for Cantonese.”

“At least it’s rated the best in the city.”

“We pay for that title. Bah. Ah, well. If Lilian has a problem, she can take it up with me. Or Caitlyn. Either way, we won’t let her know you made the reservation.” Jane scratched her chin, brimming with a new thought. “Or maybe we will. She adores you, after all. She’ll think it was an honest mistake.”

Becca didn’t know how to take that.

“You’ve done fantastic this past fortnight, love. Remind me to make it up to you when things have settled down a bit. We’re overdue for a holiday. As nice as it was to curl up and *perish* on the sofa, I’d much rather take days off work because I’m spending quality time with my ladies. Or just you and me. I’m fine with that as well.”

Now *that* Becca knew how to respond to. “Caitlyn’s been working hard, too.”

“Yes. I’ve been neglecting her as well. She’s due a good spanking, don’t you think?”

Although Becca attempted to keep her laughter to herself, all it did was send a hoot of disbelief through the office. “Good luck with that,” Becca said with a smile on her face. “She’ll pass that spank right on to me.”

“We can cut out the middle woman and I can swat your bottom right now. I’ve got, what, ten minutes before my next call? Come over here and let me touch your arse.”

Becca got up, but it wasn’t so she could round the desk and amuse Jane. Instead, she backed toward the office door. “You sound like such a lecherous old man when you say shit like that. I have half a mind to tell Caitlyn. Know what she’ll do?”

“God, please, tell me! My brain is a dearth of decent fantasy right now.”

Becca put a hand on the door. “She’ll chain you to your chair and make you watch.”



Jane said nothing. Her smug look was enough to sate Becca for now.



While Jane had derided Golden Palace, Becca didn't see the problem – outside of taking the Cantonese family to Cantonese dinner, when Lilian no doubt wanted to sample worldlier fair. With discreet staff who spoke multiple languages and arranged multiple-course meals that appealed to every palate, honestly, there were far worse places to go. Why, didn't Jane come here with some of her “*gwái lóu*” acquaintances who couldn't get enough “authentic Chinese food” in their lives? *Oh, that reminds me...* Becca was under strict instruction to order the *Americanized* course ahead of time. Not only did it appeal more to Becca and Caitlyn, who were still squeamish about some more traditional dishes like pickled pig's tongue and beef entrails, but it would be different enough for Lilian, who could eat a bird's nest whenever she wanted back home.

First, it was only the three of them escorted back to a small dining room with baby blue walls and picturesque paintings of Southern Chinese pastoral life. For every fair maiden coyly flirting with a scholarly suitor, there was a field of tea farmers going about their work. Jane never looked twice at them. Caitlyn often scoffed at the outrageously golden pillars propped up in the four corners, each marked with a cardinal direction (because of *course* Golden Palace not only courted the best feng shui practices but had arranged their original building to be perfectly matched to “the winds” as the sign

outside said.) Becca was the only one who attempted to discern the calligraphy on the paintings. Her Cantonese – let alone her Mandarin – was still not the best, but she always prided herself when she picked out a character. Like water. Or heart!

Jane explained to their trilingual waiter that their fourth would arrive in half an hour, and they would begin with a wine and cucumber water pairing. She requested their best red wine to start. As soon he ran off to fetch a bottle, Jane shared a look with Becca that suggested they should get everything out of the way.

“All right, so why did we lie to your sister about when to arrive?” Caitlyn didn’t bother looking at the drink menu with wine on the way. Nor were there any food menus to peruse when Becca had already arranged for the “American Delight” four-course meal. (It wasn’t called that on the menu or on the website, of course. No, she referred to the “Lucky Star Four-Course Delight,” with the stars referring to the ones on the American flag. Once upon a time, that made Becca’s head spin, but now she understood. It simply made sense after dining in enough Chinese banquet halls around the world. “There’s something you want to tell me.” That was directed at Jane, although Becca knew she was included in that sentiment as well. After all, the three of them were a single unit. Sometimes, what Jane hid from Caitlyn was something already bearing down upon Becca’s shoulders.

Well, Caitlyn wasn’t wrong, now was she?

“Why don’t we wait for the wine to arrive first, Cait?” Jane already laid the charm on her partner, who had the fortune of sitting to her right. “It was a long day at work. We could all stand to relax before Lilian gets here.”

Caitlyn rolled her eyes. “Get on with it, Lin.”

The charm instantly disappeared. Becca braced herself. “I have a meeting with the local immigration office this Tuesday. There’s an issue with my visa, but my new lawyer is helping me. I don’t doubt it will be taken care of before we know it.”

Caitlyn knitted her blond brows. “What’s that, now? What’s wrong with your visa?”

“Apparently, this year’s renewal might not go through. The lawyer is encouraging me to explore alternative avenues for staying in this country, even if it means not being able to legally work for a while.”

The waiter appeared with a bottle that passed Jane’s initial inspection. While he filled three glasses, Caitlyn mulled over what her partner said. She didn’t respond until the waiter was gone and the three of them were alone again. “What?” she asked.

“We don’t know what the issue is yet,” Becca interjected, much to Jane’s chagrin. “USCIS is being mum for now, but we should know everything Tuesday. I mean, Jane will know. I’m not supposed to go with her this time.”

Caitlyn glanced between them. “So you knew about this the whole time?” she asked Becca. “I see. When were you going

to tell me? You must have known since Wednesday.”

“Yes, love, but none of it made much sense. I decided it best to not worry you until I knew more. Today, I know more. So, here we are.” Jane sniffed her wine before swirling it in its glass. “Your Jane is having a spot of bother with the government. It will sort itself out. These things usually do.”

While Jane and Becca tasted their wine, Caitlyn looked between them, impenetrable.

“Keep me updated, at least?” she asked with a sigh. “I can only imagine what will happen should your visa be in jeopardy. Hopefully, it’s not them making an example out of you...”

“Why in the world would they make an example out of *me*? I’ve done nothing wrong!”

“Be that as it *may*, Lin, you never know with anyone’s government. Someone might have been in a bad mood the day they sent you that letter.”

Jane shrugged. “This is why I waited to tell you. I did not want you fretting over your old Jane. I’m fine. Everything’s *fine*. Now, let’s relax before my sister shows up and—”

Becca had already seen it. She merely waited for Jane and Caitlyn to catch up to the shadow lingering in the door.

“*Wa*, Lin Hua!” Lilian braced against the entryway to their private dining room, the waiter right behind her. “You’re getting deported? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Jane, who had been unfolding her napkin, dropped it into her lap with no pomp. “Why are you here early?”

Lilian sashayed to the empty chair on her sister’s lefthand side. “I knew it was six and not six-thirty. You think I can’t see one of *your* ruses to keep me away? I had to know what you three were discussing without me.” She sat down, paying the waiter no mind as he poured her some wine and presented her with a place setting. “You’re being deported?”

The mood at the table simultaneously charged with excitement while plunging into the depths of Jane’s despair. *This could go either way...* Becca wetted her throat with ice water. Caitlyn politely asked the waiter for a pot of hot green tea. When he asked if he should have the chefs go ahead and prepare the first course, Caitlyn shrugged. The waiter took that as a yes and refused to make eye contact with either of the sisters now trading jabs in multiple languages.

“I am *not* being deported,” Jane said in English. “For the love of your handbag collection, could you listen for two seconds? It’s a bit of a mix-up whoopsie-do at the local immigration office. My visa is still good through the rest of the year. Things will sort out.” Jane sipped her wine. “Do *not* tell Mum!”

Lilian huffed in her seat, her handbag still in her lap as she pouted toward her empty plate and glanced around the room. “*Feh*, you put me in the northeast corner! You know that’s my unlucky direction!”

Jane instantly deflated in her seat. “I’m *so* sorry I forgot the astrologer’s wise words on your twelfth birthday. I was too busy being shoved into a fancy frou-frou gown that made me feel like shit. Next time I book a room at the Golden Palace, I’ll ensure you’re seated in your proper direction, Lilian – on the other end of my boot.”

“Why did you bring me to a *Chinese* place, of all things? Do you think I don’t get enough Asian cuisine back in Hong Kong? You need to visit home. I can tell all of the American sugar has rotted your brain.”

“First of all, this is the finest dining establishment for anyone who appreciates Cantonese cuisine, and I’ve made sure that you get the Westernized treatment that you *so* desire, Big Sister. Second, where else do you think we’re going to eat in private on such short notice? We don’t exactly live in New York City or Los Angeles.”

“Why not? I love New York. Ooh, LA! What a cosmopolitan city. You should move to Los Angeles. They’re much kinder to ex-pats there.”

“Are you daft? It’s the same federal government. The states here aren’t like Hong Kong and the Mainland.”

Yet Lilian still wasn’t listening, which prompted Becca to change the subject. “How are your accommodations in this city, Lilian?”

Although she was caught off guard, Lilian always had a dazzling smile to spare Becca. *It’s fake as hell, though.* Maybe Lilian genuinely liked people she doted on and spoiled, but

hers was a temporal affection. As soon as someone else came along, Lilian jetted in their direction, calling after the stranger that they should be her new friend. Or so it seemed the first time Becca met this woman.

“There is a sore lack of views in this city that aren’t over by the river, and it surprised me to discover that there are so few hotels and Airbnbs out there. You’d think with all of those apartments and condos that *someone* would rent one out to me.” Lilian hung her purse on a hook beneath the table and unfolded her napkin across her lap. “I’m staying in The Grand. Do you know it?”

“It’s popular around here, yes,” Caitlyn said. “Not a bad place from what I hear.”

“It’s suitable. Nothing like St. Regis or Mandarin Oriental, but *suitable*. You won’t believe how difficult it is to get someone to run my errands after eight, though. Even those delivery app... things... stop working around ten. What is a girl to do when she wants some chocolate or tampons? I mean, that hasn’t happened to me yet, but what if it does? I don’t know how long I’ll be here.”

“Which brings us all back to the question about *why* you’re here,” Jane said. “You blew in with the wind. Hey, isn’t that what the same astrologer said you were made up of? Too much wind in your veins. You’re always blowing around and making people’s lives more *difficult*.”

Lilian scrunched her nose. “Better to be wind who comes and goes as she pleases than destructive fire, *sai múi*. Isn’t that

what you are? I seem to recall Mother shedding a tear because she was once warned that a fire daughter could bring ruin to the Wong reputation. Good thing you moved abroad. Keeps the fires in America.”

“Wind blows fire,” Caitlyn muttered with a clatter of her wineglass. “Of course,” she then said, louder, “we’re grateful to have you for a visit, Lilian. It’s been so long! Since before the pandemic, if I recall correctly.”

“Like I told Jane two days ago, I’ve kept busy raising my children and ensuring my husband does well at work. His success is my father’s success, after all.”

Becca didn’t need the reminder that Lilian had married a man old enough to be her father, but it also explained a lot. *Like, a lot.*

“When the chance to escape for a few weeks appeared, I thought... who better to visit than my sweet sister who has been here in America this whole time? So, here I am!”

The waiter entered with the gallant announcement that the first course was ready. He presented four plates of choy sum steeped in oyster sauce. Sesame seeds were sprinkled before the guests’ eyes. Becca didn’t realize until then how hungry she was. *Oysters aren’t my favorite, but I’ll eat a whole flowering cabbage raw right now.* She didn’t know where her big appetite came from lately, but she wasn’t about to turn down her immune system’s chances to boost as they went into the cold season. Nevertheless, she waited for Lilian to pick up her chopsticks first. If Becca had absorbed anything from the



Wong family, it was that they preferred to let the guest eat first. Otherwise, it was the top member of the household, and Becca was grateful to not see *that* play out between the two sisters.

Jane said something in Cantonese that was as schmaltzy as it was forgettable. Becca didn't understand anything but "heart," and based on Lilian's fake smile blasting open in between bites of choy sum drenched in oyster sauce and dripping sesame seeds, it was said in Cantonese for a reason.

It didn't stop Caitlyn from leaning toward Becca and saying, "*You are the heart of my sisterly love*" before mimicking making herself throw up.

"Actually..." Lilian placed her chopsticks across the top of her plate, careful that the tips didn't point at anyone in particular. "There is something I wanted to tell you and your unconventional family. Of course, I had a reason for visiting that wasn't limited to loving my wonderful, beautiful, and *very* understanding sister and missing her *dearly*. Have I told you that you are my oldest daughter's favorite aunt? She's only met you a handful of times, but you stick out in her memory, Lin Hua."

Jane narrowed her eyes, chopsticks suspended in the air and pointing directly at Becca across the table. "Uh-huh. You only call me by my Chinese name in English when you're buttering me up."

*That's buttering her up?* Wasn't the long line of descriptive adjectives that became more ridiculous than the last?

“I’m having some...” Lilian rested her elbows on the table, hands folded over her plate of half-eaten choy sum. Already, the oyster sauce began to congeal. It reminded Becca to finish eating her serving. “Domestic issues, dear sister. As you know, my husband is quite middle-aged and already disinterested in me. After the birth of our son, he’s made it clear that he’s had his use of me in the bedroom. Don’t ask me to name his much younger mistress. She stays out of the way, and I get to be wife and mother to Francis Lam’s house. Of course, what his *mother* thinks is another...”

Jane interrupted her. “You came to visit me because you found out your uncle of a husband is cheating on you and is no longer interested in you?”

“You know, beyond what is publicly required. Family functions, the yearly vacation for the gossip magazines to behold, our cousin’s funeral... ah, who cares? I should be relieved, right? You always teased me about agreeing to marry our father’s business partner.”

“More like I constantly expressed how grateful I was for your fortuitous existence, dear sister. Because then the responsibility didn’t fall upon me. Much better that it was you than me.”

“Either way, this is my situation now. I’m taking a break from the Lam household to sort my thoughts. Of course, Frank would never, ever allow *me* to have an affair to suit *my* needs, but that’s beside the point.”

Caitlyn cleared her throat. “You make it sound like you already have someone in mind.”

“What? No! That’s silly, Caitlyn. I’ve barely had enough time to accept my situation. I’ve got a cheating husband old enough to be my father, a geriatric mother-in-law who still calls me a toothless prostitute – which sounds much worse in Mandarin, I assure you – and three children. Is this what they call a mid-life crisis?”

Becca didn’t know if this conversation was on the fast track to burning down the restaurant. For all she knew, this was how Jane and Lilian conducted themselves every time they were in each other’s business – whether willingly or not. *In this case, Lilian is injecting herself into Jane’s world.* How often did that happen? How often did Lilian Wong show up in America to air her marital grievances to the only person in her family who didn’t truly care?

“It’s at least lovely to hear that your children are doing well, Lilian,” Becca said, with a soft glance in Jane’s direction. It gave her girlfriend the chance to reorient herself. *If nothing else, eat your choy sum, Jane.* This was a woman who often worked herself up to having no appetite or letting her food go bad because... well, Becca didn’t always understand. She only knew that Jane often ate like a bird and thought breakfast was half a grapefruit. More than once, Caitlyn had quipped that Jane would forget to drink her liquor if someone didn’t put it right in front of her nose.

Lilian was not as involved with this side of Jane, though. Which was why Becca didn't hesitate to shift the conversation.

"Yes, well..." Lilian shoved aside the congealing oyster sauce and picked at what remained of the vegetable leaves. "Cecelia was a mess when I left. I feel a bit bad about it."

"What was she upset about?" Caitlyn asked.

The way Lilian shoved food into her mouth implied that she needed time to come up with a story. *That's what I thought.* Caitlyn must have thought the same thing, for she took her time refilling the water glasses around the table, stopping only to exchange a heated look with Becca.

"It's the Queen," Lilian eventually said with a practiced sigh. "Cecelia really loved Her Majesty so much. I remember she came home from school a year ago and proudly announced they had reached that part in their history lessons." When Becca gave her a wary look, Lilian explained, "She gets it from her father and grandmother. The whole Lam family is enamored with royalty. The way my mother-in-law tells it, the most shameful thing in Hong Kong's history was losing them as our rulers."

"I see," Becca said.

"Meanwhile," Jane interjected, "*our* family will never, ever pick a side. Are we pro-colony? Pro-China? The Wongs will have you know that we are both and neither at the same time. You know, whatever lines the pocket at the moment."

Lilian dropped her chopsticks. “You know that’s not true! I think...”

“Don’t you fret about it, Lili. You simply worry about what your mother-in-law thinks.”

“This is why I almost didn’t come to visit. You’re so condescending to me. You may think you have everything figured out, but you get into as much trouble as I do! Don’t you think Mother has issues with your arrangement?” Lilian blushed when she realized she had said that in English. Becca had a feeling that the Cantonese following was not entirely for her benefit.

“Ladies,” Caitlyn said with her queenly demeanor. “It’s not every day you get to eat dinner together. I believe our second course of mushroom soup is on its way. Why don’t we focus on the positive? There is plenty of time in Lilian’s visit to get to the meat of matters.”

Lilian sniffed. “You’re wise as always, Caitlyn. Jane is so lucky to have you. Can you imagine her with a husband?”

There was no time to contemplate that. The waiter entered to begin clearing away plates. The only thing anyone would say was, “*My, what wonderful choy sum.*” As if that were the highest praise in the world.



“Can you believe her prattle?” Jane let it all loose as soon as the trio walked through the condo door. “Absolutely inane. If

she came from Hong Kong to harangue me while attempting to extract pity from us, well! I shudder to think what she would do should there be a real crisis in her life!”

With a heavy sigh, Caitlyn tossed her bag onto the couch and leaned against the back. “It’s clear there is something else going on in her life. I’m more tolerant of Lilian’s strange behavior, but that was out of character, even for her.”

Jane shoved her coat into the front closet and left her shoes in the foyer. Becca picked them up and placed them on the rack, right next to Caitlyn’s favorite work heels of the moment and her sneakers. “Are you sure about that, Cait? It’s completely in character for my spoiled sister to come and go as she pleases. She has no job and a husband as rich as our father. Her biggest responsibility is overseeing her children’s education, and it sounds like she has that planned out for them over the next ten years! Jetting off on holiday to Timbuktu or our American city is completely like her. She came here to whine to me because she knows our mother will tell her to shut up and accept responsibility. Her friends are probably in the far winds after marrying their own middle-aged billionaires. Honestly, she’s right. I’m the only person who won’t judge her for being unhappy about her marriage. Because God knows it couldn’t be me!”

Jane flopped onto the couch. Caitlyn leaned over it. Becca unloaded her sweater and purse, her stomach currently disagreeing with the main course of ginger lobster. *Shellfish. When will I learn?*

Caitlyn spared Jane a look before sauntering into the kitchen. “If my sister came into town from the far winds,” she said, searching for a clean glass in the cupboard, “I’d be concerned for her, and I’m not particularly close to my siblings, either.”

“You’d assume they were asking you for money,” Jane said. “Lilian doesn’t need money. She needs sense.”

Becca giggled.

“What’s so amusing?”

“Oh... you said she doesn’t need money... she needs *cents*...”

“You Americans and your puns.”

“Lilian is here, Lin!” Caitlyn called from the kitchen. “Right on time for the immigration office to question your every move and motive in this country! Welcome to 2022! By the way, which one of us are you taking to the wedding in December?”

The rude gesture coming from the couch would have been offensive, except Jane’s movements were so lazy that Becca couldn’t help but laugh.

“At least one of us has a sense of humor right now,” Jane muttered.

That was it. Although Becca knew that the three of them faced their separate pressures and fears – never mind *family* – she was tired of the bellyaching and backhanded comments that tended to fly when Jane and Caitlyn showed off the real

reason they got divorced several years ago. *They say it's because they both wanted different things...* Yeah, right. More like every night ended up like this between them. Becca would eat her own hair if that wasn't true.

Wasn't one of her roles in this relationship to bridge the gap between them? To help maintain the harmonious balance of their unconventional household? *They gave me something to live for three years ago.* Now, Becca gave her girlfriends something to treasure.

Even if that was unconventional as well.

"Pardon me." Becca brushed by Caitlyn in the kitchen and stared at the wall calendar hanging next to the fridge. She smacked her finger on the next day, Saturday. After memorizing the date, she flipped back in the calendar until she saw the last black star she penned. All the way back in August...

That settled it, and answered a few questions, huh?

"What are you doing?" Caitlyn leaned against the island counter, glass of water in hand. She studied Becca's movements as the black pen hanging from the calendar then traveled between the red triangle, star, and circle on various dates throughout the months. "I thought those marks came from you, but I never figured out what they meant." She shrugged. "I also don't use paper calendars, so what do I know?"

"I didn't even notice we had one until now," Jane said, chin propped on the back of the couch.



“How in the world did you not notice?” Caitlyn chastised her. “It’s huge! And right next to the fridge!”

“You know I only go over there when grabbing my breakfast, and I’m so groggy in the mornings. There could be a naked woman standing in the corner, and I wouldn’t notice.”

Becca had to restart her counting at least three times in between everyone else’s words. Once she was sure nobody had anything going on the next day, she announced, “We’re hitting the club tomorrow night.”

It took her girlfriends more than a few seconds to register what she said.

“The club?” Caitlyn repeated back to her. “You mean The Dark Hour?”

“Duh. We haven’t been since last month. No wonder you two are going bonkers.”

“Are you telling me you track on the calendar when we go to the bloody club?”

“Yup. That’s the black star. The red ones are when we all start our periods every month.”

Caitlyn’s jaw dropped. “You’ve got to be kidding me...”

“Ha!” Jane hooted from the couch. “That’s our Becca. Ever the observant one.”

“She must be the circle,” Caitlyn muttered. “Am I the star?”

“Of course,” Becca said, “and I’m the triangle. Remember back in May when we all synced up perfectly? First time that

ever happened.”

Caitlyn almost choked on her water. “We all started our periods the same day?”

“Yup! You tried to hide it, but I always know.”

“You always *know* when I start my period? Are you snooping through my trash?”

“On the contrary, your tells involve what you order from Instacart and which pair of sweatpants you wear to bed. You only wear those holey gray ones when you need to mind whether you lea—”

Caitlyn let out such a sound that made Jane only laugh more. “The gray trackies! I should have known that’s what those meant!”

“In case you two ever wondered,” Becca continued, “Caitlyn is the most regular out of the three of us. Every twenty-eight days, on the dot.”

“Must you share this with everyone right now? Besides, I already knew that about myself. I can track my cycle quite fine on my own.”

“Especially if it’s every twenty-eight days on the dot, right, Cait?”

Becca grinned at her girlfriends. “This is why we need to go out tomorrow night and have some stupid fun.”

Although silence was not always welcomed in their household, Becca didn’t hold it against her girlfriends. She had

a feeling they would come around to her idea.

*Because I'm right.* Their family unit was about paying the rent, procuring food, and taking care of each other when sick, but there was that thing that brought them together in the first place. *These two love sex.* Even when they weren't having it, they loved watching others, talking about it, and reminiscing about all the times they had fun with one another.

Becca liked sex, too, but these two had turned it into an enviable lifestyle that burrowed itself into everything they said, thought, and did. Luckily, there was a place they could go to forget everything bothering them that week.

“What do you think, Cait?” Jane said. “Shall we treat our lovely Becca to a night out on the town?”

“I didn't say it was for *me*...”

“Why, I think that's not too bad of an idea. We could get dressed up and make a big night of it. I don't have any other plans. Do you, Jane?”

“For the love of God, give me some plans so my sister doesn't show up. She won't be at the club, right?”

“If she is, we have way bigger problems.”

So it was decided, much to Becca's relief. *I hope this works.* Normalcy must return to the Adams-Wong-Pruitt household.

## CHAPTER 8

## Caitlyn

“It’s not even Ladies’ Night!” Jane peered over the steering wheel of her Jaguar, scrunching her nose at the big black SUV ahead of her in the valet parking line. “Why the hell are there so many people coming to the club on a Saturday night?”

“Didn’t you answer your own question?” Caitlyn said. “It’s Saturday night. And it’s not Ladies’ Night, so there are a bunch of *men* in the club tonight.”

“Bloody hell, the blokes are booming.”

From the tiny, cramped backseat, Rebecca chimed, “I can’t tell who is also coming tonight. I’ve texted four different people, and nobody has gotten back to me.”

“Did you find out if the Diamond VIP is open?” Jane asked.

“No, sorry. I’m trying to do five different things at once.”

“Rebecca, sweetie...” Caitlyn craned her head over her shoulder, blond hair pulling against her scalp. *I knew I should have left it down tonight.* Instead, she clipped it up into the

heaviest bun, and all so she could show off her neck and clavicles in this white A-line dress. “Don’t worry about any of that. You’re not our assistant tonight! You’re our girlfriend, and the whole club knows it.”

Caitlyn was the first one out of the car when it was finally their turn at the valet. She helped Rebecca out of the backseat while Jane tossed the keys to the young man in a red vest and black trousers. “Don’t you look ravishing?” Caitlyn purred directly into Rebecca’s ear, her nose parting through silky red hair. *Whether she leaves it naturally curly or straightens it for the weekend, she’s the sweetest thing in the room.* The first thing out of everyone’s mouths was an appreciation for Rebecca’s coppery red hair, and Caitlyn ensured her girlfriend played it up whenever they went out. So happened that Rebecca always looked like a million dollars in her black corsets and fishnet stockings. Tonight, however, she wore a faux fur stole over the corset to keep the chill off her skin. Caitlyn entwined their hands and lured Rebecca toward the entrance of The Dark Hour, their favorite weekend destination. That was local, anyway.

The only reason they didn’t head straight inside was to give Jane time to catch up. *Look at her.* Jane, who was often the first person in a room, stayed one row back so Caitlyn and Rebecca made the grand entrance together. Not that anyone but the bouncer and the girl behind the coat check made any note of them. It was Jane who checked them in at the reception. That gave Caitlyn time to finish fussing with

Rebecca's hair, a mere guise to showing affection for one of her favorite people.

"I love you." Caitlyn's hand lingered on Rebecca's blushing cheek. Jane cracked a joke with the hostess on duty, who laughed so loudly that it almost distracted the lovebirds. "I'm sorry I haven't had much chance to say that these past two weeks. I hope you don't mind. We both hate to think you've been neglected while the world... just..." Caitlyn mimicked a nuclear bomb going off in her hand. "Poof."

Rebecca wrapped both of her arms around Caitlyn's midsection. *Why, isn't that a lovely invitation to play with her hair some more?* Caitlyn didn't mind. Like she didn't mind when Rebecca played with *her* hair. *She's the only one allowed.* Not even Jane ever had such privileges. Then again, Jane liked to yank a bit too hard...

"I haven't felt neglected," Rebecca cooed. "If anything, I could be saying the same thing about you. Why do you think I suggested the club tonight?"

"If Jane were the one asking, I'd say because she can't go a whole month without sex. Unless you two had a fling I'm not aware of, it's been over three weeks for her, and time is ticking down." Caitlyn had not been involved in Jane's last dalliance, but she knew it happened. *I got ready for bed, absolutely exhausted, and heard these two carrying on in the living room before escaping to Jane's.* Oh, and seeing Rebecca walk out of Jane's room the next morning said a few things, too. "See? I keep track of things. Just not on a calendar."

Before Rebecca finished giggling, Jane nuzzled in on their party. “I asked her if the VIP room is open, and I got a big fat no. Some gigolo that Damon knows is having a birthday party up there, and no, we’re not interested in helping him celebrate his big 3-0.”

“That’s fine.” Caitlyn, still holding Rebecca’s hand, followed Jane into the main lounge. Already, most of the small tables were filled with couples and intimate groups. Men in suits and women in cocktail dresses swapped drinks while thinking about other ways to swap spit. Caitlyn always found the difference between “normal” night and Ladies’ Night in these clubs amusing, but Jane was usually in a hurry to find a comfortable corner to carve out for themselves. Her favorite roost was the Diamond VIP lounge up a flight of stairs and overlooking the rest of the club, but that was dependent on reservations. *Also, how well you know the owners.* People of a certain status could get in no matter what, but personally knowing Damon and Alice Monroe was as good as gold in the biggest kinkster club in the region. *That man will light himself on fire for three women: his wife, his mother, and Jane.* Perhaps in that order, but Caitlyn wasn’t sure. *Not taking bets.* That wasn’t one she liked to lose.

“I don’t recognize anyone so far,” Rebecca mused as they made their way past the bar and down the hallway connecting the two big lounges in the club. “Can’t check my texts now.”

“Are we heading to the other VIP room?” Caitlyn asked her partner, who acted like she knew where they were going. *Can’t have a hostess. Oh, no. That would make it too obvious who*



*we are.* Jane preferred doing things on her own around here. Caitlyn often wondered if that came from her immense, peerage-like privilege in Hong Kong or from knowing the owners. “Maybe someone we know will be in the ladies-only area.”

Jane didn’t hear her. She was already saying an enthusiastic hello to a woman Caitlyn didn’t recognize. *She’s not even listening.* Typical. Once Jane was in her extroverted element, it was a miracle if she remembered her girlfriends were there. Or so it felt sometimes.

When the woman mentioned the VIP room on the bottom floor was “popping,” it was decided. Caitlyn told Jane and Rebecca to go ahead so she could order their first round of drinks from the second bar. It gave her time to herself for a few minutes.

“Yes, these drinks will be delivered to the ladies-only room,” Caitlyn told the bartender. “If you don’t see us under Wong, it will be Adams. Someone will know who we are.”

“Ah, yes,” the man with a gauge in each ear and a tattoo sleeve depicting a full rose garden said. “You and Ms. Wong know the boss. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

Caitlyn handed over the three free drink tokens they received when checking in. “Thank you so much. I truly don’t mean to be a bother.”

“No trouble at all, Ms. Adams.”

*Does he know who I am? Or is he that good?* She swore she had never seen him before. *I'd remember that tattoo.* It was hard to look away from, not that Caitlyn spent most of her time staring at tattoos.

She turned around. She almost dropped her clutch when she saw a familiar female figure moving through the growing crowd of suits, dresses, and corsets.

“Huh?” Head of ebony hair. A gentle, sloping nose. Petite, but with a heated gaze that bore right through a woman. A ‘90s dress that looked like it had been dumped in an oil slick, which paired perfectly with smooth skin and a gait that had once beguiled Caitlyn whenever she entered a room. “Olivia?”

The woman disappeared behind a tall couple and was not seen again.

*I'm losing my mind, aren't I?* Once was a fluke. A second time? That implied Caitlyn had some unresolved feelings within her. Was her subconscious telling her something?

She took her time heading to the VIP room, where the raucous sound of feminine laughter filled the air. Yet no matter how much Caitlyn turned around, and no matter how many faces she inspected, she didn't see the woman who had last broken her heart.

Better to focus on the women of her current life, anyway.

“There she is!” Jane's voice was like a beacon in the corner of the crowded room. “The other most beautiful woman in the world! Did you get our drinks, Cait?”

Caitlyn remembered to smile when she approached the loveseat her two girlfriends had procured from this sea of loud conversation and unforgettable outfits. For every woman in a (half) suit, there was one either so undressed she might as well be naked, or another in a skimpy slip or, like Rebecca, sporting a colorful corset. Caitlyn perched on the arm of the loveseat and took in the sight before her. “Of course I did,” she said to Jane, who already made herself at home on the other cushion. “Don’t worry. I made sure yours was a double.”

“You don’t get that for the free token, do you?”

“They put it on our tab. Speaking of...” Caitlyn crossed her legs away from Rebecca, who leaned against her girlfriend’s thigh. It was an unspoken invitation for Caitlyn to stroke Rebeca’s hair, and she was never one to decline such a thoughtful gesture. “Who do you think has the biggest tab in this room so far? Because I don’t recognize anyone.”

“That’s what happens when you guys always seclude yourselves upstairs,” Rebecca said.

*She’s not wrong.* Caitlyn wouldn’t mind spending more time down here with strangers, but Jane *loved* her nooks and crannies where only the best of her acquaintances and friends found her. For years, Caitlyn went along with it, because at the end of the day... many of Jane’s friends were her friends as well. With Rebecca around? That meant there was always someone to talk to, even if Jane was sucked into a whirlwind of discussions that had nothing to do with Caitlyn.

“Never mind,” Jane said. “I recognize someone.”

Caitlyn was about to ask who, but the answer was soon as plain as the vibrant head of blond hair moving through the room. *More like... who doesn't know her?* Anywhere she went, Eva Warren was the tallest woman. A Victoria's Secret model could wear six-inch heels and *technically* be taller than Eva, but that didn't stop the towering princess of New England from making a grand entrance wherever she went. Tonight, it was with a ruby-red blouse that cinched around her lean arms and a pair of white pants that only elongated her long torso and slender legs in ways that made Caitlyn dizzy.

With her was the wife, who always turned heads in her own right. *Because a woman like Eva wouldn't be caught dead with a wife who didn't blow minds as well.* Nadia Gaines-Warren's red hair should have reminded Caitlyn of Rebecca's coppery locks. Yet Nadia's hair didn't curl, and the tone of her head was almost as unbelievable as Eva's blond hair. *The kind of hair that nobody believes is real.* Caitlyn knew better than to question it, though. Her own blond hair wasn't as lustrous as it used to be, but she'd be damned if anyone asked her which stylist kept it up to bottled snuff. *Who am I? Amber Mayview?*

No. That honor belonged to the (fake) blond trailing behind Eva and Nadia. Caitlyn nudged Jane, who sat upright at the sight of the woman who occupied an office near the top floor of their building. Because Adrienne Thomas, a woman who always ensured the whole world knew she was hot shit, was here arm-in-arm with her long-term girlfriend.

"We should invite them to sit with us," Caitlyn said to her partner. "You get someone you know to talk to, and we both

get to remind everyone that we're in with this particular crowd." She turned to Rebecca. "Aren't you friends with Nadia?"

But Rebecca was already ahead of her girlfriends. She stood up on the arm of the loveseat, waving her freckled arms until she caught Eva's attention. That immediately made Nadia look in their direction, and that was that.

"Thank God," Nadia, who pushed through the crowd, said. "Normal people."

If there was one advantage to having a commanding presence like Eva's or a snippy personality like Adrienne's, it was they tended to get their way. When both women complained to a hostess about the lack of seating in this corner of the room, there was no question about it: within five minutes, two more chairs had been procured, and two guests on an adjacent couch had been offered a drink special – but only if they went and claimed their free drinks *right now*, essentially giving up their couch.

Oh, well. Too bad, wasn't it?

"You know," Nadia said, "one day you won't get what you want. Then what?"

Her wife laughed. "You'll be right there suffering with me, so I suppose we'll find out."

Rebecca got up and joined Nadia and Eva on their couch. Caitlyn squished next to Jane, who was already in a rabid conversation with Adrienne Thomas about recent renovations

to their commercial building. Apparently, the lack of new businesses moving into the building meant more spaces were converted into condos. Did Adrienne happen to know who was moving in?

Caitlyn didn't mind being left out of conversations, or awkwardly trapped in the middle of groups like these. Over the years, she had mastered the fine art of being content with her own company. Years in the pageant circuit meant entire stints where she was either Miss Popular, attracting the attention of every other girl competing... or she was a pariah, either because she was *too* popular or because of some discerned slight against the previous year's queen. *You learn to not take these things personally.* Besides, she had a few things distractedly on her mind. One of them was her brain playing tricks on her, of course...

The other was the way Rebecca's legs looked in those fishnet stockings. Because if Caitlyn Adams had one fetish on this Earth, it was tights on a great pair of legs.

*Damn. I didn't realize how right she was.* While Rebecca laughed at one of Eva's ridiculous, off-color jokes and Jane corrected Adrienne's atrocious Mandarin, Caitlyn stared at the pattern of Rebecca's stockings, the material hugging her pale skin and refusing to let it go. *There are ways to fix that.* When Rebecca wasn't looking, Caitlyn hooked her finger in the mesh, reveling in how smooth her girlfriend's skin felt beneath. *We really needed this.*

Caitlyn glanced at Jane. She then glanced at Rebecca again, realizing that since these two last hooked up, Caitlyn had been... what? Traveling? Working? Sick! *Of all the things, we had to throw sick in there.* Caitlyn wouldn't claim that her libido was the biggest in the bunch – certainly not this particular bunch – but she had to be real with herself. If it had been a few weeks and she was crankier than usual? She probably needed to get laid again. Soon.

Luckily, they were in the perfect place to make any fantasy come alive.

“Be right back,” she said to the group before getting up. The drink the waitress had brought her earlier was soon returned to the bar in the other room. Caitlyn did not order anything else, though. She instead tracked down one of the hostesses making the rounds and asked if there were any private rooms available that night. “You see,” she said to the woman with a straight back and stern face, “someone needs entertaining outside of the home tonight.”

The hostess informed her that all of the rooms were currently full, but if she wanted on the waitlist, that could happen. When Caitlyn inquired how long the wait might be, she was more than a bit put out to hear that it was at least an hour's wait. Nevertheless, she put her party on the list before returning to the ladies-only room.

“...If you saw what I did when I walked in there, you'd be screaming like it was a twenty-foot tarantula, too.” That's what Caitlyn heard Eva saying when she rejoined their group in the

corner. “Some things were not meant to be seen by the naked human eye, and that includes your mother.”

“Sounds like I picked the perfect time to pop back in.” Caitlyn waited for someone to make her a spot on the loveseat. “Dare I ask?”

Jane curled up next to her, an empty glass tapping against Caitlyn’s chest. *She smells like cologne and liquor.* Typical for a night in the club. “We’re having a rousing discussion about all the traumatizing times we saw our mothers naked. You missed me regaling this lot with the tale of my mother’s dress malfunctioning at my older brother’s wedding.”

“Ah, yes. You told me her zipper popped open on your way out of White Fir, so you had to rush with her into the downstairs bathroom and it required your mother getting down to her skivvies before the zipper pinched her back skin. How is that the same as her being naked?”

“She had no knickers, love. Not a pair. Com-man-do.”

Laughter blasted in their corner once again. When it was Rebecca’s turn, she sheepishly admitted that her mother was gone before she had those kinds of memories. That was Caitlyn’s cue to answer. The last thing she wanted was the mood to drop because Rebecca was uncomfortable talking about her absent mother.

“It was a completely normal thing in my house,” Caitlyn said, “but I grew up middle-class. My mom, as well as my sister and me, would get ready for church in the same room every Sunday. I have memories of bathing with my mother



when I was really little. Then there were all the times she saw me naked as a grown woman because she helped me change at pageants. Then again, my gay hairdresser saw me naked plenty of times, too. He said I was the only woman whose boobs made him reconsider his sexuality.”

This time, the laughter was louder than before. “Your gay hairdresser almost turned for you, huh?” Eva asked with cheeks touched red from merriment. “Now that’s the real story.”

“I told him if he wanted to experiment with me, it was a two-way street. I was experimenting with him, too. Oh, and that’s how I came out to my mother on accident.”

Jane scoffed. “No, it wasn’t!”

“Don’t tell on me! For all they know it was me flirting with a gay hairdresser that informed my sheltered Midwestern mother that her oldest was a big ol’ gay.”

The conversation did not die down after that. “It was normal in my house as well,” Nadia said. “I’m not surprised Eva only ever saw her mother naked that one time, though. Talk about a house full of secrets.”

“Right? I have every right to know what I’m going to look like when I’m her age. You have to understand the kind of hit I’ll be taking to this great body of mine.” Eva rearranged her long limbs in her seat. “You think I didn’t tell my mother to get that giant mole on her ass checked?”

“But was it hairy?” Rebecca asked when the laughter died down again. “Because that’s an important detail I hope you noticed.”

Eva leveled her gaze at Rebecca. “Was my mother’s butt-mole *hairy*? Why, I do declare, that’s an image I never want in my head again, thank you.”

“If it was hairy, was it blond?” Nadia asked.

“Do your carpets match your drapes, my dear?”

Nadia did not get embarrassed by her wife’s inquiry. “You would know by now. Why don’t you tell everyone?”

“I get to make that joke once a year,” Eva informed everyone. “I just hit my quota.”

“And I get to ask her what the weather is like up there once a month. It’s only fair.”

Jane leaned in toward Caitlyn’s ear. “We need some trite yet witty jokes to keep it fresh in our relationship.”

“We would need some serious ground rules first,” Caitlyn said with a clenched smile.

“Right, right. You don’t touch my Asianness, I don’t touch your weight. Got it.”

“How about I go after your posh upbringing, and you get to have my beauty queen background?” Caitlyn placed her hand on Jane’s knee. “Does that sound fair, Duchess of Pomposity?”

“Oh, yes. Heavenly, my sweet button whose average IQ knocked all of the other beauty queens out of the park.”

“See?” Caitlyn squeezed her partner’s knee. “You’re already a butt about it.”

A ruthless grin touched Caitlyn’s ear. “You started it, love.”

Although Caitlyn didn’t pay much more attention to her partner, her hand did not leave its destination. *From tugging on fishnets to feeling up another woman’s thigh.* This was her life. *I don’t know how I stumbled into this, but it is something else.* She shared a quick but sobering look with Rebecca, who soon jumped back into conversation with the other four women around them. Caitlyn didn’t catch the new topic. They had moved on from naked mothers and the scarring impressions they left on the privileged heiress’ minds.

“You know what I think?” Caitlyn asked Jane, picking at a loose thread on the knee of her trousers. “I think it’s getting crowded in here. Why don’t we go get another drink at the bar? They’ll hold our seats for us.”

Jane hesitated. “Something tells me you’re not thinking about alcohol.”

“Mm, I might not be.”

“And leave our poor Becca here with these heathens? Wouldn’t she be put out?”

“She’ll be fine, considering what I have planned for her later.”

That got a wide-eyed look out of Jane. “You are the ringleader here tonight, are you?”

“Sometimes you let me take charge.”

Jane pushed Caitlyn's hand off her knee and loudly announced she was off to get another drink. As the two of them stood up, Caitlyn asked Rebecca if she wanted anything. After a shake of the head, Rebecca was reabsorbed into her conversation, which gave Caitlyn the reassurance she needed that she wasn't putting anyone out by sneaking off with Jane.

"You're a right sight in this dress, Cait." Jane entwined her hand with Caitlyn's and whispered that in her ear as they maneuvered out of the room. Instinct led them in the same direction – past the second lounge with its pink backlit bar and to a room sporting a stage that was currently in between performances.

"I might have thought of you when I wore it tonight." Caitlyn took the lead when they had to snake past a couple going at it in a back hallway. Jane left them one of her witty quips, which made the young gal of the pair giggle and her boyfriend of the night look around as if he had no idea what happened. "I know how much you love my ass."

"You know how much I love all of your parts, love." Jane's arms were soon around Caitlyn as they half-stumbled into a darkened room full of revelers in various stages of undress. *Shit, we didn't accidentally enter an orgy room, did we?* Caitlyn wasn't worried about Jane's reservations. Not when her own did the trick of souring a mood. "Can't wait to get into them half of the time."

"Would you shush?" Caitlyn found them an empty couch and pulled Jane down beside her. To the sounds of giggles,

whispers, and clothes losing purchase on bodies, Caitlyn shoved her hands into Jane's perfectly kempt hair and overtook her on the couch. "Your mouth is better at other things, you ask me."

Although Jane was always quick to get to the kissing, she didn't miss a beat when she retorted, "Funny! I've thought the same thing about yours!"

For that, Caitlyn was asserting herself on top.

Of course, it never lasted long. Not when she was fooling around with someone like Jane, a woman who couldn't stand to be pinned to anything for more than two minutes – the exact amount of time for the novelty of a woman like Caitlyn being on top to wear off.

Caitlyn always rode the high for as long as she could, though.

*It's not like I mind...* Once she was pushed back up, she welcomed Jane all over her, as if they had met for the first time. Not that it had been *so* long ago. Caitlyn had been just out of school, her pageant days behind her and nothing but uncertainty ahead. *Then I met this woman in a bar when I was with my friend. Next thing I know, we're all in bed together.* The friend went away in the morning, but Caitlyn stayed behind. What ensued was a whirlwind romance that led halfway across the world and to a marriage that felt as fresh then as it did when it inevitably ended. Caitlyn and Jane could never sustain themselves for long – not without someone else to round things out. Yet that didn't mean they didn't enjoy

spending time together. They had their intimate conversations. They took trips and had dinner as the two of them. *Like I sometimes only spend time with Becca.* Sometimes Caitlyn was alone while the other two gallivanted off. The point was to not feel neglected – and if someone was in a relationship with Jane? That was almost impossible.

“What do you think you’re going to find in there?” When Jane was in the mood, she managed to kiss and talk at the same time. This was especially true when Caitlyn unbuttoned that silk shirt while receiving a brand-new hickey to her throat. “You should know by now that I keep the best goods downstairs.”

“Maybe I like you vulnerable.” Caitlyn almost protested when Jane’s head bumped into the bottom of the high and taut bun, unraveling a core part of it. Instead of saying anything, she undid the other clasp and allowed her hair to fall upon her shoulders.

“I think it’s only fair if it goes both ways.” Caitlyn didn’t get much choice in the matter. If she were to unbutton Jane’s shirt, then her dress was destined to be hiked above her hips. *Good thing it’s dark in this room.* Caitlyn wasn’t in the business of watching and being watched, but she didn’t mind sharing a few heavy kisses in front of strangers when the mood was right. If her ass was hanging out, though? It better be dark! “Look what we have here! My favorite.”

“Shut up and kiss me, Lin.”

Caitlyn had perfectly calculated how ready Jane was for some sexual fun. *Especially with me.* Although she didn't like to admit it, she had been a bit closed off to her girlfriends even before the sickness settled in their house. If anyone was likely to abstain from sex for weeks at a time, it was Caitlyn – Jane had the highest active libido, and Rebecca was easily seduced when someone else was in the mood. *It makes me feel like I have to keep up, sometimes.* From the outside, it must have looked like Jane and Rebecca were an impenetrable couple, no matter how much Caitlyn interjected herself. Yet they often described their menage as a triangle. Sometimes it was an equilateral three-sider where everyone had a say in what they did. Yet Caitlyn was the first to say it was more like an isosceles triangle, with Rebecca making up the shortest side. *That's not a diss toward her, either.* Rebecca claimed to prefer that precious place between shared submissive girlfriend and someone who had as much say in where they lived or how they worked together. Rebecca liked being coddled and treated like the occasional plaything for two depraved women like Jane and Caitlyn. Yet that meant Caitlyn had to hold up her end of the arrangement, too.

Even if it meant letting Jane have her handsy way.

Caitlyn lost herself to that fleeting moment, for she knew it wouldn't last much longer. Not when there were other things to do that night, and she wasn't in the business of sharing her most intimate self in front of strangers doing the same thing. Yet while her lips were on Jane's and their arms around one another, she forgot everything that happened that week. *Work.*

*Immigration. Lilian and Olivia.* She didn't think about being sick. She didn't worry about who was happy in her house or who might be losing attention. Nor did Caitlyn dwell on what had once driven her and Jane apart several years ago. *The darkest days of my life.* The more she thought about the sad, enraptured bitterness that once captured her heart, the harder she yanked Jane's shirt out of her trousers and the harder she kissed that mouth she had once promised to love for the rest of her life.

It was in those heightened moments of lust and love that she swore she'd do whatever it took to keep the harmony she so treasured.

Her focus was soon interrupted by the clearing of someone's throat beside her.

"Well!" Jane was the first to fall back, her clothing in complete disarray. "Looks like we've found our third, Cait, and it's not our Becca."

Caitlyn recognized the hostess from earlier. How a woman so stoically stood in a dark room full of lovers, she had no idea, but she also knew the staff at The Dark Hour were paid to be the best in the local business. "H... hello there."

A nod precluded the fake smile on the hostess's face. "I only wanted to inform you that your room is ready." She handed Caitlyn a key. Too bad Caitlyn was too busy searching for her hair clasp that had fallen in between the couch cushions. "It's #3. Please enjoy."



“O-ho.” Jane’s movements slowed as she put herself back together. “You went behind our backs and got us a room? Please tell me Becca is invited. It’s been ages since the three of us had a romp.”

Caitlyn didn’t bother fixing her hair. She slammed her clasp into her clutch and forced it shut. She almost forgot the key the hostess had left her. “Why don’t you go fetch her? I want to scope out which room we got.”

“Pry her away from her dear friends? They’ll know what we’re up to.”

Caitlyn stood. “Good. It keeps her popular.”

Jane didn’t argue with that. She also took her sweet time following Caitlyn out of the room.



“So nice of you two to join me.” Caitlyn, who had left the door ajar, sat on the edge of the mattress in the small room. The sounds of the club disappeared when Jane shut and locked the door, Rebecca fiddling with the lighting until she declared she liked the soft yellow lights with a hint of seductive red. “We have a lot to talk about.”

Jane remained pressed up against the door. “I was hoping we wouldn’t be doing much talking at all. In fact, I told Becca we were coming in here to double-team you. So, where are the toys, Cait? I call dibs on your—”

Caitlyn didn't hesitate to interrupt her partner. "There will be none of that tonight. In fact, I think you'll discover that there isn't much room for your ego, Jane."

While two thin eyebrows raised, Rebecca tentatively sat next to Caitlyn. "Sounds like you're up to something."

For Rebecca, Caitlyn only had a soothing smile. "Am I up to something, or having fun?"

"What's going on, Cait?" Jane crossed her arms. "What's happening in that diabolical mind of yours? Do you want Becca and me to get naked while you pose us like your sweet sex dolls?" She shrugged. "Could be fun."

"I've got a much better idea than that." Caitlyn crawled across the bed to Rebecca, who didn't move. When Caitlyn came to kiss her, she closed her eyes and leaned into it. *That's what I like to see.* Wasn't it what Caitlyn liked to experience? Two women in one night?

"I get a show? Works for me," Jane said.

Caitlyn pulled herself away from Rebecca, who collapsed onto the mattress and the crinkling sheet with a giggle. "I've got a plan for you, too, Jane." As soon as Caitlyn said that Jane steeled herself. As well as she should have, too. Because Caitlyn knew what she was doing when she employed a seductive purr that was as deadly as a viper slithering toward its prey. "Do you remember Paris?"

While she backed Jane against the lone chair in the corner of the small room, her partner cleared her throat and refused to

sit down. “Paris?” she asked. “Oh, I remember many things that happened in such a fine and romantic city, Cait.” She poked her partner right in the chest. “Isn’t that where I sampled your black cherry for the first time?”

“Don’t turn the power back toward yourself.” Caitlyn opened a small chest of goodies The Dark Hour supplied in most of their private rooms. Jane had every right to question the metal handcuffs now dangling from Caitlyn’s hands. “Besides, you’re thinking of Hawaii. Remember now? You took me to that private guest house out on the water. You said you wanted to hear my cries of pleasure on the Pacific winds.”

“I did, didn’t I?”

Caitlyn glanced at Rebecca, who lay on her stomach and kicked her feet up behind her. *She’s got to be bored of these power plays by now.* She probably waited until Caitlyn got back around to her, anyway.

“Paris is where we met that lovely lounge singer. What was her name? Sylvette?”

“Ah, yes! Sylvette! With the green streak in her hair I thought looked like... well, I shall not repeat it.”

“Remember what you did to Sylvette, Jane?”

“Better to ask me what I didn’t do to her, right?”

Caitlyn gently pushed Jane down onto the chair. “Remember where I was? Handcuffed to a chair, like this one.”

“I fail to see what that has to do with tonight. That was nearly ten years ago, Cait.”

“Do you know how long it’s been since I had some fun with you two?” The handcuffs clattered together in Caitlyn’s hand. “I still remember the last time you two got to do it. Or has there been some hanky-panky since then? I wouldn’t mind knowing.”

“Things have been a bit slow around the house!” Rebecca chimed in. “I could use some attention, honestly.” She rolled onto her side “Why do you think I’m wearing this silly getup?”

“Cait...” Jane attempted to stand up, but Caitlyn was stalwart where she stood. “Are you saying what I think you are?”

The handcuffs dangled from Caitlyn’s hand. “Put them behind your back, please.”

Although Jane did as told, it was with one of the brattiest looks Caitlyn had ever beheld. “You’re going to torture me, you know that?” Jane purred.

Caitlyn cuffed Jane’s arms behind the chair and bent down to kiss her forehead. “If you’re really good, I’ll give you something when I’m done with Becca.”

“What if I want some with Becca, too, huh?”

“I’m afraid she’ll be too worn out to help you. Like Sylvette.”

Jane rolled her eyes as Caitlyn turned away. “Naughty, naughty, Caitlyn. You’re a terror if I’ve ever met, bedded, and married one.”

Caitlyn pretended she didn’t hear her. “How’s the night been so far, Becca?”

That question was met with an indifferent shrug. “Depends. Am I a pawn in your game with Jane, or do you really see me as the woman you’re going to make love to like crazy tonight?”

“How can you ask me something like that?” Caitlyn straddled Rebecca’s stacked legs, looming over her as if she were preparing to take her for the first time. “Especially with such a sweet face like that? You know I’ll eat it right up.” It was true. Caitlyn was a sucker for a pouty, feminine woman who sucked her in with such a come-hither look. “In fact, I’ve already forgotten everyone else in this room.”

Either Jane didn’t hear that, or she was behaving better than Caitlyn ever imagined. Rebecca must have forgotten about the other woman in the room, too, for she quickly softened her stance and welcomed Caitlyn’s kiss that was soon directed right to her corset-boosted cleavage.

That was Caitlyn’s goal for the whole scene. *Make her feel like the only woman in the world.* When Caitlyn got into it, that wasn’t difficult to accomplish. Especially when her partner was Rebecca Pruitt, who loved to go along with whatever her Mistress of the evening told her to do. If she was wanted on all fours, she asked if she should start barking. If

Caitlyn told her to roll over? Her ass was already in the air. Rebecca wasn't only the city's greatest assistant who anticipated her boss's every want and whim – she was a fantastic girlfriend who actively participated in whatever Caitlyn had in mind. *I've been neglecting her these past few months.* No wonder Rebecca was mush beneath Caitlyn's body as the two of them kissed and lost themselves in yet another moment that night. *So many moments. How can one woman keep track?* That's what blew Caitlyn's mind every time she threw herself into this arrangement. One minute she belonged to Jane, thinking of all the grand times they had together over the years. The next? She was one with Rebecca, who clung to her and responded with such desperation that it was a miracle they hadn't met in another timeline and simply been a couple of their own merit.

Yet Caitlyn knew it wouldn't work so easily like that. There was always something missing – and it wasn't necessarily a British accent chiming in from the corner of a room.

“At least tear her clothes off for me, Cait,” Jane chided. “I should be all bothered by the time there's sweat on your face. You know how I like it.”

Caitlyn ignored her. Her attentions were better suited for immersing her face into the depths of Rebecca's cleavage and inhaling her sweet scent. Even better when she heard the accompanying sigh of a woman about to burst from only a few touches. “What do you think?” she asked Rebecca, who slowly opened her eyes. “Should I take my time with you over the

next hour, or should we do that other thing you like and get on with it?”

A wicked smile flashed on Rebecca’s face. “Suppose it would free up some time in the end. You never know who else might need some attention.”

That was when Caitlyn looked right at Jane, who pretended to be disinterested for the sake of her precious ego.

*We can’t take too long, anyway.* Jane was a good sport as long as something was in it for her. Once she grew bored or thought she was shut out from the fun much longer? *Mutiny.* Caitlyn knew how to deal with it, but she didn’t want to ruin Rebecca’s good time, too.

Oh, no. Wasn’t that terrible? This meant Caitlyn had to start grinding *now!*

“Every time is like the first time with you.” Caitlyn didn’t want to admit that she barely remembered her first time with her Becca. *Not because it wasn’t memorable... but because there have been so many wonderful times since.* They always blended in a sensual blur in her memory. *The only reason I remember my first time with Jane is because my friend was there.* Otherwise, it would probably be the same story. Caitlyn’s forte wasn’t in recalling that one anniversary dinner or Roman vacation – it was the amalgamation of the good times.

Like her forte in bed wasn’t being the kindest, most considerate lover in the world. It was bringing as much fun to the table as her body could muster.

“Who bought you this corset, anyway?” Caitlyn loosened it in three seconds. Not her personal best record, but when she was determined, things got done. “I don’t think it was me. It must have been some other woman who takes care of you.” As soon as it was visible, Caitlyn’s mouth was on Rebecca’s nipple, eliciting the kind of sweet response that often rattled the bed and sang in the air. Caitlyn’s lips grazed against the material wrapped around Rebecca’s chest. *It’s too nice to be something she found on her own.* Rebecca had great taste, of course, but when left to her own devices, she didn’t know which store in which city carried items of this quality. That was all Jane, who often claimed to be above fashionable trappings but instinctively sought them out wherever she went. Bless her for it, too, because it meant Caitlyn got to rip off Jane’s present right in front of her.

“Don’t be shy to tell me what you want.” Caitlyn parted Rebecca’s thighs like she parted through her own hair now falling in her face. “You get what you get, but I take requests.”

“I only want you.” Rebecca wound her hand around the curtain of Caitlyn’s blond hair.

“Who do you want, though? Me?” Caitlyn’s voluptuous thighs settled between Rebecca’s. *Nothing like her body wrapped around mine.* Their body types, like their hair, couldn’t be more different. Caitlyn often delighted in how her curves collided against Rebecca’s thinner figure. *I love it even more when I’m the one on top.* Caitlyn’s memory might play tricks on her, but she’d never forget the first time she saw an adult video where the curvy woman commanded the whole



scene. It may or may not have contributed to her attitude in the pageant circuit, let alone one during a time when “thin was in” like the early 2000s. *Look at me now. From being called fat backstage to owning these two women like there’s no choice. They have to have me. That’s all there is to it.* Nothing inflated the ego of Caitlyn Adams like that. “You’ve got to show me the proper reference, Becca. You know what I like to hear.”

Bliss overtook that freckled face as Rebecca eased against the mattress and said, “I want whatever you’re serving, Mistress.”

“Mm, say that louder.”

“*Mistress.*”

Caitlyn glanced up, catching the look on Jane’s face. *Don’t tell me this doesn’t get you hot, Lin.* Oh, whatever. Jane could poker face her way through this, but beneath those nice clothes and that stoic face was a woman bursting to get involved. Jane Wong did not sit idly if the world allowed her to get up and take part in everything it had to offer. Which was why it was so, so sweet to put her in her place once in a while.

Besides, she needed to lose herself to fantasy as much as Caitlyn and Rebecca did. They deserved this after the stress their household had been through lately.

Caitlyn knew, though, that she couldn’t waste much time. *I want this, anyway.* From the moment she decided this was on the docket, she was off like a rocket. *Kiss Rebecca. Look at Jane. Touch one and cajole the other.* The more the seconds wore on, the hotter Caitlyn’s skin became. The heat that

couldn't touch her face, however, traveled to her thighs and settled deep in the pit of her being. So much energy. No place for it to let loose.

Now, wasn't that a lie?

"You tell me if you're going to fall." Caitlyn pushed Rebecca up the mattress until her head and its torrent of coppery curls fell toward the floor. The sweet yelp touching Caitlyn's ears didn't declare foul play, though. If anything, the way Rebecca gripped the edge of the bed and braced her legs around Caitlyn's hips suggested that this was only the beginning of their fun. After all, Rebecca opening her legs as widely as possible meant Caitlyn could pin them both down to the mattress. Wasn't that the easiest way to enjoy each other's company?

Rebecca would say whatever was necessary. Right now? It was a plea to end her misery. God only knew how long she had been revved up for lovemaking.

*Me too.*

"Oh, God!" Rebecca knew her role. It was to not only receive Caitlyn's oncoming thrusts but to be as loud about it as possible. After all, there was a third person in the room who needed to enjoy herself as well.

Caitlyn's dress was too tight and obnoxious to take off for ten minutes of fun. The best she could do was raise the hem above her hips and remove her thong, which she tossed at Jane. She didn't even try to dodge the strip of white fabric smacking her against the cheek and landing in her lap. *Keep*

*acting like you don't care about this, and we'll see what kind of reward you get for behaving.* Caitlyn channeled those sentiments into humping Rebecca, the mattress smacking against the wall behind them as sweat spread across Caitlyn's thighs.

Or maybe that was Rebecca's excitement. Caitlyn did love it when her girlfriend showed her appreciation with such sweet ardor.

"How's that, Becca?" Caitlyn steadied her rhythm, so her breath didn't betray the amount of vigor this required. *Or how good it feels to have her legs wrapped around mine.* Her knee and thigh made quick friends with Becca's immaculately groomed mound – goodness, was that a present from Jane as well? Here Caitlyn thought that the one thing she and Rebecca shared was a love for the spa. *I'd remember this treat.* Rebecca wasn't bare, oh no. Instead, her hair was an attractive strip straight down the middle. *Ask them to wax my initials into it next time, dear.* How was that for a treat? "I know you're a grateful girl. Don't be shy. I thank you for your existence all the time, don't I?"

"Yes, Mistress." Rebecca grabbed both of Caitlyn's thighs and pulled her forward. Was that her way of saying she didn't want her girlfriend's knee to abandon the place it was now? *Right against her pussy, of course.* Rebecca knew how to grind as well as Caitlyn did, after all. "Thank you, Mistress!"

"You can thank me by coming on me, Becca. I know you want to."

“Yes...yes, Mistress!”

Caitlyn hid her smile of amusement in the breadth of Rebecca’s breasts – easy enough when that back arched and both nipples came straight for Caitlyn’s face.

Rebecca was one of the easiest partners Caitlyn had ever played with in the bedroom. *I say take off your clothes, and she’s already naked; I say start humping, and she’s halfway to orgasm before I finish my sentence.* If Caitlyn told Rebecca to come? Maybe half of it was a performance, but Rebecca had a powerful imagination. She also fed off the attention from Jane, who still quietly watched from her chair in the corner of the room.

*More like they’re making eye contact...* Caitlyn allowed it if it served Rebecca’s fantasy. Except the message to Jane had to change. That meant slamming so hard against Rebecca that she had no choice but to slam her eyes shut and fall headfirst into climax.

It felt good for Caitlyn, too, of course, but she was more invested in setting up part two of her own fantasy.

“That’s it, Becca.” Her tongue lavished attention against any areola it discovered beneath it. Since Rebecca wiggled so much while riding out her orgasm, it might have meant that was the same nipple receiving special treatment the entire time. Caitlyn didn’t care. She was enamored with the blessed sight of her girlfriend receiving the kind of attention she always deserved. “Give me more. I want everything you have.”

She half-expected Jane to say, “*Leave some for me, would you?*” Yet it was complete silence – to the point that Caitlyn had to double-check that her partner hadn’t disappeared.

“Wow.” Rebecca fell into her usual fit of giggles once her brain was overtaken by the results of her lovemaking. Caitlyn backed off and pulled Rebecca onto the mattress. If too much blood rushed to her head, she might pass out, and Caitlyn didn’t want their evening ruined because she didn’t pay enough attention to her girlfriend’s state of mind.

Caitlyn got up and pulled her skirt back down. As she tossed her hair over her shoulder she received a snotty look that implied Jane had seen better.

Rebecca rolled onto her stomach and perched her chin against the end of the bed. Curly red hair covered her sleepy face as Caitlyn braced herself in front of Jane, hands digging into the arms of the chair and their noses only a few inches away.

“Tell me you want some of that,” Caitlyn purred against her partner’s cheek, “and it’s all yours.”

“Oh, Caitlyn.” Here came that smarmy accent that Caitlyn loved to fuck out of her ex-wife. “I can’t tell if you mean some of Becca’s body, or some of what you’re offering. Grammar is never your strong suit after you’ve been shagging half the club.”

“I think you know what I mean, Ms. Pedantic.” Caitlyn’s lips lingered on Jane’s right ear. Only a slight turn of her head

told Caitlyn that she was on the right track. It was the first time she felt the tension release from Jane's body.

“Uncuff me and we'll find out.”

“Is that a threat, Ms. Wong?”

“Mm, you know I love it when you call me that.”

“You love it when I call you ‘Miss’ anything.”

“Because you know me so well after all these years.”

Caitlyn stepped back, Jane's cologne still caught in her nose. “What do you think, Becca?” she asked the woman still basking in the afterglow behind her. “Should we set her loose? Do you think you and I have had adequately caught up?”

Rebecca gave her a thumbs up. It would have been hilarious if Caitlyn wasn't so determined to keep wearing the biggest britches in the room. *My mother always warned me about being too big for them.* Not a problem with these two. No matter how much Jane fronted, deep down, she loved every second of this.

“You know I'm going to devour you, right, Cait?” Jane sweetly asked as her partner fumbled with the handcuff keys. “I'll rip your dress right off and it will be a miracle if Becca gets a taste of you before I do.”

“That's fine.” The first cuff came undone. Jane felt up the full brunt of Caitlyn's leg, digging beneath her skirt and going straight for her slit. Caitlyn kept her composure as she reached for the other cuff. “As long as you agree I get all the attention right now.”

A willful smile electrified the air between them. The moment Caitlyn unlocked the other handcuff, she kissed Jane, redirecting all of the sounds of her pleasure into the depths of her partner's throat.

By the time they made it to the mattress, Caitlyn's dress was on the floor and Jane's trousers were unzipped. Rebecca had to roll out of the way for them, but she had found the renewed strength to sidle up behind Caitlyn and unhook her bra. Although Caitlyn had been serious about needing to be the center of attention for at least a few minutes, she never imagined how good it would feel once she was surrounded by the women she loved.

*We really should do this more often.* That was the last coherent thought she had before Jane's mouth was between her legs. It was nothing but primitive platitudes after that.

## CHAPTER 9



## Jane

Jane's least favorite thing to do on a Sunday was locking herself up in the home office and playing catchup, but when the alternative was spending a day at the spa with her sister... well, that sounded like an assignment for Caitlyn and Rebecca, two women who ate up pedicures, facials, and waxes like they were at a buffet.

Not that Rebecca had much left to wax right now, but that was beside the point.

*Stop thinking about sex for two seconds and get back to work.* Yet Jane's cabin fever always put her on edge. The best way to calm down and refocus her attention on things that should wait for Proper Business Hours was to dally in some five-minute-fun. Except she was alone. While there were ways to take care of fantasies when *alone*, God, it was too much work. Especially when two women lived in her house who might be down to shag whenever she was in the mood.

Besides, how was she supposed to behave when memories of the night before continued to dance in her head? Every time

she closed her eyes, she either saw Rebecca's curls flying through the air with every one of Caitlyn's thrusts... or Caitlyn coming at her in that shockingly sweet white dress. *Good times. Amazing times.* Jane replayed every minute after that like it was a homemade film in her head.

Damnit. There were emails to get a jump on before Monday. Constance-Grace also left a message about hiring new staff. Good. Shouldn't Jane double-check that they had at least ten full-time employees on the payroll? The government liked that, last she heard.

There it was. Her state of mind on a lonely Sunday afternoon. *Sex. Work. Immigration.* In that exact order.

That must have been why her new lawyer called her right then. He knew.

"Mr. Downey!" Jane had never been so grateful to hear another human's voice. Even one that belonged to a man – one who had no business butting into her most hedonistic of lesbian fantasies. "What a privilege for you to call me on a Sunday."

"I do hope I'm not interrupting something, Ms. Wong." The flat tones coming through her phone killed any libido lingering in Jane's body. *Always leave it to the right man to know how to turn me upside down and forget who I am. Horny ol' Jane.* "This is important, so I wanted to catch you before you started your work week."

Another man yelled "*Four!*" in the background. Was Mr. Kevin Downey playing golf? "I should be the one asking you

that. How's the fairway today?"

He ignored that. "I received concerning word about your impending visa status. There has been a large mix-up over your qualifications. Your previous spousal visa is conflating with your current entrepreneurial visa." Kevin paused. Jane could have assumed it was to let her digest this information, but the sounds of caddies picking up golf bags and breathless middle-aged men hiking down the fairway of the local country club only made Jane more anxious. "It's raised red flags about your renewal. Apparently, they know of your domestic situation and have some questions that you must answer. I've already arranged an interview for you this upcoming week. You're welcome. These things don't often happen at the last minute."

Jane barely had time to breathe in between Kevin's sentences. "What do you mean they're confused about my domestic situation? I have two girlfriends and live with my ex-wife. So what! I know you Americans are a prudish lot, but this is ridiculous."

"We will sort this out, Ms. Wong. I assure you. In the meantime..."

"Oh, what is it?"

"Gather all of your documentation. That includes your citizenship information from Hong Kong, as well as your proof of divorce and tax documents. If nothing else, you pay a lot of taxes. Uncle Sam loves immigrants like you."

“I should hope so! Bloody Uncle Sam has never met an ex-pat as honest as me!”

“That’s the other thing. Decide if you’re an ex-pat or an immigrant before Wednesday.”

Jane hurried to write this down. “What does *that* mean?”

“It means you need to decide your exact relationship with this country. Are you here temporarily for a few years? Or do you intend to become a permanent resident?”

“Permanent resident! Yes, let’s get that ball rolling. Do they need me to announce my intent to naturalize, too? I don’t fucking care, Downey.” Jane was out of her seat, pacing before her window while loosening the top two buttons of her shirt. *I can’t breathe!* She would be damned if she had to leave the country at the end of the year because her visa expired without renewal. *Or worse! Deported!* “Fix this, please.”

“I will forward you some of the standard questions they ask at meetings like these. I also suggest you bring your household with you. If your ex-wife can vouch for you and help explain what’s happening, that would be helpful.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll be there.”

“Oh, and Ms. Wong...”

She sighed. “Now what?”

“Seriously consider what I advised at our own meeting. That might be the fastest track to you staying in this country, especially with this confusion going on.”

The connection dropped. Jane leaned against the window overlooking the river, her head pounding. Or maybe that was from her forehead tapping against the glass.

Voices roused her attention. Although her office door was closed, she could hear the faint sounds of Caitlyn and Rebecca in the living room. Any relief Jane felt was soon usurped by the sour feeling in her stomach. In five minutes, she had gone from wanting to seduce her girlfriends to disappearing into the couch cushions. *“Fix it, Americans.”* That’s what she planned on saying when she marched into the main room, where Caitlyn and Rebecca put away their coats and rifled through shopping bags they had brought home from their outing with Lilian. Yet when they saw her standing in the hallway, their conversation stopped, and their faces fell with concern. Apparently, Jane really did look like shit.

“What’s wrong?” Caitlyn asked.

*Bloody hell.* That look on Caitlyn’s face... she knew how to get right to the meat and potatoes of Jane’s business. *That’s why I married her.* And divorced her. Was that the problem?

Jane pulled herself out of the hallway and leaned against the island counter in the kitchen. Scented soaps and bottles of hair products greeted her when she glanced into the nearest white paper bag. “I got a call from my lawyer. The immigration one,” she amended.

“What did he say?” Rebecca asked.

Jane shook her head. Every time she tried to explain what was happening, she only confused herself. She also kept

coming back to Kevin Downey's suggestion that Jane get herself another kind of visa again.

“Caitlyn. Rebecca.” With the fake confidence of a woman who had more pride than sense, Jane slapped her hands on the counter. *A hand for both women.* “Caitlyn, my longest love who has been through the absolute worst with me and has also committed to creating this home...” When Caitlyn furrowed her brows in tepid confusion, Jane turned to Rebecca. “Becca, my sweet, radiant light of joy who will try anything at least once...” She inhaled a deep breath for imminent strength. “Would one of you do me the honors of marrying me so I can stay in your fine country?”

Rebecca dropped her purse. Caitlyn was stunned into silence.

About what Jane expected, really.

## PART 2

### MENAGE A DESIR







## CHAPTER 10

## *Rebecca*

**S**he worried that what she wore was not conservative enough for the immigration office. After all, Caitlyn had much more to cover, yet she looked presentable in a black sweater dress cinched with a gold belt and accented with opaque black tights and knee-high autumn boots. Becca continuously fussed with her hair in the elevator mirror as the three of them rode up to the interview that would either make Jane's life easier... or all of their lives complicated.

In a moment of panic, she called up her stylist on Monday and begged for an appointment on Tuesday. Greta, the only woman Rebecca trusted with her curls, made a grand show of squeezing Becca in at nine in the morning. It was worth it. The more Becca thought about it, the more she wanted to show the immigration officials her most professional side. Unfortunately, she had long internalized that "professional" meant straight hair that didn't betray a single curl on her head. Greta worked the closest thing to miracles. While Becca could

straighten her hair, Greta's work held longer. Becca wasn't taking any chances.

"Do I look all right?" she hissed to Caitlyn, who wore her long hair back in a simple ponytail in a turtle shell clasp.

"You're adorable."

"I don't want to look adorable! This is for Jane, after all."

"Jane loves adorable," quipped the woman in question. The elevator doors dinged open on their floor. "Jane loves you, love."

*How can she be so calm?* Jane was the first out of the elevator and Becca the last. Her phone buzzed with messages from Constance-Grace about the interviews Becca missed because she had to be here. They would have to wait until later. Right now, Becca busied herself with panicking on behalf of everyone in the single-file line making its way to the immigration office that represented their metro area. Then again, no matter how much Jane straightened her shoulders and held her head high so nobody noticed she was the shortest among them, Becca – and Caitlyn, surely – knew the truth. *She's a mess in there.* Jane was simply masterful at putting on a brave, complacent face when necessary.

Kevin Downey was already in the small lobby separating the quiet hallway from the telephone rings, fax machine grumbles, and surly, sleep-deprived workers who occupied the drab downtown office. Becca knew the government spared every expense it could, but even she was surprised to see a lack of windows as well as metal-gray walls and old furniture

that was considered well, *old*, back in the '90s. *Even my public schools were more updated than this.* She took that back. The computers looked like they ran Windows XP.

“Even city council meetings are cheerier than this,” Caitlyn muttered, her and Becca hanging back while Kevin and Jane checked in at the front desk.

Becca barely had time to check her texts. Caitlyn didn't bother trying. Within three minutes of arriving, everyone was shuffled down a cramped hallway and into the tiny office of a local immigration official who looked like he hadn't left the room in five years.

“You must be Ms. Wong.” Becca wasn't surprised by the man's large size, the bright-red suspenders, or the bald spot on his head. She was mostly taken aback by his pleasant demeanor. From the moment he saw them, his face lit up as if Jane were here to make a generous donation to a private, charitable cause. Instead, she shook hands with a man three times her size and was asked if she spoke English.

“The Queen's English, no less,” Jane said with her affable smile. “Or perhaps I should say the King's English. So many adjustments to make this past month.”

The man, whose nameplate announced him as “Ralph Skinner,” awkwardly laughed. “Forgive me. I always like to confirm before beginning.”

Jane kept any opinion to herself, but Becca could hear a response in her head. “*Do you think I run a billion-dollar business in this country without knowing English? Really?*”

Unfortunately, there were only so many places to sit in Mr. Skinner's office. Jane and Kevin sat in front of his desk, and Caitlyn took the extra chair nearby. When Becca looked more lost than the puppy she felt like, Mr. Skinner called for someone to bring in a folding chair for her. It was almost comfortable enough to sit in without getting hemorrhoids.

“Let's see here...” Mr. Skinner put on his half-moon glasses and ran his finger beneath Jane's profile on a sheet of paper. “Ms. Wong, it looks like you've run into some confusion with the USCIS, huh?”

“You tell me,” Jane coolly said from her chair.

“What my client means is that she's an upstanding resident who merely wants to continue living here – legally – in peace. There does seem to be confusion, yes. For example, Ms. Wong's attempt to renew her current entrepreneurial visa has had some hiccups on the government's end, and we would like to rectify that as soon as possible.”

Mr. Skinner looked at Kevin as if he spoke gibberish. “So I see here. Looks like we need to ask a few questions to clear things up. These ladies, ah...” He looked at Caitlyn, then Rebecca. “Which one of you is the ex-wife?”

Caitlyn perked up at that. “That would be me, sir. Caitlyn Adams.”

“Whom you still cohabitate with, it seems. What is your exact relation? It says here you're also in business together.”

“Caitlyn is my ex-wife, yes,” Jane said without more prompting. “We married and divorced several years ago. Trust me, it saved our relationship.”

Mr. Skinner looked at Jane with a genuine chuckle. “I tried telling my wife a divorce would do wonders for our marriage, but she doesn’t believe me. We’re also not in business together, though. That happened afterward, hm?”

“Yes. We decided to go into venture capitalism together. After a short run in my native Hong Kong, we decided that the real money was here in America, *her* native country. I applied for an entrepreneurial visa and was approved. I last renewed it in 2020. There were no issues.”

“2020 was a helluva year, Ms. Wong. We approved every renewal that didn’t raise more than a few giant red flags. Even then, we were slow, as shown here. You didn’t receive your updated visa until February of 2021.”

“That is correct, yes.”

“Honestly, it’s a miracle you got it *that* quickly.” Mr. Skinner peered at Jane over the rim of his half-moon glasses. “You must be quite the woman to be given renewal preference.”

Jane said nothing. Becca allowed a small sigh of relief.

“So, do me the honor of explaining to me your current domestic situation.” The man’s eyes were now on Caitlyn and Becca – or were they mostly on Becca, who shifted in her seat and pretended that her blouse wasn’t constricting her airflow?

“I’m assuming that these ladies aren’t your cheering squad, Ms. Wong.”

“Quite the opposite, sometimes,” Jane said with her permanent smile. “As you know, Caitlyn is my ex-wife and current business partner. We do live together, yes. Things remain romantic. We’re just terrible spouses.”

“Thank you, Lin,” Caitlyn muttered.

“Rebecca is also my romantic partner.” Jane wasted no time bringing Becca into this. “She is also Caitlyn’s romantic partner. We are a single-family unit. No children.”

Although Mr. Skinner must have known this already, he still expressed a small modicum of shock when Jane implied that Becca also slept with Caitlyn. *Nice curveball there, Jane.* Considering Kevin Downey did not flinch, Jane must have already gone over all of this with him. Becca hoped they knew what they were doing. *Besides, you know, telling the truth.*

“Quite unconventional, isn’t it?” Mr. Skinner eventually said. “I honestly can’t imagine having *two* women I live with. You really must be exceptional, Ms. Wong.”

Jane didn’t let it go to her head. “Our arrangement works wonderfully for us. Both are American citizens, by the way.”

That was the first thing to make Kevin sigh.

“May I ask what transpired first?” Mr. Skinner asked. “The divorce, or the addition of Ms. Rebecca Pruitt to your household?”



“Oh, the divorce, of course. The whole reason Caitlyn and I didn’t work out the first go-round is because we are terribly unbalanced. That’s where our Becca comes in. She’s a fantastic mediator to our moods.”

“What my client means is that her family unit does not function without all three of them living together,” Kevin interjected.

*He’s still staring at me.* Becca didn’t know if it was best to exchange eye contact with Mr. Skinner or to look away. While he didn’t give her creeper vibes, she knew that he questioned her real role in the relationship. *What if he thinks I’m part of human trafficking or something?* Becca didn’t know how that would work, but her mind wasn’t exactly firing on all cylinders right now.

“You or one of your peers are welcome to come into our home and see how things work, of course,” Jane said. “I remember that being par for the course when Caitlyn and I first married, and I was here on a spousal visa.”

“That shouldn’t be necessary. Not if we’re discussing an entrepreneurial visa.”

Becca’s phone buzzed in her lap. She glanced at the name. It was Lilian, of all people.

“Why don’t you walk me through the timeline between your divorce and now? Tell me about the nature of your business.”

Caitlyn caught Becca checking her phone. “What?” she whispered.

Becca showed her girlfriend the notification from Lilian. Caitlyn offered a quizzical look before turning her attention back to the interview. Jane had already launched into her usual spiel about venture capitalism, putting much emphasis on the “capitalism” part. *If anyone asks, Jane looooves capitalism. Can't get enough.* When Becca asked her girlfriend why she always brought business conversations with Americans back to the virtues of capitalism, she was laughed at in Jane’s silly, good-natured way. It had made her blush in embarrassment at the time, but she got it now. Jane may have been from Hong Kong and spent much of her youth in England, but foreigners could be ignorant. They saw her, heard her speaking “Chinese,” and immediately assumed she was a communist. When it came to making friends and acquaintances in the Western business world, she overcompensated to make up for people’s inconsistent views of Jane Wong. She never seemed put out by it, either. *One of those things I'll never understand about her personality.* What truly got under Jane’s skin? For all of her bravado and lackadaisical airs, in the end, she was the only member of the household who had skin like a duck’s feathers. Nor did Jane attribute that to her upbringing. “*Look at my mother. Look at my sister!*” she would probably say to that.

Speaking of Jane’s sister...

“*Do you have a moment, Rebecca?*” Lilian had texted. “*I need to talk to someone right now. Someone who isn't my sister!*”

Becca didn't have the chance to reply. She overheard her name – spoken by one of the men at the desk.

“Yes, Rebecca has been to Hong Kong and met my family. Why does that matter?”

Kevin nudged Jane. She wasn't supposed to ask questions like that.

“Merely establishing a relationship between her and you, Ms. Wong. As I said, you have an unconventional relationship. Since your renewal was flagged for investigation, it's my job to understand it. Is Hong Kong understanding of your type of relationship?”

Caitlyn sputtered breath between her lips. Becca glanced at her phone again. Nothing new from Lilian.

“We don't have gay marriage like here in America,” Jane said, “but it's fine, I suppose. You're talking about a place where your family's opinion about your personal life matters much more than the government's.”

“Does your family give you any grief? Are you worried about their reaction to you having one girlfriend, let alone two?”

Kevin answered on Jane's behalf. “Are you asking my client if safety is a reason for her being in this country? Because I already filed on her re-application that she has a strong tie to her home country, including her family.”

“Mm, yes. As I said, Mr. Downey, I'm merely interested in what's pertinent to her visa status. For example, does Ms.

Wong plan on marrying either of her partners shortly?”

The silence rang in Becca’s ear. Caitlyn cleared her throat. Jane sighed so loudly that all attention returned to her.

“Is that what it would take to sort this thing out?” Jane asked. “You tell me, Mr. Skinner. Pick one for me, and let’s get this over with. I simply want to stay in your country in good faith. I pay millions a year in taxes. I employ the locals. I have connections – powerful ones, even – in this city. Would you like them to provide character references? Because they can.”

Becca’s phone buzzed again, trembling in the silence.

“I’m *so* sorry,” she whispered, standing up. “I have to take this. It’s important.”

Caitlyn smoothed over Becca’s exit by scooting closer to the desk. “Perhaps I can explain a few things, sir. Jane gets a bit flustered when people question her interest in America.”

That was the last thing Becca heard before ducking into the small lobby, where nobody glanced up at her and nobody – least of all the one man waiting in one of the chairs – talked to her. She commandeered a corner chair to herself and scrolled through her messages. Apparently, Lilian was lonely.

*“I’m sort of at the immigration office with Jane right now...”* Becca wrote. *“We’re sorting out her visa situation.”*

*“How interesting! Tell her we’re rooting for her.”*

*“We?”*

Lilian punched something in, deleted it, and started writing again. She must have done this multiple times, for when words finally appeared on Becca's phone screen, there were not enough to warrant the amount of time Lilian spent typing.

*"Why, you and me, of course!"*

Becca indulged Lilian for a few more minutes before returning to Mr. Skinner's office. She was right on time for the part that would be quoted *multiple* times later that night.

"...I'm pretty sure that America won't let me marry both of them. You have many grand freedoms in this country, but polygamy isn't one of them. Why, I recall Joseph Smith ensuring that a hundred years ago." Jane corrected herself. "Two hundred years ago! My, time flies."

"Ah... that has nothing to do with this," Mr. Skinner said. "I don't know about Joseph Smith, but no, no one is allowed to have more than one spouse in this country. That's bigamy."

"But you're saying that I should marry one of them. Is that it? Everything keeps circling back to that."

"I haven't said anything along those lines, Ms. Wong. You're the one putting words in my mouth."

"Heavens, no. I do not dare to dream such a thing, Mr. Skinner. Now, what are the next steps I should take to ensure my residency in the United States?"

Becca was asked to take notes on these matters. Once she had her app open, she punched in the following: *Collect character and business references from upstanding American*

*citizens, do not leave the country until further notice, and explore alternative visa avenues should this one not pan out.* Nothing new. Yet, without instruction, Becca created a list of the best contacts for compiling character references.

“Next time, let me do most of the talking,” Kevin said when the four of them entered the elevator later. “I know this is stressful, but there’s a reason you’re paying me above all others to help you right now. It’s because I’ve navigated these waters before.”

Jane slumped against the wall as they plunged toward the earth. “Forgive me. It’s been a long two weeks, and I was sick for part of it.”

Becca sidled up next to Jane and wrapped an arm around hers. “Your sister wants to know if we can have dinner tonight.”

“Oh, bloody hell, I forgot about her!”

Becca told Lilian that they would love to have dinner – and Jane looked forward to hearing tales that had absolutely nothing to do with her current plight.

# CHAPTER 11

## Caitlyn

“**Y**ou’d be doing us a huge favor, Mom.” Caitlyn tapped her pen against her desk. In her ear, the sounds of her mother cleaning up the dishes after a Midwestern lunch went with the grandkids squealing in the distance. Caitlyn imagined the kids ate the same thing she did for lunch at that age. *Boxed macaroni and cheese and bologna sandwiches*. The lunch of champions. “Jane’s all out of sorts with this immigration thing. Which, by the way, you didn’t hear about from me.”

“We’re always happy to help you and Jane any way we can, hon.” Christie Adams turned off the faucet in her kitchen. “Now, what is it that you need, exactly? A character reference? I wouldn’t know where to start with someone like Jane...”

“Say that you knew her as a daughter-in-law and knew her to be upstanding. The kind that contributes a lot to her local community. That should work.”



“Of course. Although, if she wanted to put that to work, I’d have seen her volunteering at church when you two were here.”

Caitlyn rolled her eyes. “Don’t push it, Mom. Jane is the most atheistic person I know.”

“I know, I know. Just saying! I bet Uncle Sam would love to see her rolling up her sleeves and scooping food at the soup kitchen.”

“Jane and I contribute financially to local charities. We’ve got that part covered.”

“You two are always generous with your money.”

“Yeah, put that in the letter, too!”

Caitlyn had to get back to work after her personal call to her mother, but her thoughts were always on what happened in the here and now. *I don’t know what the problem is with Jane’s status.* Was it the divorce? Was it taxes? Or was it deeper? Had something occurred with the Wong family back in Hong Kong, and that was the real reason behind Lilian’s sudden visit? Caitlyn hated to admit it, but the thought had crossed her mind more than once. Perhaps a cousin or close in-law was in political trouble, and it flagged Jane’s name. *Her older brother? Lilian’s husband?* Caitlyn was knowledgeable about the political and historical climate in Hong Kong after a marriage, divorce, and business overseas, but there were still some details she didn’t quite understand. For all she knew, Lilian was the one making inflammatory political comments. *That would be the day, all right.* Lilian was so fresh with

current events that she claimed to have completely missed the protests that filled her hometown because they happened during her maternity leave when she “only thought about sleeping and watching soap operas.” *I’d be shocked if she knew who Carrie Lam or Xi Jin-ping were.* Women like Lilian had always lived in a completely different world. So had Jane, but at least Jane had common sense and a more worldly life experience.

As anxiety rose in her throat, Caitlyn employed two of her personal secret weapons when drama arrived. *Mindfulness. Radical acceptance.* She closed her eyes and shut out the sounds of the office beyond her door. Breath filled and emptied her lungs. With every purposeful breath, she was brought back to the moment, where there were things that had to be done *today*. Things within Caitlyn’s control, like meetings and emails.

And a conference with Constance-Grace, who – alongside Becca – had narrowed the candidates down to three people.

Caitlyn looked through their applications now. Two women and one man vied for the chance to be the co-assistant at Adams & Wong, a place that required “quick thinking and quick feet.” Constance-Grace and Rebecca had argued over how to word the job description. Constance-Grace wanted more corporate lingo, and Rebecca wanted to be honest. Yet not too honest. Caitlyn had vetoed “*Adams likes to micromanage, and Wong likes to randomly shirk her work*” before those words left her pretty lips.

*Wouldn't mind seeing those lips right now.* Caitlyn had the pleasure of having Rebecca in her bed the night before, although the sexiest things got was some heavy petting and soft kisses as they drifted off to sleep. Caitlyn had tried to be better at offering nightly affection to her partners, but Jane often liked her alone time and Caitlyn often fell asleep long before Rebecca was available for anything more than dinner conversation. *Such is life.* Cohabitation with two other women wasn't much different from when it was her and Jane. Or her, Jane and Olivia...

Great. Time to practice more radical acceptance.

Caitlyn set an alarm for five before five, since she and Jane weren't heading home together. Instead, Jane was taking Rebecca out for dinner at a restaurant they both liked, and Caitlyn had promised to drop by Lilian's hotel room for... something. Caitlyn still wasn't sure. For every moment Lilian attempted to spend with her own sister, she bugged Caitlyn and Rebecca twice as much for companionship. *I understand she's lonely, but Jesus.* Caitlyn didn't know if it was unfortunate or simply pathetic that this was how Lilian dealt with her woes.

All of that meant Caitlyn wanted to say goodbye to Jane before she took off for dinner – and maybe ask for some advice about Lilian.

“There's my favorite blond girl!” Jane spun around in her office chair the moment Caitlyn entered the other corner room

and shut the door behind her. “Do come over here and dote on me, Cait. It’s been a rubbish day filled with planks.”

Caitlyn stood by Jane’s desk. “What am I supposed to do? Sit in your lap and crush you?”

A dazzling grin that betrayed the anxiety that also simmered inside Jane welcomed Caitlyn to the window overlooking a drizzly New England evening. “You know I love it when you threaten me with a good time.” Jane inched closer, elbow scraping across her desk. “If anyone gets to crush me with her chest and gams, it’s you.”

“Think I’ll pass for the moment. I was only stopping by to say goodbye before you head off to dinner with Rebecca and I deal with your sister.”

“Smashing! That’s my Cait, always taking one for the team. What would I do about Lilian without you?” Jane took Caitlyn’s hand. She was careful to avoid bumping her thumb into the wedding ring that Caitlyn now wore on her right hand as if that diluted the relationship they once had. “She always got along more with you. Besides, you have the most sensible advice when it comes to lady topics. Not me.”

“Are you saying you’d give your sister bad advice about her marriage?”

“Oh, definitely. The gay side of me says to leave his arse.”

“Let me guess – that’s conflating with the Asian part?”

“Most definitely! I’m such a dutiful daughter that I must insist she fulfill her promise to the family by staying true to

the man who helps steer our decades-long legacy. Ha! Can you imagine me saying something like that?”

Caitlyn pressed against her partner’s desk. “Yes, actually. You know what Lilian stands to lose should she leave her husband.”

“Over something as petty as her being bored? As him cheating on her? God, unless the mistress is prancing about town with his gifts on her person, I don’t see what the big bother is. Tell her that some people in her family have real problems right now.”

“You don’t care that your sister is being cheated on?”

“By a man old enough to be our father? Whom she married for money and prestige? She knew exactly what she was getting into. You ask me, she’s panicking about getting old. She’s my *elder* sister, you know, and I’m in my forties. That’s a lot of Botox and plastic surgery keeping her looking thirty-five. It’s only going to get more difficult, and she knows that once her kids are all in middle school, she’s officially *old* in her social circles. She’s not ready to become our own mother. She’s always thought Mum the epitome of pathetic.”

“You know her better than I do, but I think there’s something else going on. Suppose I’ll find out when I go over.”

“Make sure you eat something. I’ll bring home my leftovers, but no telling you’ll like them.”

“I should be telling you that. Biggest thing I ever nagged you about was *eating*.”

“What can I say? My stomach is as big as my finger. It’s not my fault portions in this country are out of control.”

“Don’t let the immigration officials hear you saying that. *Porking out* is one of our time-honored traditions in this country.”

“*Porking out*? My God, Cait, please tell me that’s not a real phrase.”

Caitlyn could have teased her some more, but she was more inclined to tuck a single errant hair behind her partner’s ear and smile. “I think when I get home I’ll take a long bath. I bet you’d like to join me, huh?”

“Now, what would Becca say about me leaving her in the foyer to jump into the tub with you? You have the best bath in the house, but it’s not big enough for three people.”

“If she wants to join, we’ll figure it out. We always do.”

Caitlyn had to leave, but she didn’t depart until she left a lipstick print on Jane’s forehead. *Not telling her it’s there, though*. Next time, though, she’d leave one on Jane’s collar.



“Caitlyn!” Lilian was a bright spot on that dreary, dark evening. The sweetheart dress with a sunset-inspired ombre caught Caitlyn’s attention before anything else. Not even the

clacking of six-inch heels summoned Caitlyn to the far reaches of the hotel lobby like Lilian's outrageous dress did.

They exchanged air kisses before Lilian led Caitlyn to the elevator. "What is it that you wanted to show me?" Caitlyn rearranged her purse on her arm, falling behind Lilian's quick steps. "So you know, I'm starving. I barely had anything for lunch and wouldn't mind grabbing dinner sooner rather than later."

"Of course! This will only take a few minutes." Lilian had plenty of time to wait for Caitlyn to catch up to her. The elevator in this hotel was slow, after all. *She made sure to tell me five times the last time we talked.* "Now, Caitlyn." Lilian dropped her buoyant demeanor once they were alone in the elevator. "I should warn you. There's something that I haven't told either you or Jane. Or Rebecca for that matter. I thought it best to tell you first. You're... you're so much more understanding than my sister."

Caitlyn looked up from the depths of her purse. "Sure. What's up?"

"What's up! I love that phrase!" Lilian faced her reflection in the ornate mirror hanging on the wall behind her. "*What is up?* So fun."

"Lilian." Caitlyn finished messing around with her purse and sighed. "It's been rough, lately. I don't have the wherewithal to deal with riddles and puzzles. What's going on with you?"

The doors dinged open. Lilian bounded out in a blur of oranges and yellows. “Life takes such interesting twists and turns! Do you know the Chinese saying *‘Huà lóng diǎn jīng?’*”

Caitlyn hesitated near the single vending machine on that floor. “Can’t say I do. Is one of those words ‘dragon’?”

“Yes, yes.” Lilian backtracked, her ridiculous heels clomping on the fine carpet beneath their feet. “It means ‘paint the dragon, dot the eye.’ My mother used to say it all the time when overseeing my studies. I’ve never quite shaken it, you know?”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“The phrase? It means that nothing is complete until you put on the finishing touches. I used to think it was such a silly saying. Who cares about the details in a dragon’s eyes when a grand, pretty dragon is fine enough on its own? That’s how I’ve always approached life, Caitlyn.” At the same moment Lilian took Caitlyn’s hands, the ice machine crunched only a few yards away. Caitlyn almost forgot they were in one of the nicest hotels in town. Lilian claimed to have one of the best suites. What was she doing on a floor with an ice machine? “Everything was the big picture. Having the best of everything. That included doing whatever my family told me. Doing whatever it took to ensure my place in society. I married a man I didn’t love and had his children. Now...” She dropped Caitlyn’s hands. “I’ve realized I’ve never dotted the eye. I’ve never added the fine details to my life. You can’t



have a rich tapestry without the silk threads that make up the sunset's hue, and you can't have a five-star buffet without the sweet garnish on your main course. Nothing matters without that taste, you see? I have to follow my heart. I must go where my will takes me." She giggled. "Maybe I'm having a mid-life crisis, Caitlyn, but I've never been happier."

For one, shocking second, Caitlyn wondered if Lilian Wong was coming on to her.

That moment was fleeting, though. Because when Lilian turned around, it wasn't to lead Caitlyn to the tiger's den. It was to reach her destination, where the thing that made her the happiest awaited her.

Caitlyn almost couldn't catch her breath. Another face had appeared before her, but she swore it was a figment of her imagination. Like all of the other ones those past two weeks.

"Please don't be mad, Caitlyn." Lilian had opened the door to her suite and motioned for Caitlyn to come inside. "I promise I can explain. Hear me out before saying anything."

Yet Caitlyn already knew what – or who – she would see tidying up the one-bedroom suite on the top floor of The Grand, the city's go-to hotel for privacy and delicacy. There, among the single couch in the lounge area, was a woman with long, black hair who fluffed pillows and rearranged the teapot and cups on the coffee table. When she looked up and locked eyes with Caitlyn in the doorway, all air escaped the room.

It was Olivia. She wasn't a ghost, after all.



“I don’t know what to say.” Caitlyn sat in a plush chair while Olivia poured tea – just the way she had always liked it. Lilian roosted on the couch, ankles crossed and haughty airs suffocating the entire room. Olivia served Lilian’s tea last, never taking a moment to ask how she liked it. Was there a reason for Olivia to know how Lilian drank her tea? *They’ve met plenty of times before, sure...* When Jane and Caitlyn lived in Hong Kong, Olivia was their third. And Lilian was a huge part of their lives, of course. Still, nothing about this made sense. For one thing... “Have you been here as long as Lilian? Because I swore I saw you a few times.” Including at The Dark Hour, but Caitlyn didn’t dare bring that up.

Olivia stood, tea tray in her hands as she moved it to the far side of the coffee table. “I came with Lilian a while ago, yes. I’ve seen you, but we agreed that I wouldn’t approach any of you until the time was right. Lilian thinks now is the time.”

Caitlyn’s head spun. She didn’t touch her tea, unlike Lilian, who sipped it as if it were a fine wine. “Isn’t she wonderful?” she asked Caitlyn as Olivia made herself comfortable on the couch. “She’s also made us reservations at the restaurant downstairs. If you haven’t eaten there, Caitlyn, you’ll love their chicken marsala. I’ve slowly been going through their French American fusion menu.”

“Chicken marsala isn’t French,” Olivia whispered.

“Oh! Right.”

Their two voices made Caitlyn more nauseous, but not because she held anything against either woman. If anything, seeing Olivia again should have been... more monumental. There was still something left unsaid between them after the way she broke up with Caitlyn – and Jane, to be fair. Whenever Caitlyn imagined having another moment alone with Olivia, she didn't think Lilian would be there, the grinning mediator between them. *I want to know how she's doing. If she's happy with her husband.* Caitlyn entertained no fantasies of getting back with Olivia, but even Rebecca was the first to tell Caitlyn that she had lingering feelings stirring in everything she said and did. *You don't simply get over someone like Olivia.* Before Rebecca, Olivia was the first woman to completely steal Caitlyn's heart in the wake of her devastating divorce. Even after she and Jane got back together with the understanding that they'd open things up to a third, Caitlyn had been raw. *Living in another country hadn't helped.* Olivia didn't only steal her heart. She had helped Caitlyn adjust to making a new life in Hong Kong, a place Olivia had called home in more ways than Jane ever did. *She knew the best hideaways. We lost whole days exploring them together.* Then exploring one another at night.

It wasn't the breakup that hurt the most. It was how it happened.

But there were no chances to have that discussion now. A third sat between them, and the longer Caitlyn was entertained by her hostesses, the more something overtook her thoughts.

*It can't be, though.*

“Anyway, our reservation isn’t for another half hour,” Lilian cheerily said. “Besides, I thought it better that you two reintroduce yourselves in private. I know you had a... a thing.” She didn’t look at Caitlyn when she said that.

Olivia blushed but did not look away from Caitlyn’s heavy gaze.

“Someone please tell me what’s going on here.” Caitlyn had to clear her throat before she squeaked like a twelve-year-old boy. “Why are you really here, Lilian? Why the hell is my ex-girlfriend with you? Doesn’t she have a kid of her own now? Where is he?”

Olivia’s hand lightly touched her chest. Caitlyn instantly regretted accusing her ex of something as terrible as abandonment or neglect. “My son is back in Hong Kong. With Lilian’s children. We thought it best that they are watched by the same team of nannies. You know, our sons aren’t that different in age. We hope they’ll be like brothers growing up.”

“I’ve been joking for *months* that it would be hilarious if my youngest daughter married her son. Unfortunately, it’s not the outdated notion of an arranged marriage that keeps the idea from coming to fruition. It’s the fact that our children are technically distant cousins. I mean, nobody would bat an eye, really, but better to keep it out of the public, right?”

Olivia curtly nodded. “Let them sort their fates.”

“Are you guys friends now? Since when?”

“Livie and I became close friends back when we couldn’t leave Hong Kong. Our husbands were so busy navigating their businesses through the pandemic that it simply made sense for us to spend more time together, especially since Olivia was a new mom and I had *so* much advice to give her, being a mother three times over myself.”

“I owe a lot to Ms. Lilian,” Olivia said. “My parents decided to ride out the pandemic in British Columbia, where my brother lives. I was very alone.”

Caitlyn detected the dejection in Olivia’s voice. *She’s so fragile...* Olivia was the queen of poker faces, but Caitlyn had gotten close enough to her to know when something shook her. Loneliness had never been something she weathered easily. *It’s why she would only leave me if she had a marriage lined up.* Which was exactly what happened.

“I’m sorry,” Caitlyn said. “*Livie?*” She kept coming back to that nickname as if Lilian had bestowed it without Olivia’s input.

“Yes! We became known as Lili and Livie. Isn’t it adorable?” Lilian’s hand momentarily slapped against Olivia’s hand before it slid off again. Olivia had to compose herself. It was the first moment she refused to look Caitlyn in the eye.

A boulder crashed through the ceiling and conked Caitlyn on the head.

“You’re sleeping together,” she whispered as if in a hypnotic trance.

Olivia did not deny it. Lilian, however, laughed like an automatic rifle firing at the wall.

Caitlyn looked around the suite. Only one bedroom. *Only one bedroom.*

She pressed her hand against her stomach. “I don’t know what to say,” she said, anyway. “Besides *what the hell?*”

Lilian was still laughing. Olivia placed a hand on Lilian’s shoulder to calm her down. “It’s all right. That’s why she’s here, isn’t it?”

*I’ve got to tell Jane.* No, wait. Caitlyn couldn’t *possibly* tell Jane. How would she broach this subject? “*Guess what, Lin! Your sister is queer and screwing our ex-girlfriend who broke up with us to marry a man she doesn’t love!*” At least now she understood what these two women had in common.

“You must please understand,” Olivia softly said when Lilian finally stopped making such awkward sounds. “We didn’t mean for it to happen. We resisted it for a long time.”

“Like over a year!” Lilian shouted to the void before her face.

“We’ve always flirted, though,” Olivia continued. “Even when I was with you and Jane, Lilian was quite the flirt.”

“I didn’t know I was flirting, though! You inspired me to say such ridiculous things when we were alone! I meant it, too. I *really could* eat you up like a dumpling. You’re so cute, Livie! The things you inspire me to think... oh, I can’t say it in front of Caitlyn.”

“Caitlyn’s probably thought a few of those things about Olivia in the past,” Caitlyn muttered. “Oh, my God. This is too much. How the hell did you hide Olivia for almost two whole weeks? Do your families know about this? Are you planning on telling Jane? I can’t... Jesus!” She was supposed to have dinner with these two? In twenty minutes?

“Of course, I want to tell Jane.” Someone had flipped a switch in Lilian’s brain. Now, she was nothing but serious. “That’s the reason we’re here. I need Jane’s help figuring out what to do about this now we’re in a heap of trouble. Mother has already begun suspecting things, but then Jane’s immigration issues arose as soon as I got here, and...” Lilian sighed. “I can’t pile that on top of her right now. That’s why we finally decided to tell you first. Only you. We’re hoping you can give us some advice as well. That and...” Lilian exchanged a brief glance with Olivia. “It’s so good to finally get it off my chest.” Lilian’s hand was back on Olivia’s thigh, this time on purpose. “As I told you, Caitlyn, I’ve finally dotted the eye on the painting that is my life. I never knew that what I needed was so close to me for years.”

Caitlyn swallowed the lump in her throat. Seeing Lilian and Olivia together like this was both surreal and haunting. *Like the craziest parts of my past leaping right before me.* Was she dreaming? She wouldn’t put it past it herself. After all, she had recently been ill. Was this a relapse? Was this her feverish hellscape inspired by recent events? *There’s no way. These two?* Olivia had walked away from this life. Lilian? *Lilian?* That surprised Caitlyn the most.

“I think we’ve broken her,” Lilian said to Olivia. “Livie, why don’t you get some of that CBD we’ve picked up? I could use it right now. Maybe Caitlyn would like it as well.”

Olivia got up without a word. Caitlyn was still speechless when left alone with Lilian.

“I hope you’re not sore,” Lilian said.

“Sore?” Caitlyn squeaked. “Why would I be sore?”

“Because, well...” Had Caitlyn noticed that blush on Lilian’s face before? Was it painted upon her skin, or was it a result of Lilian’s sudden embarrassment? “I know the history of you and Olivia. She’s told me quite a bit about it. In confidence, of course. I didn’t realize you took the breakup so seriously. Jane made it look like a matter of course.”

“Yes, well, Jane is good at that.”

“Not to mention, I remember how I treated Jane sometimes. Just because I was the nicest person in the family when it came to her... well, how she is... doesn’t mean I didn’t cause strife or ill feelings at the time. I always found her lifestyle curious. Now I know why.”

“It’s simply shocking, is all. I never would have guessed this in a million years.”

Lilian nodded. “Go easy on Olivia, please. I know she broke your heart. She feels terrible about it, but I thought that since you and Rebecca are getting along so well now... well, I figured you had moved on from Olivia, and it was all right to talk about us. We really could use your help, Caitlyn. Jane is



the only member of my family who might understand what's happened. Sisters have to look out for one another, right?"

Yet Caitlyn still belonged to another realm. One where she yearned to vacate this suite and return home. When she convinced herself that Jane and Rebecca would await her there, she remembered that they were out enjoying a romantic dinner now – just the two of them.

She could not intrude upon that. Besides, she had promised to have dinner with Lilian.

Caitlyn called upon the experiences that trained her to deal with uncomfortable situations. Yet a catfight behind the stage of a pageant or someone making off with her ideas had not prepared her for the sheer discomfort she now encountered in Lilian's suite.

*I will prevail. For everyone's sake.*

"I believe it's time for our reservation," Caitlyn said. "Tell me more downstairs."

Lilian clapped her hands once and called to Olivia in Cantonese. Although Caitlyn did not understand everything, she got the gist: "*Get ready, ladybug dumpling bear, because it's time to eat some chow!*"

Caitlyn would sell her soul if it meant forgetting the way she felt when Olivia walked back into the room. Every memory, every ill feeling consuming her couldn't be soothed by the greatest of doctors. Not even Jane's unforgettable ruses or Rebecca's tender words could save Caitlyn now.

## CHAPTER 12

## Jane

The first thing Jane ordered was a glass of bourbon to go with the bottle of wine already waiting their reservation. *Wine isn't stiff enough for this.* Jane had purposely picked Rebecca's favorite, anyway: a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc that was a bit harsh to Jane's discerning tongue, but Rebecca claimed was like drinking candy.

"You really shouldn't have." Rebecca sat in the chair while Jane took temporary residence in the booth side of the table. Such a last-minute reservation at the restaurant Caitlyn did not care for meant they had to sacrifice some comfort for the privacy Jane commanded whenever she ate out in her work clothes. *Besides, she fits in the chair better.* Jane was loathed to admit it, but her feet were barely flat on the floor. Rebecca was tall enough to scoot back her chair and cross her legs. "You know what you've done? You've eliminated half of the menu for me."

"Consider it a favor. There's already too much to eat here." Nevertheless, Jane was so nervous that her already barely-

there appetite was more likely to make her vomit than eat anything of substance. *I'll get soup. That'll do it.* Easier to look like she had eaten her fill when it was something she drank first, ate later.

“Should I get the house pad thai? Ugh, I really love the red curry here, though. Oh, my God, Jane.” Rebecca tipped forward, elbow on the table as she showed her girlfriend one of the seasonal specials. “Pumpkin curry with harvest vegetables and *duck*. You know, I never tried duck before meeting you.”

“Aren't you the one who said she made a vow to not eat new and novel meats in a world where it wasn't necessary?” Jane chuckled, grateful to think of something else. “Get whatever you desire, love. The night is ours.”

Rebecca placed the menu on the table and leaned forward. “Does that mean when we get home, too?”

*Hopefully.* That assumed everything went according to plan. “I love it when you flirt.”

“Maybe we should wait for Caitlyn to get home, though. After dinner with your sister, she'll need some decompressing.”

“Ha. Dinner with my sister means shutting herself up in her room and never leaving the bath. Caitlyn will lay back with classical music in her ear and cucumbers on her eyes. I bet you a hundred dollars she won't want anything to do with us until tomorrow. So, really, the night is ours, Becca.”

“It has been a while since you and I had a date. Something always comes up, doesn’t it?”

Jane almost refuted that but recalled the one-on-one dates in her more recent memory featured Caitlyn, not Rebecca. Sometimes those dates ended together, but usually, Jane and Caitlyn called it a night when they returned to the condo, where Rebecca may or may not be. Domesticity had never been Jane’s strongest suit, but she had to admit that as she got older, it was more natural to sit on the couch in her pajamas. Sometimes, she fell asleep in someone’s lap. *For the love of your reputation, Lin Hua, don’t make a habit of that.* The last thing she needed was to become a big ol’ softie in her middle age.

The waiter appeared. As soon as Rebecca ordered the pumpkin curry, Jane requested the blandest soup, as well as the fresh spring rolls with bamboo and black mushrooms. Rebecca was only slightly surprised.

“Don’t tell me you ordered *mild* soup. You usually like this place because they don’t hold back on the spices.”

“I’m attempting to keep my stomach at peace, love.”

“You’re losing your Hong Kong edge, is what I think.”

Jane snorted. “Not all good cuisine sets your mouth ablaze. As I tried telling Caitlyn several years ago, though, good spice is about enhancing the flavors once you’re used to the sensation.”

“I’m sure that went over well with the Queen of the Midwest.”

“The corn and potatoes crowd are cute with their Tabasco sauce, but you’re not wrong.”

Rebecca laughed. “I have no room to complain. Outside of this really bomb Mexican restaurant in my hometown, it’s not like I was exposed to much spice in Virginia, either.”

“But you traveled parts of the world before we met you, so there’s that.”

“If you think I ate anything hotter than wasabi then... well, I think I did. There were some nights I blacked things out.”

Jane knew the conversation had to change, but she was in no hurry to get to the subject at hand. As far as Rebecca knew, this dinner was an excuse to spend some much-needed time together. From the beginning of their three-way relationship, everyone agreed that while they were all equal when it came to needs and attention, it was also important to cultivate one-on-one feelings as well. Jane was always for that. Sometimes she only required attention from one woman, and she was not the jealous type – if Caitlyn and Rebecca wanted to holiday for a weekend without Jane, she would live. If anything, the jealousy was because they went somewhere she’d love to see!

That dynamic might be changing on paper soon, though.

“Is something up?” Rebecca lowered her voice, although the nearest couple was more than five tables away. “You’ve been a

bit cagey since we left the office. Do you have immigration on your mind? Or is it your sister?"

Sighing, Jane relaxed against her seat. "Can't get anything past you, love. You have to pick something, though. Is it my exhausting older sister?" She sniffed her bourbon. Suddenly, it wasn't as appealing as it had been a minute ago. "Or is it the government looking for reasons to not take my money? You tell me, Becca."

"Sorry for bringing it up. I'm sure you'd rather talk about something else."

"Actually, I suppose we should get this out of the way." Under any other circumstance, Jane would not be bothered by what she was about to say. After all, the first time she did this with Caitlyn, it had been natural. Of course they should take things to the next level! They had been in love! *As they say here... like, duh.* Yet looking Rebecca in the eye and realizing what she was about to do only made Jane more nauseous. "There's something very important we have to discuss, love."

Any frivolity evaporated from Rebecca's form. She sat up straight and offered Jane the hand she sought on the table. They almost knocked over their plates and drinks, but would they have noticed before it was too late? *No.* Jane refused to lose face as her finger pushed between Rebecca's knuckles. The straight red hair falling over Rebecca's shoulders was almost too distracting. *What I'd give to simply focus on her beauty and sweet demeanor tonight.* *No.* Jane had to make this about herself, too.

“How worried should I be?” Rebecca asked.

“Suppose that depends,” Jane softly said. “Don’t worry, love. This isn’t a breakup talk. Nor is there anything wrong with the business. But... our way of life might be in trouble if I don’t sort out this immigration issue. You’ve heard what everyone’s said. It might be easiest for me to switch my type of visa for the time being. Even if it means not being able to work for a few months. On paper, anyway.”

Rebecca squeezed her girlfriend’s hand. “Don’t do something you might regret.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about, love. You might have regrets, too.”

Rebecca’s freckled face was paler than usual. “So, you’ve decided, huh?”

“What does that mean?”

“You’ve joked about it a couple of times. You know... whether it should be me or Caitlyn... again...”

“Rebecca...”

“Don’t mind me. I shouldn’t ruin this moment.” Rebecca bit her lip. “I’ve never done this before. I’d like to hear you say it. You know, as if it were the plan all along.”

Jane should have been taken aback, but how could she be, when Rebecca was so damn clever? *Can’t ever get anything past her.* The same could be said about Caitlyn, but Jane’s partner often kept her observations to herself. Not Rebecca. She was quintessentially American in that fashion.



“Becca, you know I love you.” Jane hadn’t rehearsed any of this. She was an off-the-cuff person, anyway. “I love you so much that the thought of spending the rest of my life with you is comforting. I know I haven’t had the chance to give you all of the attention you deserve lately, but I will certainly make up for that soon. Because...” Ah, crap. There went the flow she had entered. She couldn’t even blame it on the restaurant staff, the other diners, or the look in Rebecca’s knowing eyes. “Because I think we should get married.”

There it was. Out in the world. Jane couldn’t take it back now.

“You know I love you, too.” Rebecca allowed a wan smile as she tilted her head and squeezed Jane’s hand. “You know I’d do anything for you, Jane. I only worry that it isn’t the best decision right now.”

“Damn it, love. I don’t know what else to do. It’s either you or Caitlyn, and Cait and I have already been there and done that. I can’t ask her to do that again for me. Besides, let’s be real, you and I are perhaps the best suited for this right now. I promise Caitlyn will understand. It’s temporary if things don’t work out between us like that.”

“You really know how to sell this, Jane.”

At first, Jane assumed the clammy feeling on her hand was Rebecca’s sweaty fingers. *No. It’s all me.* Jane was the one suffering from embarrassment. *It’s not supposed to be like this.* If she ever asked a woman to marry her, it would be like the first time, when she and Caitlyn holidayed in Thailand, the

crystal blue waves accentuating the figure of the woman Jane had loved more than any other. *She came out of the surf and lay on our towel, and I couldn't help myself. I told her she was so perfect that I had to marry her before someone else did. Then we made love on the beach.* After their divorce, Jane knew she was not cut out for being anyone's wife. Not as long as she was better suited for the kind of arrangement she currently had. She and Caitlyn had spent many nights like this one discussing how to best make women like Olivia and Rebecca feel equal to them. That meant, regardless of their own history together as a married couple, they couldn't let it sway any household decisions. Rebecca truly was their equal when it came to love, sex, and where they lived.

Why couldn't things stay that way?

"I mean what I say, love." Jane pulled her hand away, only to cup her fingers around Rebecca's. "I love you. I love Caitlyn, too. Christ, you know that as well as she does. But I can't marry her again. That ship has long sailed from whatever harbor we tended together. I wouldn't ask you either if it wasn't important. Don't think I say any of this lightly. Nor do I expect an answer right now. Yet I had to put it out there."

When Rebecca released Jane's hold on her, it was to tuck her hair behind her ears and have a sip of her wine. "You know I'll do anything for you. I want you to stay here with us." She savored the flavor of her drink before meeting Jane's gaze again. "I hate the thought of disruption as much as you do. Suppose I have one major question, though."

“If you’re asking if I’ve talked this over with Caitlyn yet, then no, I haven’t. I wanted to run this by you, first.”

Rebecca shook her head. “I figured that. No. I wanted to know...” She pulled her white cloth napkin into her lap long before any food arrived. “If this relationship had only been you and me since the beginning, and if visa issues weren’t behind this... well, would you still ask me to be your wife? Because if we get married, that’s how it is. I’ll be your wife, and you’ll be mine. We can’t take that back. Hell, we can’t take this moment back. You’ve asked me to marry you. That’s all there is to it.”

“Yes.”

Rebecca double-glanced at Jane. “Yes, what?”

“You asked me a question. So, I’m responding. Yes, Becca, I would ask you to marry me three years into our own relationship. I married Caitlyn in less time. When I know I love someone for life, that’s all there is to it. I don’t see why you won’t be with us for the rest of our lives. I want to give you the world. So does Caitlyn. I think it goes without saying, I’d move mountains for her as well. I know she’d help me. I daresay she’d marry me again if absolutely necessary – but I don’t want to put that on her shoulders. We divorced for a reason. We’re a much stronger couple without the piece of paper.”

“That piece of paper is important, though. It got your residency in this country your first time around.”

“Ah, look at you, knowing everything.”

“I’m serious. Jane, I...” Rebecca sighed. “As I said, I’ll think about it. If we can’t find any other answer to keep you in America under good standing... perhaps there is no other way.”

“Come on, love, I don’t want you to marry me unless you love me.”

“Of course I love you. You and I have a special bond, you know?”

Those unexpected words lifted Jane’s spirit. “Yes. I know we do. We always have.”

“In a way, I fell in love with you first. It’s because of you I got sucked into this relationship with you and Caitlyn. We’ll always have that.”

“Must you make me nostalgic for the first time we met?”

Jane was grateful for the smile returning to Rebecca’s sweet face. “I think about it a lot, you know. How if I had not gone on that weekend excursion of self-destruction... I would have never met you and Caitlyn. None of this would have ever happened.”

“That’s what life is. A series of amazing coincidences.”

“I think your biggest coincidence was being born to such a wealthy family. I needed way more coincidences to bring myself to you. Like, we met because I went on that trip to California, but we technically met in the airline’s lounge. I was only able to get into that lounge because I had racked up so many loyalty points on my card. How did I rack up all of those

points? So many trips that I used to hurt myself with. I only went on those trips because of my breakup with my ex...”

She trailed off long enough for Jane to interrupt. “Let’s not dwell upon that, love. We are where we are because life works out like that. I’d rather focus on the present, anyway. And the future, I suppose. If I think about the past too much... you know me. I’m not good at that self-reflection rubbish.”

“You’ve had quite the life beyond Caitlyn and me, huh?”

“No need to bring it up.” Rebecca was right, though. Jane had her own whirlwind life that felt more like a series of wild coincidences than anything else. *All the way down to what I did right after the divorce.* That time she and Caitlyn spent broken up had been formidable to them both. While Caitlyn was off having one monogamous relationship after another with women she barely remembered, Jane had reconnected with an old friend from university. A male one.

*You’re only alive once, I suppose...*

Jane saw the waiter coming before Rebecca sensed his presence. “Let’s focus on this night and how much we’re in love.” Jane offered the waiter a big smile as he presented their appetizers: spring rolls and homemade sweet and sour sauce. “Besides, you’ve fallen behind on your Chinese practice. We should focus on some stunning vocabulary.” She waited for the waiter to depart again. “The dirty kind.”

Rebecca rolled her eyes. “Nice try. You can’t stop me from thinking about what you asked.”

Jane could work with that. *If she won't stop thinking about it... I'll simply feed into it.*

She had hoped this night would trend in that direction, anyway.

“Do you remember the first time we entered this flat like this?” Jane didn't turn on the lights when they returned home. She knew the layout well enough that hanging up her coat in the front closet was no issue. Neither was removing her shoes and making her way to the living area in the dark. Rebecca brought up the rear, as deft as her girlfriend when it came to navigating the world they inhabited. “I can't recall some of the details. Did we shag on the sofa before making our way to my room?”

Rebecca propped herself against the back of the couch in question. Jane was only a few feet away. “Like I could forget. I was so nervous that I couldn't decide if it was better to rip off my clothes and go for it or to run out the door.”

“I must have been good, considering you hung around.”

Rebecca patted Jane's arm before turning around. Before she could head toward her room, however, Jane took her by the hand and drew her back.

“Can't a girl take off her face without you getting handsy?” Nevertheless, Rebecca encircled her arms around Jane's waist and slumped against the couch until their lips were level with one another. “I swear, you're worse than anyone else I've known.”

“Must be something that keeps you coming back for more.” Jane didn’t let her chance to feel up Rebecca get away from her. She half-expected Caitlyn to come through that door at any moment. *Hopefully, she’s not dying from boredom with my sister.* Caitlyn was such a sport.

“Seriously, though.” Rebecca wiggled out of Jane’s grasp. “Give me a moment, would you? I have to go to the bathroom.”

“If you think that’s enough to turn me off,” Jane said while Rebecca headed toward her room, “then you’re sorely mistaken.”

“How about I meet you in the Jane Suite?”

“Fantastic suggestion.” Jane unbuttoned her top buttons and turned around. “You’ve got ten minutes, love. Then I’m starting without you.”

Jane opened her bedroom door at the end of the left hallway – the one that housed her bedroom, bathroom, and home office. While Caitlyn and Rebecca had their own hallway, Jane always liked having all this space to herself. *Contrary to popular belief, I like my isolation, too.* Especially at the end of a long day of work and socializing.

Of course, her partners were welcome in whenever they pleased. Jane was a great hostess, after all.

She turned on the light in the corner and finished unbuttoning her shirt before her bathroom mirror. The little jewelry Jane wore returned to their places on top of her

dresser. Aside from the ring that mirrored Rebecca and Caitlyn's, of course. That only left her hand when she bathed.

Her phone alit with a message. It was from Caitlyn.

*"I'll be out at least another hour. Your sister is having a classic crisis."*

Jane snorted before setting her phone on its wireless charger. Her bra disappeared into a hamper. Before the chill got to her nipples, she pulled on one of the loose T-shirts she liked to sleep in and unzipped her trousers.

As soon as she was bare from the waist down, Jane collapsed upon her bed. It was only then that she realized someone lingered in her opened doorway.

"Hello, there." Jane rolled onto her side. "To whom do I owe this pleasure?"

Rebecca lowered her arms from her chest. The frilly purple bra protecting her breasts from God-knew-what matched perfectly with the lavender knickers covering her light red bush. *I'm such a lucky fool.* Both of Jane's partners were drop-dead knockouts in nothing but their underwear. Where Caitlyn had the mesmerizing curves, though, Rebecca was a constellation of freckles and tiny moles that told their own erotic story.

"I was under the impression that you were in the mood." Rebecca stretched her arms above her head, tracing the outline of the doorway. Her shadow cast across Jane's bedroom carpet. With the glow of only one lamp to illuminate their



homebound tryst, Rebecca couldn't look more delectable. "Did I misread your signals?"

"Becca. Love." Jane kicked her naked legs behind her. "Only thing I'm asking myself is why you're not beneath me. Is it because you want to tease me? Am I supposed to work for it?"

Rebecca took a step forward, closing the bedroom door behind her. Instead of coming to the bed, though, she wandered to Jane's dresser. While it wasn't unusual for a woman to keep her more utilitarian wares in the bottom drawer, there was another good reason to bury her marital aids as deeply as they could go beneath boxer shorts and soft T-shirts – the view as Rebecca bent over to search for the goods was to die for. *Look at that ass.* Such a shame everything was covered by fabric.

"Oh, my God." Rebecca stood up with a large dildo in her hands. "I forgot we had this. It's bigger than my freakin' fist."

"I don't think I have the strength to wield that ungodly thing right now." Jane rolled onto her stomach, fingers clasping the edge of her bed as she stretched the tight muscles in her back. "You know which one I like if that's your fancy tonight." She seldom said no to a comfortable harness. It so happened that Rebecca loved being on the other end of Jane's skills.

The ridiculously large – and beige – dildo disappeared back into the drawer. Rebecca knelt closer to the floor, her curling red hair covering her back. Jane closed her eyes.

“You know which one *I* like,” Rebecca said. When Jane opened one eye again, she was not surprised to see the double-ender plopping onto the bed. *Don't forget the bullet, love.* Oh, there it was. Jane hoped it had a fresh battery. Nothing shirked her mood more than a vibrator that gave up the ghost halfway to someone's climax. “I'm assuming you're game.”

“You'll have to make sure I'm ready. The horror.”

Rebecca climbed onto the bed but kept her distance. “Don't do it on my account. You know the fastest way to my treasure is if the pirate captain is enjoying the booty.”

“Those were some *words*, Becca. I don't know what they mean, but then again, I rarely know what you Americans are on about.”

With sweet laughter ringing between them, Rebecca straddled Jane's hips and lowered her lips to the patch of skin poking through hair that needed a cut. *Soon.* Jane didn't suffer shaggy hair. “I could put on the accent if you want,” Rebecca whispered.

Jane lifted her head, but Rebecca had leaned forward, hands propped against the bed as her lips nibbled the top of her girlfriend's ear. *Be still my errant heart.* “What do you want from me?” Jane sounded put out, but she was the first to admit how nice it was to feel a woman grinding against her bare ass. *Especially when it's Becca...* Nobody knew how to subtly move to the erotic beat like Rebecca Pruitt, who was often on a mission to get right to the good stuff. *I can almost feel her pussy through that damnable fabric.* Almost. The fact she

couldn't was what really drove Jane crazy. "I'm a simple woman of simple pleasures, Becca. I'd tell you to do your worst, but I've got to have some energy leftover to make sure you're happy."

The grinding stopped. Jane almost regretted speaking. Yet when Rebecca grabbed her girlfriend by the shoulders and began a deep yet tender massage, there were no regrets.

"That's the stuff, love." Jane melted into her own bed. While Rebecca wasn't the strongest woman on Earth, she knew Jane's exact pressure points. *The fact she's in her knickers only makes it better.* Every time Jane thought life was tough, she was reminded that women like Rebecca existed – and were in her life. *It's a good life.* Especially when she was soon relaxed enough to forget that her sister was in town. Or that the US government was too confused to properly process her visa renewal. "You're better than chocolate."

"Am I?" Rebecca stretched along the length of Jane's body. When she rolled up the T-shirt separating her from Jane's skin, someone was reminded that she had forgotten her own underwear. *Forgot? More like orchestrated all of this.* Jane would never say it out loud, though. She wanted to see what Rebecca "came up" with next.

"Hell, yes. You know I'm not a big chocolate lover, anyway."

Rebecca kissed the dip at the bottom of Jane's spine. "I've seen you tear through Halloween candy."

“Have you? Are you sure that was me? Because I think you might have me confused with Caitlyn. She’s the one used to the sheer sugar content of the candy here.” Jane could hardly stand the thought. One bite of American candy? Too sweet.

Much like Rebecca, who had a sugar content of five American candy bars. That’s how she manipulated Jane onto her back. *And got my legs open.* Jane said nothing. She was already throwing herself into the moment, like when she touched Rebecca’s head and urged her face forward.

*Everyone should have a woman like her.* Jane knew she was with the right person when she didn’t have to say a word and be instantly understood. She never asked “*do this or do that*” when intimate with either Caitlyn or Rebecca. Both women understood her on a level that transcended everything they understood about relationships.

The fact Rebecca was good in bed was a huge bonus, too.

“*Wa ha*, you make me forget English.” Which was a feat by itself, considering Jane had been speaking English for as long as she could remember. Every time someone joked it was her mother tongue instead of Cantonese, she recited the classical poems she was forced to study in grammar school. “Right there, love.” All right, so she couldn’t forget those words. Even if she had come from a loving family, Cantonese wasn’t exactly a language full of terms of endearments like *honey*, *baby*, or *dove*. That was something she had learned when attending boarding school – and, later, university – in England. *Always seemed a shame to me. Nothing like telling your*

*girlfriend she's the light in the night sky when she's licking you like a lolly.*

Jane held back laughter as she imagined that in her mind. Luckily for her, it was easy enough when someone like Rebecca lavished her with oral attention.

“Oh, don't stop.” A smile had already cracked her countenance when Rebecca crawled back up and kissed Jane's lips. “You're the biggest tease, Becca.”

“Is that so?” The kiss to Jane's lips soon moved to her ear, then her throat, which prompted Jane to wrap her body around Rebecca's and sigh into the top of her head.

Hadn't she been fretting about something earlier that day? Jane couldn't remember now. There was only her and this woman who always knew the right things to say and the right moments to touch Jane where it mattered most.

She toppled on top of Rebecca and gave her what she deserved. Even if it meant searching for the strap-on with eyes closed and body preoccupied with other, arguably more important things.

## CHAPTER 13

## *Rebecca*

If her mission had been to alleviate the tense feelings from earlier then Becca considered that accomplished. Not that it took much to get Jane thinking about other things – especially when sex was on the table.

And it was easy to understand why Jane had picked her to marry if she were to go a second lap on the nuptial merry-go-round. It didn't mean it was a good idea. Nor did it mean that Becca was on board from the word "go." If anything, she didn't want to risk ruining moments like these: moments punctured by heavy, deep kisses and the kind of lovemaking that shot straight to her soul.

Not that Jane could do both at the same time. *She's a great lover, but I'm still so much taller than her...* That meant if Becca wanted her body to be at Jane's complete whim – with a strap-on, no less – she had to give up kissing. Which would have been a crying shame, except Jane always more than made up for it when she grabbed Becca by the hips and drove into

her with the strength of a woman who might never get the chance again.

Becca wanted to forget, too. She didn't want to be at the center of Jane's family and legal woes. Nor did she want to think about how this might affect Caitlyn, the woman who had as much say as anyone else. Wasn't it bad enough that she couldn't be there with Jane and Becca right now? *I'll make it up to her.* Becca was so wound up that she already imagined herself sneaking into Caitlyn's room later that night and offering herself up on a platter. Were clothes required? Absolutely not. Wouldn't be the first time Becca wandered the house as naked as anyone could get her.

She couldn't help it. When Becca got like this, she wanted to be a part of everything – and everyone's world. That meant making love with Jane and crawling into bed with Caitlyn a moment later. She needed them both to make her feel like the most wanted woman in the world. *The only one who matters.* When one of them, least of all Jane, got inside of her like this...

There was no denying it. She belonged to both women, even if right now she belonged to one more than the other.

What drove Becca the craziest, though, was Jane's verbal inhibitions eviscerating from her soul. Not that it helped when she cast English out with the bathwater. Caitlyn had told Becca their mutual girlfriend did it on purpose. *She knows you can't understand what filthy things she's saying in some other language.* Even if Becca learned enough Cantonese to know



the difference between “beautiful slut” and “tight pussy,” the lingual goalposts moved. Next, it was Mandarin. Then it was Malay. Jane was completely fluent in three languages and proficient in two more. If she wanted Becca on her hands and knees and to pull her hair back from her ear to say something deliciously naughty, nobody but Jane would understand it.

Somehow, that made it hotter.

And, somehow, being in this position brought the most animalistic part of Becca out of her body.

*It's no lie that I would do this every night for the rest of my life if I could.* She already felt like Jane's. She already knew that Jane was as much hers. Not once, even with all of the flirting and frivolous airs, had Jane ever made her girlfriend feel like there was someone else. When Jane devoted herself to something or someone, she went all-in. Sex was an expression of their mutual affection as much as it was a reason to get off. *She's cool with how filthy I like it.* Jane was the first to know about Becca's precarious history. Not only the toxic ex-girlfriend but the string of one-night stands that existed only to puncture more holes into Becca's fragile heart. Jane had never judged. Nor had she ever held back in subsequent nights together, like this one.

“Oh, darling, I forgot all about *my* needs.” Like that, Jane was back to speaking English, her accent dialed up as if she didn't know any other way to talk. Becca collapsed against the bed as Jane smacked her on the ass and kissed her left

shoulder. “I hope you checked the battery. As I said, I’d be sad if it died halfway through my fun.”

Becca clung to Jane, clutching fists full of cotton when she wasn’t feeling up the sweaty skin beneath Jane’s shirt. While Jane gently chided her for getting in the way while doing something as important as inserting the vibrator into the strap-on, they shared a soft yet intentional kiss that almost brought everything to an end.

“Roll over on your side,” Jane purred against Becca. “You know that’s my favorite.”

“Since when?” Nevertheless, Becca propped herself up on her side, giving Jane plenty of room to sidle up behind her. The low hum of the vibrator excited her, not because she’d feel the best of it, but because that was Jane’s happy ending. *It’s not like it’s difficult for her to get there...* Yet there was an accomplishment to hearing that ring in Becca’s ear. The rational side of her said, *“Of course I like it. I want her to enjoy herself, don’t I?”* Yet the primal, broken parts of her that had never fully recovered from her past found enough self-worth at that moment to last her the week. Caitlyn had once claimed she never met a woman as happy to help others climax as Becca. What was left unsaid was that Becca lived and breathed for those moments. She yearned to know that it was her body, her face, her voice that did that to her partners. *They could have had anyone tonight, but it was me.* Did she cry out in pleasure when Jane entered her and the strap-on vibrated between their bodies? *I’d be the biggest liar to deny it.* Did she sit perfectly still on Jane’s big bed, letting her

girlfriend do whatever she wanted to get her to the peak of her performance? *I don't know how else to live right now.* As far as Becca was concerned, this was her sole reason for existing tonight.

She didn't care how long it took. She didn't care how uncomfortable it might get. For Jane, she would do anything.

*Anything.*

And Jane would do anything to live in the moment. When she grabbed Becca's breasts, it was to rip off her bra and touch the flesh beneath. When she pinned down Becca's hips and thrust forward with all of her might, it was with a grunt of determination that quickly put Becca in her place. *Love me, save me, destroy me.* Whatever Jane wanted, Becca provided.

Her body. Her heart. Her name.

"Ah, hell!" The erratically simple way Jane moved against her told Becca everything she needed to know. *She's closer than I thought.* So was Becca. She was the kind of girl who could go from one orgasm to another when she was in the right mood. Jane said it was wonderful. Caitlyn expressed envy. Everyone was different, right? *I don't have a lot of talents, but that's one of them.* "You want to come with me, love?"

Jane's breathless question sealed the deal in Becca's body. She couldn't respond with her words, but she could gasp in unfettered delight.

She didn't care if she came as hard as Jane. Hell, Becca would fake it if it meant giving her girlfriend what she wanted. Not that she had to – but she did play it up, reaching back to cup Jane's face as the shudders rolled against her and the intensity of the thrusts subsided.

“Fucking brilliant.” Jane fell onto her back. Slowly, Becca also fell back onto the bed, head resting against Jane's rising and falling chest. “Do me a favor and make that stop, would you, love? I'm too out of sorts.”

Becca pulled the strap-on off Jane and shut off the vibrator. The silence in Jane's room was marred by the heavy breaths now rippling across the sheets.

Jane wrapped her arm around Becca's chest. The two of them lay in the minute light of the room, Jane sighing and Becca closing her eyes long enough to come back to reality.

“Yes,” she said.

It took Jane a moment to realize what her girlfriend said. “Yes, what?”

Becca pushed herself up. “If it's what you need, I'll marry you.”

While Jane gathered her thoughts, she moved her fingers down the length of Becca's bangs. Such a sweet gesture lulled Becca into forgetting what she had said.

“We'll talk it over with Caitlyn,” Jane eventually said. “Right now, come here, would you?”

Becca cuddled up next to Jane and closed her eyes. *Maybe I'll marry her, maybe I won't.* For now, she would linger in this moment. She never knew how many more she might have.



Jane didn't take a shower. Instead, she went straight to bed, curling up beneath her covers and inviting Becca to join her until morning. As relaxed as Becca was now, it was still barely nine o'clock. She had a few things she wanted to do before turning in, like taking a shower and maybe draining her brain power on TV.

After kissing Jane goodnight, Becca slipped out of her girlfriend's room, wearing a borrowed T-shirt. With her lingerie hanging from her hand, she walked into the dark living room, thinking she was alone.

"Jesus!" Becca clasped her hand over her chest when she saw someone sitting on the couch. The lights were still off. So was the TV, although one might walk upon the scene and assume Caitlyn watched her own memories on the black screen before her. "How long have you been home?"

Caitlyn's head slightly turned toward Becca. "Not long. Maybe ten or fifteen minutes. It was... a long evening with Lilian and..." She stopped. "How are you? How was dinner?"

Becca approached the couch. She didn't think when she placed her underwear next to Caitlyn's head. Right away, the powerful scent of perfume tickled Becca's nose, and she was compelled to lower her shoulders until her face was right next

to her other girlfriend's head. "Fine," she said. "I've got some leftover pumpkin curry in the fridge if you want some."

Caitlyn shook her head. "I don't have much of an appetite right now. I thought about going to bed. What are you up to?"

If Caitlyn saw the underwear in hand and Jane's T-shirt on Becca's body, she didn't give it away. "About to take a shower. Would you like to join me? Jane's already down for the night."

A soft chuckle betrayed Becca's numbed senses. "Is she a toddler?"

"Sometimes."

Caitlyn looked forward again. "I think I'll sit here. I've got a lot on my mind."

"All right." Becca stepped away. "If you want to talk, you know where to find me."

She almost expected Caitlyn to stop by when Becca was in the shower. Yet after forty-five minutes of washing, drying, and primping, she was still alone. It wasn't until Becca shut off the light in her bathroom that she discovered Caitlyn was no longer in the living room. Instead, she was in her own room, dressed in pajamas and combing her hair.

Becca didn't ask. She climbed into Caitlyn's bed and stared at her phone until someone else finally turned off the lights and came to bed.

"We've got a lot to talk about this weekend," Caitlyn said, hands to herself.

Becca sighed. “We sure do.”

She knew Caitlyn gazed at her for a moment. Yet they did not kiss, nor did they embrace. Not until Caitlyn turned over to sleep, and Becca was compelled to hold her.

Here was hoping Becca and Jane weren’t about to burn down this family.



“She’s been acting a bit strange since she came home last night.” Becca didn’t say that until Caitlyn was out of the room, returning to her own in the hopes of uncovering her favorite “stay home on the weekend” pants. Jane was ready to paint the town from the moment she awoke, but Becca cornered her in the bathroom and unceremoniously announced, “*We need to tell Caitlyn.*” Except it seemed like Caitlyn had something to tell them as well.

Becca could only guess. For now, she had control over what she and Jane decided. *Something we need to tell Caitlyn today.* Worst case scenario? They put it off, and Caitlyn found out and was so hurt to be left out of the decision that there was no coming back from that betrayal.

“Suppose I should bring it up.” Jane refilled her coffee cup. Without being asked, Becca went ahead and added a small pour of her girlfriend’s favorite creamer. “Are you sure you don’t want me telling her later tonight? Just me and her?”

“Are you worried that she might get angry? At me?”

“No, no. More like I’m worried she’ll be angry at *me*.”

“All the more reason for me to help. It involves me, after all.”

Caitlyn reemerged from her room, comfy pants on and a tablet hanging from her hand. She nested in her favorite corner armchair, propped her slippered feet up on a plush ottoman, and grabbed her reading glasses off the coffee table.

“It’s now or never,” Jane said. Then, louder, “Cait, love? Becca and I really need to talk to you about something.”

“Funny!” Caitlyn called back. “I’ve got something I need to tell you, too!”

Jane and Becca entered the living area. Jane placed her coffee on a coaster and remained leaning forward, elbows squared against her knees. Becca sat beside her, although she debated taking up another chair so she didn’t immediately look so paired with Jane. But Becca needed backup. At the end of the day, her spine was only as strong as her will – and that was debatable.

“It has to do with my immigration issues.”

Caitlyn looked up from her tablet. When she caught the look on Jane’s face, she set aside her device and said, “I guess you’ve decided what to do.”

“Becca and I had a long talk about it last night, yes.”

Becca refused to look away when Caitlyn glanced in her direction. “Should I spare you the words? Because I already



see the perfect wedding dress for you, Becca. You'll be darling in a strapless gown."

While Becca's throat was dry, Jane laughed. "Can't get anything past you. I honestly don't know what else to do, though. Besides marry you again."

"Mmm." Caitlyn shook her head "Love ya, Jane. Never again."

"That's what I thought, and why I talked to Becca about it first."

If nothing else compelled Becca out of her seat, it was the look on Caitlyn's face. *She may be good at hiding her feelings, but I know.* Perhaps this wasn't a shocking revelation, but Caitlyn could be as sensitive as anyone else in that room – even Jane had her moments of feeling neglected. A relationship like theirs was a balance, and now Jane and Becca threatened that.

"We won't do it if you don't want us to." Becca sat on the arm of Caitlyn's chair. Only last night, they had fallen asleep together with Becca as the ultimate little spoon. *Caitlyn is the best cuddler.* Jane had her strengths after sex, too, but nothing compared to how softly Caitlyn knew how to hold a woman. *Don't tell me I've jeopardized that...*

"Who am I to stand in the way of doing what needs to be done?" Caitlyn rubbed the small of Becca's back. For some obnoxious reason, it wasn't enough to help Becca feel better. "So? When's the big day?"

Jane rolled her eyes. “I need to speak with the lawyer first. I’m not sure if my visa status will change in the meantime. There’s a lot to sort out, keeping in mind I only asked this of Becca to not disrupt our household. The last thing we need is me suddenly having to go back to Hong Kong until things are sorted. That could take months. Or years, Heaven forbid.”

“Guess we have some time to figure this out.”

Becca didn’t like how Caitlyn deflected and Jane grew more irritable. “You guys worry about your day-to-day. I’ll plan whatever needs to be done.”

Caitlyn squeezed her girlfriend’s knee. “Don’t worry about it. Everything will be okay.”

“As long as you don’t feel put out.”

“Put out? Honey, I’m more worried about you.” Caitlyn looked around Becca’s body and right at Jane. “Like I said, never again.”

“I love you too, Cait!”

“Oh, yeah? Prove it.”

Becca had to get out of the way for Jane to trudge over and lay a comically loud kiss on Caitlyn’s cheek. “There’s more where that came from, love,” Jane said. “Shall we take this to my room or yours?”

Caitlyn considered it for five seconds before grabbing her tablet. “Maybe later.”

With a snort in her nostrils, Jane stood back up. “Wasn’t there something you wanted to talk to us about?”

“It can wait until later.” Caitlyn curled her legs up beneath her. Before Becca left, though, she realized her girlfriend looked in her direction. “I do need to talk to you about something else later, though. Let me know if you’re around. I have a feeling Jane is about to spend lunch with her sister.”

“Ugh! Don’t remind me. Before you ask, I am *not* telling her about this. In a perfect world, nobody outside of this room will know about it.”

Becca caught up to Jane before she took her coffee cup back to the kitchen. “Does that mean I should not tell anyone? Not even my dad?”

“When’s the last time you spoke to your father, again?”

“A while, but me getting married sounds like the time for me to pick up the phone.”

“Give it a few weeks, love. We want to make sure we’re doing it, first. After all, can’t have the information leaking and turning our lives into proper rubbish.”

Becca let her go. Behind her, Caitlyn said, “Enjoy your lunch with Lilian! Let me know how it goes, huh?”

Jane waved that off before turning on the kitchen sink.

“You’re really not mad about this?” Becca asked Caitlyn when they were alone.

Caitlyn turned off her tablet screen. “Why would I be mad, Becca? It’s an extreme circumstance that might call for extreme measures. Honestly, I’m more worried about you getting wrapped up in something with Jane. She thinks things will stay the same, but...” She weakly took Becca’s hand. “We’ll discuss it later.”

That was Caitlyn’s way of saying she wanted to be alone with her morning coffee and tablet. With a smile, Becca walked away, although she didn’t know what to do once she was in her room.

Change was in the air, and it wasn’t merely the oncoming fall weather making Becca restless.

## CHAPTER 14

## Caitlyn

Caitlyn knew when she was being a hypocrite. *It's practically my middle name.* When it came to Becca and Jane? She was often a hypocrite, and her girlfriends weren't afraid to call it out. Yet they were far from perfect, too. Becca was a doormat on a bad day. Jane? Her words held the potential to sting more than a wasp. Her propensity for saying what was on her mind and not thinking of the consequences held more power in the house than anything else Caitlyn considered.

So Caitlyn knew she had no room to be upset. No, not about Jane and Becca. About Lilian and Olivia.

*Can you believe it, though?* Here it was, Monday afternoon, and Caitlyn remained the only one who knew about it. Lilian had not brought it up to Jane at their Saturday lunch, which she had promised Caitlyn she would do. *I made her promise. Because I didn't want that on my shoulders!* It wasn't Caitlyn's responsibility to help Lilian come out to her sister. Nor was it her problem to help Lilian and Olivia sort out their lives. Was

it Jane's problem, though? No, but Caitlyn understood why they wanted Jane's help. Hell, she might have done the same thing if the roles were reversed...

It was a lot to process, though, wasn't it? Especially when she was at work and couldn't tell a soul.

"Your résumé is quite impressive," Caitlyn told the thirty-something man sitting across from her at the conference table. "Yet you're new to the area. What brought you out to New England all the way from Las Vegas?"

The well-groomed man in a pinstripe vest and shined shoes was more than happy to answer. "To be frank, my fiancée had a great job opportunity that brought us out here. It required selling our condo in Henderson and quitting my job with my former employer, but I couldn't say no when she had this opportunity in her industry. I knew my skills were transferable out here, so here I am. Putting myself out there."

"Oh?" Rebecca said. "What kind of work does your fiancée do?"

Caitlyn cleared her throat. "You don't have to answer that." She made a memo to talk to Rebecca about what questions were and weren't allowed at these official interviews. "Anyway, I think we have everything we need to know. Thank you so much for coming. We'll be in touch."

They shook hands. Once Caitlyn and Rebecca were alone in the conference room, she reminded her girlfriend that questions about what people in the applicants' families did were not signed off on by Constance-Grace.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know why I asked that.” Rebecca pressed her fingers against her temples. “Too much on my mind, I guess.”

“It’s all right.” Caitlyn didn’t sit back down until she poured them both some water from a carafe in the corner of the conference room. “I’ve got a lot on my mind, too.”

She brought Rebecca some water. After patting down some of Rebecca’s curls, Caitlyn turned to the window, where she stretched her arms across her chest and prepared for the next applicant. The whole afternoon was stacked with interviews, and since Constance-Grace called out with a cold, Caitlyn had to take her place so at least one official employee with any say in the company was at the interviews. Because that was not Rebecca, unfortunately.

“Anything I can grab you guys?” Sammie asked from the doorway. “Your next appointment called to say she was stuck in traffic, so she might be late.”

Caitlyn glanced down at the bumper-to-bumper traffic on the main boulevard cutting through downtown. “I think we’re fine, Ms. Reinhold. Becca?”

“No, I don’t need anything. Thanks, Sammie. When she gets here, tell her to come back.”

With one of her charming Midwestern smiles, Sammie disappeared down the hallway.

“We have a few minutes to ourselves.” Caitlyn sat back down, her body turned toward Rebecca. “I’d overtly flirt with



you, but I don't want to get in trouble.”

Rebecca kept her eyes on her papers but still smiled. “It’s never stopped you before.”

“I don’t want new hires getting the wrong idea about what goes on here. They’ll hear enough stories.”

“Ain’t that the truth? It’s bad enough that most of those stories come from Jane’s mouth.”

“Ugh. The biggest mouth around.”

“Yeah, but she really knows how to kiss.”

Caitlyn had to give her that. *Before Jane, I didn’t know what good kissing was.* Caitlyn was a connoisseur now.

Sammie reappeared in the doorway. “Looks like she’s here,” she announced. “I’ll send her right back.”

Both Caitlyn and Rebecca thanked her. “So much for flirting,” Rebecca said with a sigh. “I missed my opportunity to get up and stretch like you.”

“Still time. Here, I’ll step on your back if you lay on the floor.”

“You know, I often hear that phrase ‘step on me’ around here, but I don’t think this is the appropriate time.”

“I barely know what you’re talking about, Becca.”

“It’s weird Gen-Z stuff. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Why? Because I’m *old*?”

“No, because I’m too old to parse it for you. We’re both screwed.”

Caitlyn sat back down and tucked her lap beneath the table. “Uh-huh.”

Someone cleared their throat a few feet away.

“Oh, hello...” Caitlyn had turned on her own charms before she looked up, but her eyes were clearly deceiving her. Because the young woman standing in the doorway could *not* be Olivia, the last woman Caitlyn expected to see around the office.

The same went for Rebecca, who dropped her pen on her leather-bound folder.

“I’m so sorry,” Olivia said. “I kept telling them I wasn’t one of the interviewees, but they insisted I come back here. I’ll go wait out in the lobby.”

“No!” Caitlyn jerked out of her seat so quickly that she banged her knee beneath the table. Yet she couldn’t let the sudden pain get to her. It was too imperative that Olivia stay away from the lobby, where Jane could walk through at any moment. *They still haven’t told her!* Also, it wasn’t Caitlyn’s job! But, oh, it could be done for them should Olivia be seen around this office! “I mean, come on in. Our next candidate is running a few minutes late.”

Rebecca was still speechless as she watched Olivia gracefully enter the room. Her black long-sleeved dress and wide-brimmed hat did nothing to conceal her precarious

identity. The Balenciaga bag hanging from her arm? Marked her as a spoiled woman with connections. *I used to buy bags like that for her...* Now it was someone else. Dare Caitlyn believe it was *Lilian*?

“Um... what’s going on?” Rebecca blurted as Olivia came closer. “You didn’t tell me she was in town.”

Olivia’s eyes slightly widened. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you were here today, Rebecca.” She said it with a steady inflection that reminded Caitlyn of when Olivia used to practice her foreign word pronunciations in front of the bathroom mirror. “I was hoping to speak with Caitlyn if it’s all right.”

Although discomfort radiated from Rebecca like she wore a fur coat in the middle of a heat wave, Caitlyn had to pretend that nothing was amiss.

“Of course. I’m sorry, Becca, I have to take this.”

“*What the fuck?*” Rebecca mouthed at her girlfriend as Caitlyn attempted to escape the room with Olivia.

“*I’ll explain later,*” Caitlyn mouthed back. To Olivia, she suggested the other empty conference room down the hallway. It was either that or the ladies’ room, and Caitlyn would rather die than do that to her ex-girlfriend who had traveled across the world for this conversation.

“I’m so sorry.” That’s what Olivia said when Caitlyn opened the blinds in the other room. After Caitlyn gestured to a chair, Olivia sat down, but not before placing her Balenciaga

bag on the table. A golden, embossed keychain with Olivia's married initials flopped against the material. "I know I shouldn't be here, or that I at least should have called ahead, but I was already in the neighborhood, and..." She chose a deep breath over more words. "It's about Lilian. I'm worried about her."

"To be fair, I'm worried about everyone involved."

"I know this is quite the shock, Caitlyn..."

"A shock? I'll say. You were the woman who conspired to marry one of Jane's second cousins behind my back and *then* told me about it when the deed was done! You think I haven't forgotten that?"

Olivia gazed down at her lap. "I'm so sorry, Caitlyn. I know my actions hurt you. Life has been... an event. A series of them, as it were."

"Look." Caitlyn leaned back in one of the swivel chairs and placed her hand on the table. "I don't want to drag that up. This whole weekend has been shocking enough. First you and Lilian being in town and a *thing*, then Jane and..." She shook her head. "Lilian was supposed to tell Jane at their lunch on Saturday, but that didn't happen, did it? Were you even there? God, I've had this bomb hanging over my head ever since." Now she had to keep secret about Jane and Rebecca possibly getting married? Caitlyn rarely reflected on her lack of friends – who weren't also Rebecca or Jane's friends – but now she desperately wished she had someone to call who would understand her point of view.

Because it wasn't Olivia, the biggest ghost from Caitlyn's past.

"No, I wasn't there. That was the plan, but Lilian thought it best to break the news 'between sisters.' When she returned, I discovered she hadn't said a thing about her and me. We've been arguing off and on all weekend."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It's fine. You know how Ms. Lilian is. Very hotheaded and opinionated. The exact opposite of me."

Caitlyn didn't respond to that, even though she had a few things to say.

"She's terrified of telling anyone in her family. Even Jane." Olivia opened her black bag and withdrew her wallet, a petite piece of solid leather that didn't betray any of the personality lurking beneath the woman sitting across from Caitlyn. "Especially her mother. I can't say I'm not worried about it, too. After all, even I didn't think this relationship would go this far."

Caitlyn accepted the photo sliding across the table. At first, she thought it would be a vacation photo of Lilian and Olivia living it up like a couple who were never meant to be. Instead, it was the professional studio shot of a toddler dressed in red and gold. Even if Caitlyn didn't know this was Olivia's son, she instantly recognized the reserved expression on the baby's face. Wasn't it looking right back at her?

“I don’t know what I was thinking.” Olivia gazed into the space before her, contemplating her own life while Caitlyn studied the baby photo in her hand. “Lilian only told you half of the story the other night. She didn’t really give me the chance to tell my side.”

Caitlyn returned the picture. “Lilian is like that, as I’m sure you know.”

“I’ve always been attracted to big personalities. Maybe that’s why I quickly lost interest in my husband. He’s too much like me. An exciting night for him is watching the news and eating ice cream. Don’t get me wrong. He’s an excellent provider and has never been unkind to me or our son. Even my mother-in-law is kind, although a lot like him and me.”

“You did surprise me when you announced you were marrying a man I had never heard of,” Caitlyn said. “I always thought you were... well, gay.”

“Suppose I am. It didn’t matter to me then, though. I foolishly thought I could set aside the pleasures of my youth and commit to a more traditional lifestyle. My own parents always pressured me, you know, especially when rumors about you and Jane got back to them.”

“It’s my experience that one does not simply run away from who they are.”

“Which is why I was always attracted to Ms. Lilian. She’s always been 100% into who she is. The whole family is like that. Jane, their brother...”

Caitlyn raised her eyebrows.

“Surely, you recall all of their brother’s affairs that Lady Wong was always hiding from the press. He hasn’t changed. The man absolutely owns his philandering ways.”

“The whole family is like that, indeed. Although I never suspected Lilian of having an affair, let alone with a woman. She seemed too absorbed with her status.”

“Oh, she’s still like that. Right before we came to America, she was accepting an award for volunteer of the year at the local church charity. Don’t ask me which one, because I can’t keep them apart. Jesuits? Jehovah’s Witness? First Church of Jordan? Something with a J.”

*Lilian as a JW sure would be something.* If anyone could convert people, it was the vivaciously social Lilian Wong.

“You would prefer to keep it under the radar, wouldn’t you?”

“You know me, Caitlyn. I don’t like to make a big fuss about things. I’m content with a once-a-month getaway with lots of quiet in between. I’m attracted to women like Jane and Lilian because they always seem to live life to the fullest and don’t let people’s opinions stand in their way. Yet that can’t be *my* life. If I had it my way, we’d keep on in the shadows as I prefer. Her husband is much older than her. They don’t interact much anymore. When he dies, she stands to inherit quite a bit of money and property. All she has to do is manage their children’s affairs until all three are old enough to make their own decisions.”

“Is that when you imagine slipping more into her public life?”

“I don’t know. I merely don’t want her ruining her life. Nor do I want to jeopardize my own life. I don’t know what to do.”

Caitlyn swallowed whatever pride still lingered in her embattled heart. “You have to tell Jane. That was your whole point of coming out here, right? Tell Jane to her face, and get her advice?” A shadow moving in the hallway caught Caitlyn’s attention. She assumed it was Rebecca and figured she needed to wrap this up quickly. “I can’t make Lilian do that for you. I think you have more sway over the situation than you think.”

“What advice is Jane giving her ex-girlfriend?”

Olivia turned around in her seat. Caitlyn jerked back and instantly chastised herself for not realizing that was Jane in the doorway. *Of course it is. Since when is Rebecca that short?*

Here came Rebecca now, standing next to Jane as if they were still some unstoppable force that could take out any issue in their way. Like this one. *Like me.*

“Jane...” Olivia grabbed her bag off the table but did not approach the woman standing only a few feet away. “Hello. It has been a while.”

“Mhmm.” Jane looked like she had sucked on a lemon. When she looked to Caitlyn for answers, all she received was a sigh of defeat. “Funny that you should be in town while my



sister is as well. Except I thought you were living the big domestic life with my cousin? How's the tot?"

Caitlyn rounded the table before the energy sparking between everyone else set a fire in the building. "Came as a shock to me as well. Perhaps you two should come in and hear what Olivia has come all this way to say." Although she couldn't see Olivia standing behind her, Caitlyn was well-aware of the look that must have been on her face.

*There's no walking back from today.* Now that Jane knew Olivia was also in town, the truth would inevitably come out. *Because no one gets to the heart of the matter like Jane.*

And, perhaps for the first time in three years, Rebecca would find out what happened when *Jane* was the one left out of important matters. Because it never ended well – and it was far, far from pretty.

Honestly, Caitlyn felt bad for Lilian. She had her chance, and now it was blown. The ball was in Jane's court now.

## CHAPTER 15

## *Jane*

**D**espite Caitlyn's feverish pleas that Jane not go too hard on Lilian, there was no other way to address the issue – *especially* when Lilian had been in town for over a week and had said nothing of substance.

To Jane, anyway.

Work was a bust once the story was laid out in the conference room. With heat in her cheeks and a sour stomach, Jane immediately made reservations at the most private restaurant open on Monday nights and called Lilian to inform her they *were* having dinner together. She did not mention that she knew about Olivia, but there was no way Lilian heard that edge to her sister's voice and didn't realize how serious their dinner discussion would be.

Rebecca was the only one completely in the dark. Apparently, she hadn't known about any of this until Olivia's sudden appearance at the office, either. After Caitlyn briefly spoke with Jane about what she would say to Lilian, Rebecca

entered her girlfriend's office and asked, "Do you need me to go with you?"

"Absolutely not." Jane had not meant to snap at Rebecca, but nausea in her stomach nearly claimed her words. *Fucking hell*. This was too much already! "You stay with Caitlyn and Olivia. This is private between sisters. Lilian has to hear some uncomfortable truths."

Rebecca kept her distance while Jane went ahead and packed up her bag for the day. "Are you sure there's nothing I can do?"

Jane wrapped her hand around Rebecca's arm. "Help Caitlyn finish today's interviews. That's the primary issue here in the office."

"Will you be home later?"

"God willing."

"What does that mean?"

Jane nearly bumped into Caitlyn on her way out of the office. "Hopefully I won't get deported because I killed my sister!"

She didn't regret saying that until she realized she shouted that in English. For the whole office to hear and witness, no less. *Great. That's a lot of witnesses for my upcoming trial.* The main honor would probably go to Sammie, who dropped her tablet when Jane rushed by her.



“You have to understand.” Lilian was immediately on the defensive once she realized why her sister was so irate. “This wasn’t something I could *come out* and tell you about immediately. What was I supposed to do? Swoop in and make a bigger fool of myself than usual? I’m no idiot. This has to be done delicately.”

Jane was so flustered that she didn’t bother putting on any pretense that she was hungry enough to eat an early dinner. When the server bothered her, she insisted on a Waldorf salad, no dressing. She also refused an alcoholic drink, since something of this magnitude required a clear head, especially with a half-empty stomach that would rather retch her supper than keep another morsel down.

She should probably pass on caffeine, too. Jane was already too jittery to sit still at the table in the tiny private room she had reserved for her and Lilian.

“I want to get this straight.” It had been years since Jane last smoked a cigarette, yet this was the first time in a long while she almost gave in to *that* vice. *No food. No drink. But if that server comes back offering me a cigarette and a light, I might take him up on it.* God knew Jane couldn’t stand the thought of making love right now. Finally, someone in her family had figured out the subject to completely kill her libido. “You’re having an affair with Olivia. *My* Olivia. The one I used to live and work with alongside Caitlyn back in Hong Kong.” Jane remembered those days well, although Caitlyn had always been closer to their mutual girlfriend than Jane ever was. *We got along as two Hong Kongers more than we were desperate*

*lovers*. Jane didn't want to paint an inaccurate picture, though. She and Olivia had plenty of good times together, and not only in restaurants like these, where they often recounted their different childhoods and spoke of what it would be like to have grown up elsewhere. Olivia had always been envious of Jane's studies abroad, and Jane somewhat cherished the idea of growing up lower middle-class, free to do anything she wanted without a woman like Willow Wong to dictate every move of her daughter's adolescent life. *We slept together a lot, too*. This mess wasn't as simple as them sharing the same best friend. *It would be like if my brother had an affair with Caitlyn*.

Jane almost gagged on her water when she thought of it. Some things were never meant to be shared between sisters, regardless of what their relationship was like. Certainly, they weren't supposed to have the same girlfriend!

"I'll have you know that we were never like that when you were with her," Lilian snottily said. "We were acquaintances! No, this didn't start until lockdowns ensured we spent more time together than ever. You know how mother used to say that a tiger never changes its stripes? The same is true for queers, I suppose." Unlike her sister, Lilian indulged in a glass of wine that she couldn't stop sipping. "To be fair, though, she awakened something in me. What was I supposed to do? Ignore the call to fall in love for the first time in my life? Please. I'm older than *you*! I know I look younger – don't deny it – but I've gone much longer without taking care of *my* romantic life."

“What are you talking about? You had all of those boyfriends before you agreed to marry Uncle Frank.” Like Jane could forget! Their own mother had called Lilian’s youth the “sowing of wild oats” in feminine form and often thanked whatever ancestor was listening that a widower like Francis Lam had agreed to marry a woman like Lilian, whom half of Hong Kong knew had dated movie stars and the philandering sons of other CEOs. “*A virgin your sister is not,*” Willow had slurred during a family dinner. “*Like you, but you’re a different problem.*”

At least Willow agreed that Jane wasn’t a virgin even though she had yet to be with a man. *Made quick work of some of Lilian’s friends, though...*

“I can’t believe these are the words coming out of your mouth.” Pouting, Lilian’s prim and pink lips slammed against the rim of her wineglass. After she emptied the glass, she looked at her sister and said, “I thought you of all people would understand how suppressing yourself works! Or maybe you’ve been out there cavorting with every *tóngzhì* in Asia and America for so long that you’ve forgotten what it’s like to not know who you really are because you’ve been who everyone *else* wants you to be! Do you think I wanted to marry Frank? Like, really? Trust me, Jane. I’ve had three of the man’s children. Nothing says hot and heavy like his wrinkled balls smacking against your thigh as he tries to remember how many kids you have and if you’re trying for more to get a damn son!”

Jane held up her hand long before Lilian finished that sentiment. “I’m going to vomit. Please, for the love of our grandmother’s ghost, do not put the image of you having sex with anyone, let alone the man who used to give me candy, in my head. I don’t care how many kids you’ve borne. As far as I know, the stork dropped them off on your doorstep!”

“I hate to break it to you, but some of us have spent most of our lives performing wifely and motherly duties! I really am like Mother!”

“You mean a martyr? Because that’s what you sound like right now.”

“Everything all right in here, ladies?” Their server, who wore his tie tighter than Jane could bear to imagine, peeked into their room at the sound of their rising voices. “Would you like some more wine, Mrs. Lam?”

“Bring her the whole bottle and put it on my tab,” Jane muttered, while her sister primped. “She’s a mother of three, after all. She deserves it.” *Where are those children now?* Since Lilian raised her kids the same way Willow had raised them... truly, it was a miracle the young son wasn’t already in a German boarding school. *Learning to tie his shoes the European way.* Jane would know about that.

“You spoil me,” Lilian said with a dramatic sigh. “I’m the one who is supposed to be spoiling you. Yet here I am, running to your adopted country so I can ask for advice you don’t feel like giving. Go figure.”



“I can’t believe you’ve done something like this.” Jane nearly kicked the bottom of the table when she forcibly turned in her seat. “It’s probably the most foolish thing you’ve ever done. I knew you could be a git, but this takes the bloody cake.”

“Who the hell are you to tell me off? For as long as I can remember, you’ve always been the troublemaker making Mother’s life harder. For God’s sake, you came out as soon as you were old enough to figure things out for yourself. Do you think I don’t remember Mother fainting as soon as she returned to her room? You got to leave and hole up in a hotel while I dealt with the aftermath!”

“Please. Mum always knew I was different. She cried when I asked to cut my hair.”

“Because she thought you wanted a commie cut! We’re talking about a woman who didn’t consider that maybe you wanted it even shorter!”

“Exactly. Mum couldn’t handle two queer kids, so what makes you think she can deal with two? She’ll think I’ve infected you!”

“Hmph.” Lilian kept her thoughts to herself as she sniffed her empty wineglass. Much to her visible relief, the server brought her the rest of the bottle. He promptly refilled Lilian’s glass and left the bottle in the middle of the table, assuring the sisters that their food was on its way.

Jane curled her hands on the table and steadied her breath. “Do you know why Mum was so keen on getting me away

from Hong Kong as soon as it was socially feasible to do with your youngest child? It wasn't because she really thought I was the smartest of all of us three and didn't want to waste a moment of me *not* learning to speak the Queen's English abroad. It was because she knew. My coming out to her when I was older was not the first time she discovered my orientation. That honor went to when she caught me playing 'doctor' with Sienna Koh. Remember? My best friend from St. Margaret's?"

"I vaguely recall that gangly girl. Koh... was her father the head of that dentist conglomerate?"

"Best teeth in Hong Kong. Why do you think I had to kiss that mouth?"

"St. Margaret's was a junior school! What were you? Thirteen?"

"Twelve."

"My God, Jane, how old were you when you..." Lilian couldn't get the words out, but the shock on her face was enough to tell her youngest sister that she needed to answer. Now.

"I saved going all the way for when I was *far* away from Hong Kong. Trust me, though, I knew what the goods looked like before I shipped off for the land of rain and fog." Jane didn't often think about those times. At least, not through that lens. *If I delve too deep, I'll remember Mum dragging me by the ear and slapping me until I confessed what I had been doing with Sienna.* Jane never saw her best friend again. The last she heard, Sienna Koh had attended university in France

and never left. “The point is that things have not been easy. From the moment Mum figured it out, I’ve always been one major fuckup away from being cast out of the family. I’ve played my hands carefully and with the understanding that it may always be the last straw. I honestly thought that I wouldn’t be allowed to show my face at White Fir again when I announced I was marrying Caitlyn. That was as public as it got.”

“You’ll notice you weren’t kicked out. For Heaven’s sake, Jane, I remember people talking to me about you like you were some brave soul who would do great things in America!”

“How many never talked to you again?”

Lilian considered that for two seconds before scoffing. “You want to talk about being a martyr? That’s always been more your thing, little sister. From the moment you were born, it’s always been *Jane and what she’s up to now!*”

“So, you’re jealous? Middle-child syndrome finally get to you? Piss off with that. You were always the good one! Mum always told me to be more like you!”

“What? Blindly feminine and obedient? Because it’s been nothing but a nightmare!” For the first time since Jane could remember, her only sister balled her hands into fists and slammed them against the table. The first few tears of Lilian’s hidden rage spurted from her eyes and marred her impeccable makeup. “Jane, I’ve never had a life of my own. You have absolutely no idea what it’s like to be the ‘golden child’ of a family like ours. The sheer amount of pressure on me the

moment Frank's first wife died... God, I could see the potential in Mom's eyes, and Father...! Do you know what he said to me a month after Frank's mourning period? '*You know what you have to do.*' I was barely in my twenties! Frank was in his fifties! He used to give you candy? He gave me a dress when I turned sixteen! Mother made the sourest face when she saw it but said nothing. Now I know why. She hated the idea of him creeping on me already, but would she stop it? Would she say anything to keep me away from a man the same age as my father? No, because that meant Bart's inheritance was absolute!" She referred to their brother, Bartholomew Wong. "He was already studying under Father and working at the company. If his sister married the business partner? Any kids we had were more like Bart's kids than mine. God, do you know how different things would have been if Frank's first wife hadn't been so sickly and had some kids? Maybe I wouldn't have been so pressured to marry the fart!"

She slugged her wine. Jane had a headache.

"So, no, I don't care if Mom told you to be more like me. You always had more freedom than me. You were the goddamn baby. So big *what* if you were a queer? They shipped you off to England because they knew they already had me as the bartering chip. The only reason I got away with dating before agreeing to marry Frank is because of Mom. She vouched for my supposed innocence, even though she knew damn well I wasn't a virgin. She knew about my abortion when I was twenty, too."

That nugget was news to Jane, but she didn't have a moment to get a word in edgewise.

“I didn't love any of those boys, though, so I didn't fight to be with one of them instead. The pressure was so insane that I thought, what the hell, how long is Frank going to live, anyway? I'll put up with him for ten years, have a baby, and get on with my life. Except it's been *fifteen* years, Jane, and those *three* babies didn't happen on the first try! Fucking Heaven help me that the first two were *girls*, too, because I had to give it one more shot to get a boy before my ovaries dried up! Doctor told me this one should be my last one, too, because I won't even speak of what my youngest daughter did to everything down... you know where.”

Jane took the bottle of wine and drank straight from the top. Lilian grabbed the bottle when her sister was done and topped off her glass.

When Jane was sure that Lilian had finished ranting, she leaned forward and switched to Cantonese, a language that immediately told Lilian this was *serious*.

“You cannot let anyone know.” Jane's grip on her sister's elbow did not go unnoticed by the woman with a full glass of wine balancing in her hand. “Do you understand me, *gā jē?*” She hadn't called her sister with any earnest since Lilian's wedding. *Because of course I was there.* Jane had suffered through the banquets and ceremonies, filled with old friends and business associates of the family. She had been told to be on her best behavior, which meant she could dress as she

wished, but she should speak femininely and never, ever bring up her current girlfriend, a woman who would never hold a candle to the buxom beauty she later met at an American hotel. “This must stay a secret from everyone, *especially* the men in your life. Don’t jeopardize your marriage for an affair with another woman. I don’t care who it is. It could be Caitlyn, and I’d tell you the same thing. Do *not* bring down the Wong wrath. I know you can’t handle it, and you shouldn’t have to.”

Lilian chomped on her nail while Jane spoke and had made it all the way down to her cuticle by the time her sister backed off. By the time Lilian responded, Jane had become so sweaty that she shrugged off her jacket and slapped it over the back of her chair. Within two seconds, it was on the floor, and she didn’t care.

“I don’t want to live like that.” Lilian wiped away her tears, careful to keep her red polished nails away from her fake lashes. “I don’t want Livie to have to do that, either.”

*Livie? We’re fucked.* Jane knew better than anyone that once the pet names came out, relationships were set in stone. “If no one else, do it for her. She has even more to lose than you do. If her husband leaves her, he will get the kid, and she will have nothing. Don’t tell me she’ll have *you*. What good do you do her when the same thing happens to you? Mum might let you back into White Fir or quietly give you money to support yourself elsewhere, but what about *your* kids? What about your social life? Are you willing to give all of that up? What about your children? Two of them are old enough to know without a doubt that, for better or worse, *you* are their mother.

You might be fucking off in America right now, but they're expecting you to come home sooner rather than later. Are you going to let Frank and his mother be in charge of your children for the rest of their young lives? Are you willing to give up any claim to them because not only did you have an affair and make your husband leave you, but it was with a *woman*? Our family will officially be tainted. Even Bart can't be spared. Imagine the lost money in Hong Kong. From the Mainland or the rest of conservative Asia? Bart will be inheriting a broken company because nobody wants to deal with a family of broken women. You think I don't know this, Lili? Because I do. I've never forgotten what it's like there when you're part of our peerage and don't conform. I am the way I am because of my experiences. You've got to be a tough bitch to be 'out and proud' in our world. As you said, I'm the damned baby of the family. It's easier to sweep me under the rug, especially if I play my part exceptionally well otherwise. Everyone loves Caitlyn. Even Ma liked Rebecca. They're foreigners. They're *exotic* foreigners. Caitlyn's got blond hair and an ass, and Rebecca is tall with red curls."

"She's got freckles..." Lilian whispered.

"Yes. Ma loves freckles." Jane was grateful that not only were they still speaking Cantonese, but that the histrionics had faded. The server wouldn't understand either, especially when he was overburdened with salads and noodles. Jane had absolutely no appetite for her Waldorf but knew she had to at least pick at it. "Our mother is a miserable woman, too." Jane felt more confident saying that when she confirmed the server

didn't speak anything adjacent to "Chinese." She momentarily switched back to English to thank him and confirm they didn't need anything else. "She sacrificed a lot of her own self to secure her future. If I had grown up in her generation, I would not be the woman you see today. I understand where she's coming from in that regard." Jane spent a lot of her time being grateful for what she had – and when she had it. Yet she didn't know how to properly convey this to her sister, who usually had everything in her life under control. *This is uncharted territory.* Now there was lettuce stuck between Jane's teeth. *My life is out of control.* "So she probably lets me get away with more. You've followed her path by marrying a man chosen for you, but you're outgoing, vivacious, and well-loved by society. She lives vicariously through you with that. As for me? I do what I want and am still respected by those I care about. I know she envies it sometimes. It's also why she goes easier on me than most mothers would. If you try to be both? I don't know if she can handle it. Don't let her know about you and Olivia."

"What am I supposed to do?" Lilian completely ignored her noodles. "I love her, Jane."

That had been in English, the words slipping into Jane's ear – and melting in her heart.

"Do you?"

"Yes! I've never been so sure of anything in my life. She's exactly the person I was always meant to be with. Honestly, if I had known before... I would have stolen her from you and



Caitlyn. I wouldn't have cared what it did to our relationship. Maybe there's another woman out there for me, somewhere, but Olivia is the only one I want. Why must we hide it? Why *can't* I be more like you?"

"Because you have so much more to lose than me."

Lilian sank back in her seat, palm spread wide on the table. Her defeated demeanor did not sway Jane to her side, though.

"Bullshit," Lilian said. "This is *bullshit*."

"Yeah, well..." The water on Jane's tongue did not inspire her to keep talking. *Can water be dry? Welcome to my hell.* "You asked me for my advice. Trust me, today has been an absolute roller-coaster for me. Not only is Olivia in town... apparently, that marriage I so awesomely set up for her is on the brink of destruction because my idiot sister has seduced her." Jane was surprised yet wasn't at all. *Olivia was never straight.* Yet Jane hadn't told her what to do with her life. It had been clear for months that Olivia wanted out of the arrangement she had with Jane and Caitlyn. *If I could get her a good husband like she wished, it was good enough for me.* It turned out that one of Jane's distant cousins was single and looking. While he wasn't from the wealthiest part of the family, he did well for himself, and his two older brothers didn't threaten to completely cut him from his own inheritance. He and Olivia were much alike in candor and demeanor... what else was Jane supposed to do? Throw her own girlfriend to the wolves?

*Instead, I offered her access to my sister.* If Jane had known... well, she didn't know what she would have done.

"I'm sorry." Lilian sniffed her final tear and squared her shoulders as if she prepared to go on stage to accept yet another "*thank you for being so awesome, Lili!*" award, or whatever she spent her spare time as a housewife doing. "I've dumped a lot on you. I was supposed to tell you all this on Saturday, but I was too cowardly. Instead, I made the love of my life do it for me. Maybe you're right. I'm not cut out for what exposing my relationship would do to us."

Regardless of their past sibling rivalries and however much Lilian may have driven Jane up the proverbial wall, she hated to hear her own sister say such a thing. *She's daft but doesn't deserve to suffer.* Neither did Olivia, who had never done anything wrong to anyone. Jane had no room to ruminate on the technicalities of them cheating on their husbands. That wasn't the point, as far as she was concerned, anyway.

The point was how this could blow up in the whole family's face.

"*Deui mh jyuh, Lili.*" Jane stared at her Waldorf salad, hand slapped against her face and the weight of her family's worries hanging above her head. *My own worries are currently perched on my shoulders.* It had been a long while since Jane was so overwhelmed by troubles. Before, the problems she swallowed were shared by most of the world. *Money, pandemic, and international security.* She still found camaraderie with her peers and employees over most of those

things, although she kept the occasional money woe to herself – after all, the employee making the starting salary at her company didn't want to hear about how wealthy Jane Wong paid more taxes than she expected. This? It would be one thing if she was the only one who stood to lose something from her sister's homosexual infidelity. Quite the different business when the whole family stood to lose extreme face.

Finally, Jane switched back to English.

"I'm on your side," she said, "because I naturally want my sister to be happy. You've done everything ever asked of you. You married Uncle Frank, even though we always called him *Uncle* Frank. You've been the belle of every ball you've attended. You kept popping out kids until you had a son. I don't pretend to know what you've really sacrificed to have a life that others envy, but I do know what it's like to go against the grain and upset the whole apple cart." Jane sighed. "Can I fit another idiom in there, or is my point clear?"

"I don't know what apple carts have to do with anything," Lilian said, "but I'll tell you what I told Caitlyn the other night: *huà lóng diǎn jīng*."

It took Jane a moment to remember where she heard that before. "You're quoting Mum?"

"That's how I look at my romance with Olivia. My whole life has always missed something crucial. It was like this huge, unfinished tapestry. Sure, I had a rich husband with trendy friends. I had kids, including a son. I had made everyone proud to the point that even my own mother-in-law fished for

things to complain about. But I never felt as whole as you always seemed to look, Jane. I spent years envying how happy you looked with Caitlyn and Olivia and Rebecca. You knew what – and who – you wanted, even if it meant giving up other things in our family. I’ve always admired that about you, you know. For all the rubbish I give you, I’ll always be one of the first people to defend your smug face.”

“And I’ll always be one of the first to defend *your* Botoxed cheeks.” Jane sniffed. “What else are sisters for, if we’re not born to look out for each other? That means tough love, too. You know you can’t come out with this relationship. Not without possibly losing everything – including your children. I know you’re not the most maternal person in the world, but are you willing to sacrifice them?”

Lilian shook her head. “Mother always says that children should have their mothers. I’d be doing them a disservice by living so selfishly. Maybe my son would be all right, but Cecelia... she’s a sensitive girl. I haven’t told anyone this, but she cried when I told her she’ll be going to boarding school.”

“She’s preparing for junior high, right? Girls that age either want to be far away from their mothers or to forever cling to their skirts. Ask me how I know.”

“You ran away, and I clung. I know.”

“If your daughter wants to be with you, then that’s one of the highest forms of compliments, isn’t it? She must admire you. She must feel safe with you. Hell, Lili, maybe she even loves you. Ever consider that?”

Lilian brushed that off with her own sniff that would save face for a few more minutes. “Do you love our mother? Did you love her when you were that age?”

Jane almost laughed. “Love! Now, we talk about children loving their parents, but we’re not allowed to talk about us loving people from our in-group.”

“Suppose you’re right. It’s an awkward thing to ask. Which is why I’m so on cloud nine now, sister. Olivia is the first time I’ve gushed with love over another adult. I didn’t know it could feel so freeing. She’s... honestly, even if it doesn’t last forever, I know I’ll cherish these past two years for the rest of my life. You and Olivia have shown me a side of myself I didn’t know could exist.”

“Me? What the hell did I do?”

“As I said, you always lived so bravely. You didn’t let people push you around and tell you who to be. You ask me? Mom’s always admired that about you, too. It’s the real reason you got away with so much. Not only because you were the baby.”

“Mum *did* used to tell us stories about growing up on the Mainland before Grandmum and Granddad fled by ferry.”

“Oh, yes, with baby Willow Li shoved in a giant suitcase because she didn’t have the proper papers. Don’t think I’ve forgotten the stories.”

“Li? Her name is Lam, like your husband’s.” No relation, though. That was always made clear to Jane when she was

young and thought Uncle Frank was *really* her uncle via her mother.

“They changed it when they arrived in Hong Kong. Or so Mom told me a few years ago.”

“Is that so? I had no idea.” Jane knew her grandparents had fled to Hong Kong a few years after the Communist Revolution on the Mainland, but the story was always told matter-of-factly and with few embellishments, which was Willow’s style. *She told us that story because it was the ‘90s, and she wanted to make sure we knew that China had not always been so open to capitalistic endeavors and free thought.* Right before Britain handed the place back to China. *My whole life has been politics.* No wonder Jane really did as she pleased. “She’s really done well for herself, then. I knew she didn’t grow up the cream of the upper class, but being a refugee and marrying someone like our dad? Wasn’t it an arranged marriage?”

“Oh, you know how it is. It was *heavily suggested.*” Lilian’s lazy air quotes almost knocked over her glass. “Mom was a real looker in her youth, though, so are we surprised Dad went for her out of everyone else available?”

“Suppose not. I wonder if we’ll ever hear the whole story.”

“Maybe if I come out like you did years ago. Ugh. What am I going to do, Jane? Do I really have to hide Olivia from the world?”

“Yes.” Jane breathed out the stale, trapped air in her lungs. Her next deep breath was not enough to replenish what had

been lost. “I’m sorry. It’s not what you wanted to hear, but I don’t see any other way. When I came out, I was not beholden to people and places the way you are now. I was also younger and foolhardier. I’m a known quantity to the clan. I also make a shitton of money, and that will always smooth over interpersonal relationships. Nobody wants to anger the wealthy queer with lots and *lots* of wealthier Western friends. I’ve dropped my friend Damon’s name more than once back in Hong Kong.” That reminded Jane that she had meant to arrange a lunch with him. The man was as busy as her, but they had no excuse when she was desperate enough for her own outsider perspective. “It opens doors, as you know.”

“I don’t want to ruin Olivia’s life, but won’t we get caught, anyway?”

“If you’re daft about it, *yes*. It’s one thing for people to spread strange rumors because you’re such close friends, but you can be smart. Always put your family first. Don’t alienate your influential friends. Keep your mouth shut about what you really like and what you want. Don’t say a *thing* about your own husband’s affairs, so if your own ever comes out, you have a bartering chip. At the end of the day, people care about saving face and not rocking their yachts. Keep your private life private. And...”

“Hm?”

“If you really love her as much as you think you do, you will find ways to be there for her when she needs you. If her husband ever abandons her, give her shelter. If he puts her

through a nasty divorce and tries to take their kid, bankroll her the best lawyer in Hong Kong. Again, keep quiet about it. That's our cousin, after all."

A week's worth of fatigue finally caught up to Lilian, who looked her age for the first time since Jane could remember. "I wish I could tell one other person. Just one."

"You mean Mum?"

Lilian was too bogged down in her own feelings to look at her sister. "I wish she could see that I'm happy, too, and not only putting up a front. Aren't parents supposed to want happiness for their children?"

"Mum's not like the ones you see on TV. She comes from a different time – and definitely a different place. Happiness isn't what concerns them. Mothers like ours want to secure our futures. That means knowing we can take care of ourselves in the world and have spouses who will continue the line through children and grandchildren. When I came out to her, she railed about our family's face, but I knew she was scared for me more than anything else. She didn't know how to help a lesbian daughter secure her future. Not in our modern world."

"Because if you lose too much face, you have no future."

"Now you get it."

Lilian corrected her posture and ate two full bites of her food. Jane took that as her cue to put something in her stomach as well. "Olivia is flying home in a couple of days. Ahead of me, of course. Not only is it more acceptable for me to be



away from home for longer, but we also thought it best that we not travel *completely* together. This whole trip was a ruse. We told everyone that we were coming to visit you, of course, but that it had been Olivia's wish to see America and I had the perfect excuse to treat her to a late birthday present. But her husband expects her home, and I know she misses her son. I can't say the same about my husband. Frank barely knows if I'm there or not."

"He's got his son now, huh? No longer interested in his forty-year-old wife."

"I'm not the hot twenty-something I used to be. Even I can admit to that, but only to you! You can't tell anyone! Besides... he lost interest in me shortly after our second daughter was born. You know, it's funny. I've never been attracted to him and held it against him that he was so much older, not that he was much good-looking in his youth, either. Yet the first time he rejected me because I still had baby weight... it hurt. He saw me so superficially. He's never paid attention to me since our son's birth. I think he was relieved to have it over with."

"I'm sorry, Lili."

"Is it wrong for me to be hurt about it even though I never felt well about him?"

"People are complicated. We're all walking around in a state of hypocrisy."

"*Ah*, I knew you were the right person to talk to about this! Even though you yelled at me, I feel so much better now. Do

you think we should get ice cream for dessert?”

“I didn’t yell at you!”

“You’re yelling at me right now!”

“This is different! I’m your sister! This is how we talk!”

“Maybe cool it a bit! I’m a sensitive soul right now!”

“I’ll lower my voice if you do it first!”

After two more rounds of that, they both fell into laughter and agreed that somewhere in Hong Kong, their mother had a pounding headache.



Jane spent more time with her sister than she anticipated, even going as far as to help her purchase a few necessities for the hotel room before escorting her back to The Grand, where Olivia awaited. While Lilian changed into her pajamas and prepared for lounging in the hotel room, Jane sat down with Olivia and apologized for anything that might have needed a “sorry.”

Olivia assured her there were never any hard feelings between them. After all, Jane was the primary reason Olivia had achieved as much as she had in her life, anyway. “What are cousins for?” she quipped.

“Technically, Lilian is your cousin, too. How about that?”

“Good thing we’re not related by blood.”

Sometimes, Jane forgot how dry Olivia’s wit really was.

By the time she returned home, Jane was beat. She had to repark her car after getting out in her private garage and realizing she was at a horrible angle. She was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she almost missed her floor while riding the elevator. When she got to the front door? She couldn't find her keys in her own pocket.

*What a way to end a Monday.* There was more work to be done tomorrow, and that wasn't counting the further discussions with her lawyer about possibly marrying Rebecca to sort out her visa issues.

She wasn't surprised to find the condo dark and quiet. She lived with two early-risers, after all. Yet the thought of going straight to her room to decompress and sleep sounded about as attractive as watching late-night TV and drowning her woes in doom scrolling through her phone. Jane needed some stimulation. The human kind.

This was not a household that questioned who they went to on any given night and why. Besides, Jane didn't have to question why she lightly knocked on Caitlyn's door before cracking it open and realizing her partner was in the shower. Caitlyn knew the intricacies of all the crap. Jane didn't have to explain things like her family history and cultural differences.

Not to mention... the thought of Caitlyn in the shower was *very* reassuring.

"Hello, love." Jane announced herself from the bathroom doorway, where she unbuttoned her shirt before moving to the foggy mirror. "Got any room in there for your old Jane?"

It took Caitlyn a moment to hear her and respond. “Depends.” She slid open the door far enough to poke her nose through the crack. “Are you here to rant, or are you here to ogle me in the hopes of getting laid?”

“Does it matter?” Jane was already dressed down to her underwear. Her hair was also wet from the moisture in the air. “I’m here.”

Caitlyn left the shower door cracked open before returning to her shaving regimen.

“Had the most *interesting* dinner with my sister.” Jane stood at the back of the shower where very little spray hit her. She eyed the soaps and shampoos lining the shelves in Caitlyn’s personal bathroom but didn’t touch them. Most of the time, she couldn’t stand the scents Caitlyn preferred. “Did you know she’s been shagging our ex-girlfriend for the past two years?”

The detachable showerhead rinsed off the soap from Caitlyn’s underarm. “Why, no. I certainly had not heard anything about that.”

“While your sarcasm is duly noted, I’ll have you know that I haven’t been this turned upside down in my life, and you were the one who asked for a divorce.”

Once the showerhead was back in its mount, Caitlyn turned her whole attention to her partner. “Because you saw that coming. I don’t think any of us anticipated your sister becoming a big ol’ queer like us.”

“Certainly not, but it’s a thing. Luckily, I think I talked some sense into her. I convinced her that it was in her *and* Olivia’s best interest to keep this to themselves. She really wants to tell Mum, though, for some reason...”

“I can imagine how that will go.” Caitlyn gestured to a bar of soap on the bottom shelf. “Since you’re here, you can help me exfoliate.”

“O-ho, I’m being put to work.” Not that Jane was complaining. Any excuse to touch one of her partners in such an intimate setting was welcomed. *After all, I calm down best when I’ve got a woman’s body beneath me.* Or so Jane told herself on nights like these. In reality, she wasn’t much different from everyone else. *Herbal tea and a comfortable pair of PJs gets the job done, too.* Maybe later. Right now, Caitlyn needed assistance with her naked body.

Caitlyn’s hair was already up in a loose bun, but she pulled aside anything in the way as Jane lathered up her hands and made a grand show of rubbing the soap suds against Caitlyn’s big, broad back. “You’re a riot.”

“And you have the greatest arse on this side of the Pacific, love.”

“If you love it so much, why don’t you touch it?”

“On my way!”

“I should have known that’s why you popped in here,” Caitlyn said with a smile. “Not that I’m complaining. You know I love having a buddy to shower with.”

Jane tightly squeezed Caitlyn's flesh before rinsing her hands off beneath the showerhead. Caitlyn grabbed her exfoliating towel and waited for Jane to be ready to take it. "I know you'll return the favor." Jane wrapped her arm around Caitlyn, which was not the best position for exfoliating her partner, but did she care? "Maybe not tonight, but soon."

"Mm, you know I do love feeling you up, too." Caitlyn wiggled out of Jane's hold, balancing her feet apart so they had plenty of room for bathing. Jane scrubbed the giant blank canvas before her. While she knew the benefits of exfoliating the skin, she also knew that Caitlyn took her beauty regimens *very* seriously. *Can't complain, now can I? I've been admiring her body for ten years.* Had it really been that long?

"Do you remember when I told my mother we were getting married?" Jane handed Caitlyn the cloth and leaned against the shower wall. "You weren't there, but certainly you remember the aftermath."

"Oh, yes." Caitlyn stood at the perfect angle to keep the water from getting in her hair, while also ensuring her whole back was adequately rinsed. *Look at that. Tits.* Jane didn't hide her staring. Nor did she fail to pay attention to what her partner said. "You told me to stay in the hotel room and to not answer the door for anyone, not even someone claiming to be staff and not family. You were so worried that someone from White Fir would attempt to see me."

"Namely my mother." Jane shuddered. "You should have heard the wailing that night. She worked herself up into such a

frenzy that she literally sobbed in the other room. I knew she wouldn't take it well, but I hadn't been expecting that."

"Yet when I saw her again, she was perfectly composed and wished me luck."

"Which was the Willow Wong way of saying, '*You'll need it.*' I guess she really thought my life was over in Hong Kong. Funny how things work out."

"How do you think she'll take to you marrying Becca?"

Jane was momentarily speechless, if only because she did not expect this topic of contention right *now*. "First of all, we're not sure that's happening. Second, I don't see why she should know about it. When you and I got married, it was for more than a visa. It was because we intended to be a monogamous couple for the rest of our lives. You know, maintaining an official household and all that rubbish."

"You mean because she already knows that Rebecca lives with us, she doesn't need to know about marriage?" Caitlyn clicked her tongue. "Your mother finds out everything, Jane. If it's legally written down somewhere, I mean. If you file a marriage license with Becca and change your visa status, your mother will absolutely find out. Maybe not right away, but eventually, and she might have questions."

"Sure! Don't know what that has to do with me, though. She can keep them to herself."

"Jane." Caitlyn emerged from the water, her body dripping, and her hair ruffled on top of her head. "It's a conversation

we need to have sooner rather than later. Maybe now isn't the *right* time, but you don't have a lot of time to figure out what Becca really means to you."

"What does that mean?"

"You once had the same conversation with yourself about me. Now you don't have to do it alone." Caitlyn motioned for Jane to get under the showerhead. She grabbed the same soap and covered her hands in suds. "Setting aside my own feelings, it might be the way to go."

"What are your feelings about it, Cait?"

Soapy hands held Jane by the shoulders. "Let's talk logically, first. Because my number one feeling is that I want you here with us. We're not a home without you."

How could Jane argue with that? *When a woman tells you she wants you in her life, you listen.* Especially when that woman offered to make Jane feel like the most wanted person in the world.



## CHAPTER 16

## *Rebecca*

When a woman needed to break away from the stress coming at her from every direction, she had no choice. *Don't tell anyone a damn thing and go.*

That sounded more dramatic than reality. In Becca's case, it meant peacing out for a long lunch – *not like I'm paid, anyway!* – with a friend who was more impartial to anything going on in Becca's hectic life.

“Don't you look haggard?” Nadia hadn't questioned why Becca wanted to meet at the café down the street instead of the cafeteria in their office building. *Unlike me, though, she's actually paid for her job.* Becca kept that in mind when she realized she shouldn't take up Nadia's whole lunch hour. “Wait. Don't tell me you're not wearing makeup. I'd feel like such an ass if it turns out you look tired because you're makeup-lite today.”

“You know I don't wear much makeup, anyway.” Becca fidgeted with the utensils wrapped in a cloth napkin. “No, no. I'm haggard as fuck. You had it right.”

Nadia hid her grin behind the glass of water left for them at their table. “Good. I’d hate to think I’m losing my edge because I’m surrounded by impossibly pretty people all day.”

“Like you?”

“Ha! Thanks for the compliment, but we know what I’m talking about.”

“Girl, you’re a shorter Caitlyn with red hair. Don’t start.”

“Like you’re never a knockout?”

“Compared to you? Pfft. I wish I had your hair’s sheen and those show-stopping curves.”

“Careful. If my wife hears you, she’ll think you’re flirting.”

“Good. Remind your wife that I’m in a throuple. I know how to handle my threesomes.”

Nadia laughed so hard that she shook the table. “So does she.”

“Where is Eva now, huh? Last I heard, she had dropped out of the family gem business.”

“Yes. It’s been sold to a Cambodian company. Not for a profit, either, but you ask me... Eva’s definitely happier now, and not only because she’s technically unemployed again.”

“Does that make you the breadwinner?”

“Please. You know where I live, right?”

“The fanciest house in the city. What’s it like having a whole wing all to yourselves?”

“Only when my mother-in-law isn’t in town. You might as well ask me what it’s like living with my brother and sister-in-law.”

While Becca appreciated this levity on a hectic day, she didn’t lose sight of why she wanted Nadia’s opinion on something. *Not that I’m supposed to talk about this with anyone.* Jane hadn’t said it outright, but Becca wasn’t stupid. *Some things are best left unsaid unless our PR firm gets to it first.* Becca couldn’t keep this to herself, though. Without a mother or sister to talk about it with, either...

Becca had more than one close friend, but Nadia was married. To someone on Caitlyn and Jane’s level, no less.

“So, what’s on your mind?” Nadia stretched in her seat, dropping her heels off her feet and crossing one leg over the other. Becca wished she could be so comfortable. “You’ve got that look on your face. Not to mention, when you texted me about grabbing lunch, you made it clear you didn’t want to hit up the cafeteria. So? Spill.”

Becca briefly spoke of Jane’s visa issues and made it clear that it was *not* to be spread around like the wildfire that often hit the gossip scene. Nadia nodded along. Shortly after Becca finished talking, Nadia claimed that she didn’t know much about the immigration process, including those who were in America on temporary visas like Jane. She didn’t hesitate to bring up an elephant in the room, though.

“Doesn’t she want a green card at some point? Sounds like she’s committed to living here with you two. Not to mention

her business.”

“Of course. I think that’s her long-term goal, but it’s harder to navigate if you’re not in the country legally to begin with.”

“Naturally.”

“I don’t know the source of her issues with immigration, but it’s stressing all of us out. She’s got the best lawyer in town, but even after the meeting with an agent or whatever they’re called last week... it sounds like the simplest way for Jane to change her visa is to get married.”

Becca pretended she had something to check on her phone while Nadia chewed on that announcement. *Any moment now.* Except what Nadia eventually asked had nothing to do with Becca, and everything to do with someone else.

“So, she and Caitlyn might be getting remarried? Am I invited? Because I still don’t know the etiquette for wedding gifts when you’re filthy rich.”

“Ah, actually...” Becca blushed. She was certain her freckles must have stuck out like pock marks. Before finishing her thought, she pulled her red curls in front of her face, as if they could hide her embarrassment. “Jane’s asked me to marry her if it comes to that. She and Caitlyn have already agreed they’re not going through that together again.”

“Oh.” Nadia propped herself up on the table. “Congratulations? I’m not sure how to read this situation.”

“Me neither. That’s the problem.”

“It doesn’t sound like your romantic arrangement is suited for marriage between two parties. Isn’t that the point? They got divorced so they could be in throuples.”

“It’s more complicated than that.” Jane and Caitlyn had divorced because Caitlyn had come more into her own as a dominant type, and Jane was not the kind to relent any control, whether in the bedroom or outside of it. *They only agreed to get back together if they opened their relationship to a more submissive third.* Enter Olivia. Then enter Rebecca. “In the end, they’re not remarrying. That’s why I might be the one doing it. Don’t get me wrong – I love Jane a lot. If it were only the two of us, I wouldn’t second guess the situation. But...”

“Hm, Caitlyn’s a wrench, isn’t she?”

“You make it sound like she’s a *hindrance* when it’s the exact opposite. I love her as much and know her as well. That’s the important thing. She’s putting up a good and logical front right now, but I don’t doubt this will speak to any insecurities she has. I don’t want to get into it, but Caitlyn definitely can be the most insecure out of the three of us. She always has something to prove, you know.” Becca didn’t add that she had her own insecurities, especially early on in the arrangement when she worried she’d always play the third wheel to Caitlyn and Jane.

To her credit, Nadia didn’t ask her friend to go into more personal details. “I don’t envy your position, then. Marriage is a serious thing. Took me a long time to come around to it, and Eva is my one and only.”

“Your hesitations were because of who she was though, right?”

“Yeah. You don’t simply marry into a family like the Warrens, especially if you’re not from their, uh, level. Her homophobic mother is a big enough problem. Only reason I eventually went along with marriage is because I love Eva too much to simply let her go.”

“That simple, huh?”

“Guess so.” Nadia cracked a smile. “That and getting to say I made the biggest lesbian playgirl in New England settle down *is* an accomplishment if you think about it.”

“In another life, Jane is a big playgirl, too.” She already was a huge flirt wherever they went. *She’ll charm the pants off her friends’ girls, too.* Becca didn’t know if it was the accent, the androgyny, or the fact that Jane Wong simply oozed sexual charisma, but she didn’t go anywhere without picking up at least one new female admirer. Caitlyn often called it “the Wong effect.” Whenever Becca asked how Caitlyn stood it when she and Jane were monogamous, she merely said, “*I really didn’t.*”

“Is that another reason you’re hesitant to put a ring on it?”

“Caitlyn is the biggest reason. If it were only Jane and me, I wouldn’t worry too much about it. Er, maybe I would. It’s a big deal, right?”

Nadia slowly nodded. “Getting married is a huge deal. There’s a reason it’s easy enough to do, but divorces are a

huge pain in the ass. You should have seen the prenup I signed. It was more with the Warrens than Eva!”

“I believe you. God, Jane would have a prenup, too. I bet Caitlyn would insist on it.”

“Sounds like you don’t really want to do it.”

“You heard me. I don’t know how it will affect the good thing we have going. The whole point is that the three of us have an equal say in all of the important decisions. You know, regardless of what we’re like in the bedroom.”

“Uh-huh. I get the gist.”

“If Jane and I get married, it could completely throw off the whole balance. *Especially* if the public finds out about it. Which is why you can’t tell anyone. Not even Eva.”

“No worries. Believe it or not, I don’t tell her everything.”

Becca snorted between her fingers. “Thanks. You know, I’m glad I have someone I can talk about this to. I was starting to lose my mind. There’s *so* much going on out of nowhere. It’s like we went two years hyper-focused on one thing, and suddenly... so much. I don’t know where else to begin.” It wasn’t her place to talk about Lilian and Olivia, but that had burned in the back of Becca’s mind for as long as Jane’s immigration woes.

Nadia placed her hand on the table. “What are friends for? Women like us have to watch out for each other. You hear all sorts of stories. Gay, straight, bi-and-dating-anyone... when you’re the poor girl coming into these relationships, you never



know how things might go. Sometimes, it's with our partners' best intentions on display. Yet best intentions rarely lead anywhere. You want my advice? Talk to them both about it separately. Don't go planning a wedding unless you're *sure*. You'll know what 'sure' means."

Becca refused the urge to take Nadia's hand. *I don't want people in public to get the wrong idea*. Becca couldn't help it, though. She was a touchy-feely person who enjoyed a good platonic cuddle as much as she liked canoodling with her lovers.

The world rarely understood that, though.

"How long do you have to sort out Jane's issue?"

Becca sighed. "The end of the year."

"Whoa. That's coming up quick."

"Yup. Right after the big wedding of the season. Which I'm going to with her, by the way. Technically we were all invited, but Caitlyn's gonna pass. She hates weddings." Becca didn't realize how that sounded until she said it out loud. *Sheesh*. "Other people's weddings." *Great. We're doing great*.

"Erica and Natalie's wedding, right?"

"Yeah. You going?"

"Eva never misses a big gay wedding, especially if it means California in December. Are you going to the bachelorette party?"

"Which one?"

Nadia giggled. “Right. I don’t know anything about Erica Mann’s party. I got an invite to Natalie’s. All it said was that it was at Hellfire, the kinky club in LA. We’re supposed to keep it quiet, of course, which is why I’m blabbing about it in a public café in New England.”

“I doubt most people in this place know who Natalie is.”

“Here’s hoping you’re right. I don’t want to get uninvited to the hen party of the year.”

“I’ll have to ask Jane if we’ve been invited to anything but the actual wedding.”

“Do let me know. If you’re going to Natalie’s, we’ll buddy up. I don’t know if I’ll be more than acquaintances with anyone else there.”

“You and I are not the best at maintaining friendships with the other gal pals.”

“I don’t know what your excuse is, but I’m a busy introvert. Once I’m done with work, I’m going home and sitting in my PJs. This might be my only social outing of the week at the rate I’m going.”

“Not turning into a hermit on me now, are you?”

“I don’t think Eva would let me. You joke about Jane being an extrovert, but there’s a reason I don’t go to many things without Eva. She’s a great person to have around when you need someone to suck up all the energy in the room. I can sit there and be pretty while she jabbers on.”

“A match made in Heaven.”

“She’ll tell you the thing she gets out of the arrangement is my hot bod.”

“As I said, you’re ginger Caitlyn. I doubt Eva Warren is the only one in this town thirsting after you, girl.”

“Yes, but you’ve seen my impossibly high standards. I wouldn’t even marry someone until she was the richest, tallest, and Diamond Dykiest person in town.”

Becca knew about high standards. Honestly, she knew about the exact opposite. *I had the lowest standards around when I met Jane and Caitlyn.* Becca’s self-destructive path had been painted with one-night stands with strangers she met on her travels. *Most of them men.* Becca was gay. That was the whole point of that level of self-harm in the wake of her last abusive relationship ending.

Jane had been the first person she told about it. Becca knew she was falling in love when Jane didn’t judge her for it. *She’s still the only person I feel comfortable talking about it with.* Becca had to admit, she and Jane had a physical and philosophical understanding when it came to their pasts.

Then again, Becca had things with Caitlyn that couldn’t be replicated with anyone else, too.

Which was why she must tread carefully. Not only did Becca desire to keep her romantic relationships chugging along, but she didn’t want long-term regrets, either.

Yet she would also be completely lost without Jane in her domestic world. *I’ll do whatever is necessary to help her stay*

*with us.* That included marrying her, for better or worse.



“We’ll need to ensure the plane is ready to go by then,” Jane said later that evening, while the three of them conducted end-of-the-day business in their living room. Becca sat on the carpet, pressed up against the couch and within Jane’s lazy reach. Caitlyn was happy in her corner chair that was big enough to cradle her like a hammock. All three wore their loungewear, which for Jane meant a T-shirt and cotton shorts that barely hid what she packed beneath. *Before anyone asks how someone who runs so cold doesn’t freeze out here...* Jane was buried beneath a big fleece blanket she kept folded on the corner of the couch for such occasions. The reason Becca was on the floor was because sitting with Jane meant being beneath the blanket, and it was *too hot* for Becca. “I’m not flying commercial that time of year. I don’t care how much fuel costs.”

She referred to the wedding in California, which Becca currently plotted into the family calendar for December. “We might not make it back in time for Christmas in Iowa,” she said to Caitlyn, who glanced up from her paperwork in the corner.

“That’s fine. Ah, if you two will be gone through Christmas, maybe I’ll head home by myself. It beats hanging out around here while everyone else is being festive.”

“Come on, Cait.” Jane had quite the setup on the couch, with her body lounging across the cushions and a pillow propped up beneath her arm so she could comfortably peruse her tablet. “Come to the wedding with us. There’s still time to change your RSVP.”

“It’s fine. You know I’m allergic to weddings. If I’m going to one, it’s a close friend or family member. I barely know Erica Mann outside of the business and kink circuits.”

“Which is how we got invited, mind you.”

“Which circuit got us invited?”

“I think you know, love.”

Caitlyn hid her response behind her paperwork. Becca went ahead and blocked out the middle of December for the trip. “What day are we leaving?” Becca asked. “Were we invited to one of the bachelorette parties? Or would you rather arrive that day and go straight to the hotel?”

“Ah, bollocks. I forgot about that bloody party. No, no, I don’t want to go. We were invited to Erica’s, and it’ll be... well, let’s say I’m feeling too old for that level of revelry.”

“My God, are you okay?” Caitlyn asked from her chair. “Since when do you turn down a fancy stag party?”

“I found out who is throwing it, that’s how.”

Becca already saw the women in question in her head. “Isn’t it her friends? What are their names? I know Margaret Sloan is one of them.”

“Oh, I wish Sloan and Woodward were throwing the party! They’ve both been married before, you know. They would know the perfect out-of-the-way but fully catered place to have some great scotch with tasteful naked girls dancing about. Bloody cigars and a five-course meal with a side of dirty stories and maybe a bondage demonstration! No. Nope. That’s not who is throwing the party.”

Caitlyn raised her eyebrows. “So you’ve heard?”

“Of course. I heard from Astrid Evans that it’s the *other* friend setting up the stag of the decade.” Jane muttered the name. Not even Becca heard her.

“Who?” she asked.

“Bloody Vanessa Richards, that’s who.”

Caitlyn cackled; Becca sucked her breath through her teeth.

“So, no, I don’t know what she has planned, but we’re not going. Knowing that lot, it’s key parties and orgies with strangers. I don’t know where they got the idea I’m as freaky as they are, but those days are behind me in Cambridge.”

It took Caitlyn another minute to calm down from her laughter. “Says the woman who goes to Asia and spends more than one night at *those* parties.”

“When in the company of my fellow Chinese speakers, I know what to expect, and I know how to excuse myself while maintaining face. If my Taiwanese, Hong Konger, and Singaporean brethren want to whip each other with nipple clamps and ride naked men who are crawling around on all-

fours, it's easy to say, '*No thank you, Jane Wong is the ultimate fussy spot in this crowd*' and still get invited to future parties. I don't know how to do that in America. I may never know."

"Now I kinda wanna go," Becca said. "Getting whipped with nipple clamps?"

"Go ask Caitlyn if you're into that, love. Your Jane draws the line at welts and such."

"You're losing your edge, Lin," Caitlyn said. "The woman I met in Chicago would be first in line at a party like that."

"Hardly! You know I'm always up for a bit of fun, but even *I* get overwhelmed when people are having *too* much fun."

"I'll remember that the next time we're surrounded by naked dancing girls at The Dark Hour and you're drowning in your own slobber."

Jane nudged Becca. "Am I painting a conflicting picture here? These are very different things, right?"

"So..." Becca marked something else on the calendar. "Let's fly in that day, send our regards, and wait for the wedding."

"Quite right."

When Becca finished her fussing, she broached the subject that had been on her mind all day. "Speaking of weddings..." She looked up at Jane, who already steeled herself for what she must have known was coming. "Should we discuss the you-know-what?"

“You can say what it is in front of me, you know,” Caitlyn said.

“I think she’s talking in code for my benefit.” Jane rearranged herself on the couch. “Becca, love, I didn’t think we had officially decided yet.”

“Really? Sounded like that was exactly what we were doing if things weren’t sorted out by December. Which will be here before you know it, by the way.”

“You see, dear, if we decide to get married, we can’t really... elope. My lawyer says I should apply for the fiancé visa or whatever it’s called right away. Then we have 90 days to get married. Is that how that TV portrays it, anyway?” She asked Caitlyn, who was the biggest consumer of reality TV in the family.

“That’s how it worked last time. We got married two months into your visa.”

“So, I think that’s the best way to do it. If things aren’t working by December, we’ll file for the fiancé thing and marry after the new year. Let’s figure out one thing at a time, Becca.”

Was it instinct, or did Becca really want Caitlyn to butt in on her behalf? Because her natural inclination was to look toward her other girlfriend with *help* plastered on her countenance.

“Don’t string her along, Lin, and don’t forget to tell her how absolutely ‘rubbish’ you are at planning even a low-key



wedding.”

“Honestly, if it comes down to it, you two can have a big ol’ go of it. If you hate going to weddings, Cait, then I hate having them. Even when I was so madly in love with you I couldn’t imagine being with anyone else. You’re lucky I showed up to the altar sober.”

“Don’t you mean I’m lucky you showed up *at all*?”

“I wanted the visa, didn’t I?”

“The truth comes out all these years later. You married me for status.”

“Of course I did, love. You were the best woman I ever met. Isn’t that status in a nutshell?”

“We’ve completely lost her to trifling compliments.” Caitlyn patted the arm of her large chair. “Come over here, Becca. You can pretend you’re possibly marrying me, instead. I’ll treat you like the blushing bride you deserve to be.”

“Blushing! I’ll have you know there was absolutely no *blushing* from Caitlyn’s side when we got married. Ha! Her own mother was a sobbing mess, and do you know what Caitlyn said to her? *‘Mom, please, you’re going to ruin the photos.’*”

“I did not say such a thing!”

“Eh, close enough.”

Becca had long learned to stay out of these tiffs between Jane and Caitlyn. Most of them were their way of flirting,

anyway. *Countdown to when they're making out in the hallway...* Becca was never inclined to butt in and ask to join. Sometimes, half the fun was in watching when they didn't think she was around.

...This was what she didn't want to upset. The banter between Caitlyn and Jane worked because they had known each other for so long and had been married for half that time. Becca now enjoyed their stolen kisses and secret showers when they thought she had gone to bed. *I heard them in the shower the other night, after all.* First it was voices. Then it was the delighted shriek of Jane dropping the showerhead in Caitlyn's decked-out bathroom.

It was still a precarious balance, though. If any two in this menage were to get married for one to keep a visa, it should have been Caitlyn and Jane. Yet Becca understood Caitlyn refusing to do it. She had been down that road before. Like Becca, she didn't want to upset their balance.

Except someone had to, right? Like someone had to change the subject a moment later.

"By the way," Caitlyn interjected into the silence when everyone had finally calmed down. "Tomorrow's Olivia's last night before she goes back to Hong Kong. I know we talked about it earlier, Jane, but you didn't give me a final say in whether we invite her and Lilian to dinner. I'll take care of everything. Because, as you noted, I usually do."

"You know I don't want my sister to know where we live. She'll drop by whenever she pleases, and I've had enough of

her fun as it is.”

“It’s more intimate than taking them out to dinner. Besides, I’ll happily tell the concierge downstairs to never let Lilian past the front desk without *your* permission. Come on, Jane. They’ve been in town for so long, the least we could do is treat them to a homecooked meal.”

“What? Are you cooking?”

“If I have to leave the office early, yes I will.”

“You don’t have any afternoon meetings?”

“About that...” Caitlyn set aside her papers and pushed herself out of her chair. Bedecked in a baggy white sweater and nothing else, she gingerly stepped around Becca and climbed onto the couch with Jane. “I was hoping you could take over one. Besides, I’ll be spending most of the morning going over the interviewees with Becca. We’ll both need a break after that.” She placed her hand on top of Becca’s head. “Mind cooking dinner with me? We can Zoom my mother again if we’re *really* worried about it.”

“If you’re serving fried chicken and grits to my sister, you might want to think again.”

“Fried chicken and *grits*? Where do you think I’m from, again?”

“I *know* where you’re from.”

Caitlyn flopped on top of Jane, who pretended she had never been so put-out in her life. Once the English was swapped for Cantonese, Caitlyn flung both of her arms around

Jane's torso, which was Becca's cue to get up and add to the pile.

“I'm being *murdered* by my own family!” Jane cried. “They want to bring *more family* into *my household!*”

Becca almost died of laughter. Jane, meanwhile, was merely crushed to death.

## CHAPTER 17

## Caitlyn

As promised, Caitlyn left the office two hours early to prepare for a small dinner party. Becca, however, couldn't join her immediately. Without her help, Caitlyn put the fate of the dinner ingredients on a random Instacart delivery driver.

“You know it's been ages since I tried making a pot roast.” Caitlyn finished rearranging the pots and pans on the island counter. Nearby, on her tablet, her mother Christie offered a step-by-step demonstration since *“post roast sounds lovely for dinner!”* Caitlyn was glad she could help her mother decide what to cook that night, but this wasn't how she wanted to do it. *Yet here I am, getting ready to peel potatoes and carrots while Mom does the same.* What a world they now lived in.

“Your cooking is great, Cait!” Christie's voice sounded so far away on the tablet. A friendly reminder that they were a thousand miles apart, Caitlyn supposed. “You know how much fun we've had eating your Cantonese cuisine.”

Caitlyn was glad her mom couldn't see her rolling her eyes. "Sure. The food I'm totally butchering when I tried to cook it. You know it doesn't in any way compare to what you actually get in Hong Kong, right? You should know. You've been there." Only once. Christie had confessed to her daughter that the city was "much too overwhelming" to ever visit again. Caitlyn had a feeling that meant the food as well.

At the same time, Caitlyn was grateful to have someone to talk to until Becca got home. *I'm always a mess by myself in the kitchen.* She second-guessed herself and grew inattentive at the worst possible moments. Having her mother's familiar, comforting voice was almost enough to keep Caitlyn grounded in reality. While Christie couldn't guarantee that her daughter's pot roast would turn out sumptuous, it was better than doing it completely alone.

Especially when more than a few things were on Caitlyn's mind.

"...That's absolutely terrible!" Christie exclaimed once her daughter explained the immigration situation. "Honestly, I thought Jane had a green card this whole time. Guess that's what I get for making assumptions. You'd think she'd have enough money to avoid the worst of this, but I guess that's never a guarantee when it's happening to you."

"Don't worry, we've had the same thought. To be fair, it doesn't help she's been engaged to me, married, divorced, started a business here, now... I don't know what the problem is. We're figuring it out."

“You two always do.”

Caitlyn’s motions slowed as she placed the potatoes and carrots in their bag. “Rebecca is helping us, too. You know she’s as committed to figuring things out as I am.”

“Of course, Cait. Now, you preheated the oven, right?”

Caitlyn didn’t begrudge her mother ignoring Rebecca’s role in the family. *She’s never really understood it.* Both of Caitlyn’s parents stayed out of her business, although it helped that Caitlyn and Jane always helped out financially when necessary. That didn’t only mean the folks. That also meant college education funds for nieces and nephews, as well as anonymous gifts when someone in the immediate family fell on hard times, like during the pandemic. *All coming “from” my parents, of course.* Everyone in the Adams network must have known it was really from Caitlyn, but there was a reason Christie acted as the intermediary. Deep down, Christie was alienated from her siblings because of money. They were happy to take it when in need, but it changed their dynamic.

In many ways, Caitlyn envied Jane’s relationship with Lilian. While far from perfect, they were on equal levels when it came to income and social status. They had both grown up wealthy and in the care of multilingual nannies. When they bickered, it was with the understanding that things were still the same the next day. Caitlyn couldn’t do that with her brother and sister. Her life had changed far too much.

No wonder she wanted this dinner to be more than good. It had to be perfect. This was *her* family, after all.





“What a magnificent scent!” Lilian hauled Olivia in by the hand and almost forgot to remove her shoes in the foyer. It took Olivia’s gentle chiding for Lilian to sheepishly apologize and slip out of her designer heels. “Did you really cook us dinner, Caitlyn? Oh, I can’t wait to try it! I’ve never had homecooked American food before!”

Rebecca came out of the kitchen, her apron still on. From the moment she came home, she went into chef mode, taking over for Caitlyn while she set the table and parlayed with Lilian and Olivia over text. Although their weekly maid service had made a special trip that day, Caitlyn wasn’t convinced that the main living area and the front bathroom were clean enough for Lilian’s standards. She could be quite judgmental without meaning to be.

“I see they’re here,” Rebecca whispered to Caitlyn, who gestured for everyone to come into the living room, where she had set up tea and sliced fruit. “The roast is almost ready.”

Caitlyn mouthed her thanks before following their guests into the living room. She insisted that Lilian and Olivia take the couch. The TV was off and the blinds were up so Jane’s family could enjoy the sunset over the river. Neither guest mentioned it, though. “I hope it wasn’t too troublesome for you two to find the address. It’s sometimes not marked on the maps.” Caitlyn poured the tea. “Privacy.”

“Of course. It’s not like White Fir is on any maps.” Lilian was the first to accept a small cup of tea with a mandarin slice on the side. “It’s a lovely place. Isn’t it lovely, Livie?”

Olivia nodded, albeit while keeping her head down. “Pardon me,” she eventually said. “I’m tired.”

“We must make the most of the night,” Lilian said. “You go home tomorrow, and I already don’t know what I’ll do with myself in your absence.”

“You will make do,” Olivia replied.

Caitlyn captured their attention with one of her beauty queen smiles. “I do hope you’ve enjoyed your stay in New England, Olivia. Did you get to see the fall leaves? They were a bit late this year, but still beautiful from what I was able to see from my office window.”

“We had many a nice walk in the local parks,” Olivia said. “Thank you.”

“She’s so modest. We drove up into the countryside a bit. Not too far, though.” Lilian clicked her tongue. “Olivia is the one with the driver’s license and is more comfortable on the road than me, so I didn’t want her overexerting herself. You may not know this about her now, but she’s *so* quiet when something is bothering her. Like now. I’ve been getting the silent treatment all day.”

“I am *not* giving you the silent treatment,” Olivia said, in a way that only she knew how to mediate. “As I said, I’m tired. Plus, being in Caitlyn and Jane’s new home is a first for me. I

wish to enjoy it while I have the chance. Let's hope the evening goes by slowly so we can savor it."

"Isn't she something else?" Lilian asked. "Caitlyn, when is supper ready? I don't know if I can hold myself back from that smell. I'm about to bother Rebecca in the kitchen! She's *so* adorable in that little apron of hers!"

Rebecca looked over from the counter, where she opened the greasy bag with a sour look on her face. Caitlyn couldn't get away with mouthing an apology, but she would be sure to offer her girlfriend one later. "It should only be about ten more minutes. Hopefully, Jane should be back from the office by then. She texted me about it a few minutes ago. I know she's excited to see you two tonight."

"No need to lie, Caitlyn," Lilian said. "Nevertheless, we can't wait to see her, either."

*Why would I lie about that?* According to Jane, she and Lilian had smoothed things over after a "passionate quarrel" at Monday night's dinner. Had Jane gotten it wrong? Or was this Lilian's quirky way of relating to her younger sister?

Either way, Caitlyn had to stay in hostess mode. Her mother had taught her well.

"You should see the apron Livie wears," Lilian continued, hardly touching her tea. "White, with this cute heart-shaped bodice and red fleur-de-lys. I didn't even buy it for her! She simply has amazing taste."

Olivia was still blushing. “You don’t need to tell people about that.”

Caitlyn cut in before Lilian dug herself a deeper hole, “How much longer are you planning to stay in town?” she asked her former sister-in-law. “I know Olivia is returning to Hong Kong tomorrow, but it sounds like you’re staying a while more?”

“What an excellent question. Originally, I had planned on staying only two more weeks to not raise much suspicion back home regarding Livie and me, but a few matters have changed. I may be here another month.”

Caitlyn cleared her throat instead of choking on her spit. “Another month? Don’t tell me you wish to witness an American Halloween.”

“Oh, that would be so much fun! Perhaps not without the children, though. They’d be so sore at me if they missed out. At any rate, there are a few things I wish to sort out with Jane while I also plot my own course. Maybe I’ll have my mother send Cecelia over for her half-term holiday. I don’t believe either you or Jane have met my oldest. She’ll be a teenager before I know it...”

While Lilian’s voice trailed off, Olivia placed her hand on her lover’s knee in reassurance. “It would be good for you to have your daughter here. I know you’re missing her.”

“Is it strange to miss the oldest more than the others? Suppose it’s because Cecelia has come into quite her own personality. It’s much easier to relate to teenagers than smaller children, don’t you agree, Caitlyn?”

“I honestly don’t know. Never had any of my own.” She didn’t count her nieces and nephews, whom she only saw once or twice a year.

The awkwardness of the situation was saved when Jane walked through the door. Lilian leaped up from her seat and waved in greeting. Jane shielded her surprise well, although there was no hiding it from Caitlyn, who hoped the two sisters could get along well enough to survive a homecooked meal together.

“Doesn’t that smell delicious?” Jane kept away from the living room. Better for her to remove her jacket and instead sidle up next to Rebecca as she cut open the roast and prepared the serving platters. “Has Caitlyn been running you ragged, love?”

“Caitlyn did most of the cooking,” Rebecca said. “I’m only helping out so she can talk with our guests.”

“Well, I won’t bother you. Everyone here knows how little help I am in the kitchen.”

“Livie makes the most wonderful steamed dumplings.” Lilian’s voice cut through the whole living area, bringing all attention back to her. *Regardless of how much she wants us to fawn over my ex-girlfriend.* Caitlyn’s nails cut into her leggings. Luckily for everyone involved, nobody suffered a fake smile better than her. “She doesn’t use the pre-spiced pork like our mother used to cook with, Jane. No, no, Livie puts in these tiny chiles to add some punch. Don’t you, Livie?”

Olivia knew how to suffer a smile, too.

“I’ve had Olivia’s dumplings before, yes.” Jane leaned against the front of the island counter, still too chickenshit to make the whole journey into the living room. Caitlyn counted down the seconds until dinner was served. *You’ll be forced to sit next to her, Lin.* Hopefully, everyone could start acting more like adults, then! “They used to be a hot commodity during New Year’s. Caitlyn always ate half of them.”

That made Caitlyn’s head jerk up. “I did not.”

“Dinner’s ready!” Rebecca’s cheery voice was faker than the nails currently glued to her fingers. “Hope you guys are hungry!”

“I’m famished, love.” Jane jumped in to help carry the serving platters to the dining table. “I’ll get this. Be a dear and grab the Cabernet Sauvignon from the wine cupboard. That should go well with our dinner.”

“No alcohol for me, thanks!” Lilian was the first to the dining table, although it was so she could pull out Olivia’s chair for her. “I’m going sober tonight for Livie’s farewell tour.”

Caitlyn caught the dour look on Olivia’s face. “I’ll take your sister’s share,” she said to Jane. She almost felt bad that she had set the table, so she sat between Rebecca and Olivia instead of next to one of the Wongs. Then again, she needed the break, as obtrusive as it would be.



Rebecca and Caitlyn were the only ones who went back for seconds. *Not too bad, Cait. Not too bad.* Was the roast as good as her mother's? Ha! No! Nor would it ever be, although Caitlyn wouldn't mind being three-quarters as good as Christie Adams in the kitchen.

The other women were not as generous with their portions, although the compliments flew as if they were so enamored with the taste and texture that they couldn't possibly eat any more. Caitlyn was used to this from Jane's family, although Olivia surprised her. *She used to eat up my cooking like she'd never eat again.* More than once Olivia had joked that she wanted to gain all of her adult weight on Caitlyn's homestyle American cooking. Yet not only was Olivia the quietest person at the table – giving her no excuse to not eat – but she only ate meat and not much else. When dessert rolled around, she took the thinnest slice of strawberry cake from the bakery near the office and chose to have more hot tea instead of the Cabernet Sauvignon Caitlyn had ensured was restocked for that night's dinner.

She knew that, ultimately, this was none of her business, but she couldn't help but be concerned that trouble rocked paradise.

She didn't get a chance to ask until Rebecca offered to clean up the plates and Lilian insisted on showing her sister some photos from a trip to the countryside. Caitlyn shared a look with Jane before asking Olivia if she minded coming back to the bedroom to collect something that used to belong to her.

To Caitlyn's credit, she *did* have something of Olivia's that had lingered in one of her drawers all these years. *A trifling trinket*. Yet it was the perfect excuse to get her alone and ask what troubled the woman who used to mean the world to someone like Caitlyn.

She didn't have to dig too deep.

"Thank goodness." Olivia was the one who left the door barely ajar – enough to douse any suspicions that something else was going on in Caitlyn's private chambers. "I was wondering how I'd get to either you or Jane in confidence. I honestly prefer you."

Caitlyn didn't bother rooting through her drawer. "What is it? Is there something wrong? I've been concerned all night."

That borrowed her a wan smile from a woman who looked like she didn't smile much in public anymore. "You've always been observant like that. Yes, there is something I must tell you, but it may not be what you think."

Caitlyn hesitated. "What do you think *I'm* thinking?"

"Perhaps I'm not happy with Lilian." Olivia sat on the edge of Caitlyn's bed. Her ankles were crossed and her dainty hands were stacked in her lap. She looked more comfortable now than she had all evening. "My current frustrations with her are not related to our overall happiness. I assure you, any ill-feelings I have toward Lilian are not baked into a pending break-up. If anything, I curl my lip because I expect better from her. The woman I fell in love with does not often act like this in private."



Perhaps Caitlyn should look for that trinket, after all.  
“What’s wrong?”

“I’m not supposed to know about this, and I’m *definitely* not supposed to tell anyone about it, but... wait, let me back up.” Olivia sighed. “The root of my frustration is Lilian’s handling of our relationship in public. She brought me here because she wanted Jane to figure out some magic way to make everything better. For months, she’s been talking about Jane like she holds some mystical key to the universe. When it comes to being gay in our families, anyway. I keep telling her that Jane has merely lived the way she’s had to, but Lilian won’t listen. She’s not like us, Caitlyn. This kind of relationship is still new for her. It took her months to even admit that maybe she was queer – and we were sleeping together that whole time.”

Caitlyn dug beneath her grandmother’s embroidered handkerchiefs. “I can imagine how frustrating that is. If Lilian has always had it in her, she’s been living so deep in the closet that she no longer knows what her own shadow looks like.”

She caught the slight nod of Olivia’s chin behind her. “I agree with Jane. Lilian and I should continue as is. That means watching our backs and not being too open with our affections. We both stand to lose a lot should the wrong people get angry. I don’t want to lose my own household. I don’t mind my husband. He’s kind and understanding about most things, and he’s been a good father to our son. It’s not his fault I tried to become someone I’m not for my own selfish image. I also don’t want Lilian to lose what she already has as well. I don’t think she could handle it well.”

Finally, Caitlyn discovered the small trinket in the bottom of her drawer. She stood up, closed the drawer, and kept her hand over the box in her grasp. “She’s a sensitive soul.”

“Like you.”

Caitlyn hooted as she turned around. “Don’t know if I’d go *that* far...”

“No, you don’t react the same way. Lilian has a self-destructive bent to her personality. She gets so wrapped up in doing the dutiful thing that she sometimes forgets who she is. The only way she knows how to act out is by being loud and needy. People like that about her, you know. It certainly charms me.”

“You must see something in her that I don’t because even if she came on to me, I think I’d find it difficult to be seduced by *Lilian Wong*.” Jane Wong was another matter. Entirely.

“Lilian has enough spirit and zest for life in her to cover the two of us. I think she could be happy with someone more like her, but I also think I’m good for her, too. But that’s not what I wanted to talk about. She did something yesterday that she thinks I don’t know about.”

Caitlyn waited.

“She called someone. Overseas.”

“I see.”

“I’m not sure who, exactly, but what I caught was a master manipulator in action. She also attempted to get this person to

seriously think about visiting America – and Jane. There is apparently much to discuss in the family.”

Caitlyn’s eyes widened. “Oh, hell no.”

“Let’s say it’s good I’m returning to Hong Kong tomorrow. My flight is in the late morning. Lilian was sweet enough to buy me a First-Class seat – and I will miss her. Dearly. These past two weeks have been my first chance to really feel comfortable with her every single day. No looking over my shoulder, and no wondering if someone in the restaurant is actually a friend of her mother’s. It’s one thing for two friends to eat together every week. It’s quite another for us to spend *so* much time together. Especially since most people in her family know my history with you and Jane.”

“Olivia...” Caitlyn sat next to her, although she did not touch the woman who simultaneously seemed so familiar yet so different from how she used to be. “I think you should have this back. Since you’re here.”

Caitlyn waited for Olivia to open her hand before dropping the ring box. Olivia held her breath when she realized it was the opal ring Caitlyn had given her as an anniversary present. *She gave it back to me when we broke up.* For years, Caitlyn had hidden it away, afraid that its energy might pervert her relationship with Rebecca. *I fear Rebecca might not understand.* Which was silly. Rebecca had her own romantic history that shaped who she was today. Hadn’t Caitlyn gone into a club to reclaim her at some point?

“I couldn’t possibly take this back.”

“It’s yours. I don’t care what you do with it, Liv, but it was always meant for you.”

“You’re as sweet as ever, Caitlyn. I’m so sorry for what I did.”

That stung more than the news of an impending visitor. “It’s bygones. We’ve both moved on.” She didn’t know if she meant her and Jane, or her and Olivia. “I’m glad you’ve found happiness with someone. Also, as it turns out, Jane and I were always meant to be here with someone else, too. Doesn’t change the past, but... please, keep the ring. I feel bad hanging on to it for so long.”

Olivia closed the box and slipped it into her sweater pocket. “You’ve never lost your romanticism. I always loved how you wore your feelings on your sleeve. It was refreshing.”

“Maybe I don’t do that as much anymore. I don’t know why.” She knew. *Because my emotions always get me into trouble.* As she aged, Caitlyn did her best to wrangle her insecurities, which were always the source of her most troubling times. Didn’t she have plenty of reasons to be insecure right now? *I can’t let it get to me.* Her family needed her to be logical and strong. So did her business. So many people counted on Caitlyn Adams to *calm the fuck down.*

“Rebecca is a lucky woman.” Olivia got up. “So am I. Thank you, Caitlyn. You and Jane continue to be two of the sweetest women I know.”

Caitlyn followed her to the bedroom door. “Don’t let Jane hear you saying that.”

“Oh, I know. *I know.*”

They returned to the living area in time to witness Lilian taking mock offense while Jane told her sister to “grow the bloody hell up.” Rebecca completely retreated into the kitchen and no amount of asking if she wanted help with the dishes got through to her. This was her domain, and Caitlyn could kindly step back.



When the dishes were done, the after-dinner tea was drunk, and the guests had departed, the three members of the household went their separate ways to get ready for bed. For Caitlyn, that meant taking a contemplative shower and turning her bedroom TV to the Real Housewives while she did her hair and nightly moisturizing regimen.

She was always the last to bed when the three of them were home. Jane sometimes showered, but mostly got straight into her PJs and hopped into bed. Rebecca would wind down on top of her own bed until her phone fell on her face while she slept. Caitlyn? *It sometimes takes me forever to wind down.* That went double for tonight. There was a lot for her to process.

To the point she eventually turned off her TV and escaped from her room, hoping to find someone else lounging in the living area. Except there was no one. All of the lights were off save for the dim glow in the hallway.

Caitlyn thought about slipping into Jane's room, but she figured her partner wanted more time to herself than ever. Instead, Caitlyn lightly knocked on Rebecca's door, waiting for a response. None came.

The door was unlocked, though. Caitlyn peeked inside and found Rebecca deep beneath her covers, the light blue glow of her humidifier pumping moisture into the air. Caitlyn quietly closed the door behind her.

When she lay down beside Rebecca, it wasn't with the intent of waking her up. Yet Rebecca stirred, her nose soon poking out from beneath her comforter.

"Is it all right?" Caitlyn whispered. "I could use some company."

Rebecca responded by turning over and wrapping her arm around Caitlyn's midsection. Soon, she drifted off to sleep again.

It didn't take Caitlyn long to join her after that.

## CHAPTER 18

## Jane

**D**esperate times called for desperate measures. Or so Jane recalled when she finally heard back from one of her closest friends and the only person who could possibly parse what she was going through.

“You say you’re a mess.” A masculine voice brought Jane’s nose out of her phone. It could not, however, make her ignore the midafternoon scotch a server had placed on her small table. “Yet you look as impeccable as ever.”

Jane hated how easily his compliment soothed her self-conscious soul. “As flirtatious as ever, aren’t you, Damon?” She put her phone away and fingered the rim of her glass. The liquid had yet to be touched by her lips. She might as well wait until Damon Monroe ordered something for himself – the man owned half of the establishment, so God knew he probably got everything for free. “What would your wife say if she knew you were here flirting with little ol’ me?” Jane ramped the charm up to eleven when she said, “Your *pregnant* wife.”



The manager of the lounge was quick to bring Damon a drink. *That's it. He doesn't have to order at all. I should have known, huh?* Jane wasn't in the hospitality industry. She would never know what such service was like! *I wouldn't mind a bevy of mind readers at my beck and call.* The novelty would wear off quickly.

"Alice sends her regards." Damon settled into the armchair only a few feet away from Jane's. "Her pregnant regards."

"Congratulations, by the way. Looks like that dove of yours will finally have a brother or sister."

"That reminds me, Clarise has been asking after her Auntie Jane. You've left quite the impression on my daughter."

"God speed to your child, Damon. She'll need it with an auntie like me in her life."

The manager offered both Damon and Jane cigars. They declined to smoke them now, although Damon tucked his away to go. *I don't need back on that train.* As much as Jane hated to admit it, quitting smoking had taken more effort than she assumed all those years ago.

"How's life?" Damon asked, cutting right into Jane's faraway thoughts. "How's work? Isn't that what we're supposed to talk about? Or did I miss a day when Cambridge taught us how to socialize with our oldest pals?"

"Last I checked, my name wasn't Lucas Blackbourne." That was Damon's *real* best friend, and Jane would be obliged to never forget that. *Ran off with Damon's assistant. Go figure.*

She wasn't bad to look at, either, although Alice was much more Damon's type. "Honestly, the things I have to talk about are more obnoxious than a dog sniffing up your leg. Do we have to jump right into it?"

"The last time I saw you this on edge, we ended up dating."

"Don't start that up. I can assure you that no big breakup is on my horizon this time." Damon referred to their short and secret affair that began after the first – and only – split from Caitlyn. *While she was off banging any model that moved, I was stealing weekends around the world with this bloke.* It had never been love. Hell, it had rarely been attraction! When Damon was ready to find someone to seriously date and Jane was prepared to move on – or win Caitlyn back – they cleanly broke things off and remained friends.

Caitlyn was never meant to know about it. Until she did, and things got complicated once again.

*As Cait would say, those are bygones.* It had been three years since things last blew up in Jane's face. No sense in rehashing them in the present company.

"What has you texting me multiple times this week asking when I have a moment to spare in my busy schedule?" Damon sniffed his drink before taking a sip. Once he was satisfied the manager knew exactly what he wanted, he creaked into the leather of his seat and half-closed his eyes. "Not that I'm complaining. I'm enjoying a reason to escape the office on a Friday afternoon. It's that time of year, you know."

Jane sipped her scotch. Unlike Damon, she was not satisfied. She also didn't take no for an answer when she swapped their glasses and sampled his drink instead. *Bourbon? I'll take it.* Damon was less than impressed but said nothing.

"I heard your sister is in town." With his arms splayed wide on the couch and his back slouched, the impeccable Damon Monroe finally looked more human than a robotically perfect CEO. Or maybe that was his intense sandalwood cologne finally creating olfactory fatigue in Jane's head. *I thought Caitlyn went overboard with the perfume...* "With a special lady, no less. Know anything about that?"

"Yes. My sister. And my ex-girlfriend. Together at last."

Damon's chuckles might as well have been full-blown laughter for how loud they were in the exclusive downtown lounge. "That's as good as Lucas taking away my best assistant. They've been in Denmark for *years*, and I'm still sore about it."

"Remember, Damon, this is about *me*, not you. We've gone over your pregnant wife and adorable daughter."

"It's a boy, by the way." Damon's long arm reached toward Jane, and she was obliged to give him back his bourbon. *He's lucky he's handsome.* And her friend. That played more into things than anything else. "Four months from now, Damon Junior will come screaming into the world."

"God help us all," Jane said with a sigh. "While you're fulfilling your biological destiny and making *my* mother

proud, I'm having a lark of my own. Apparently, your country's immigration doesn't understand that I legally live here. I've got until the end of the year to figure out what's going on, which might mean doing you know what."

Confusion swept over Damon's tired face. "Should I ask what that means?"

"It *means* I might have to marry someone to stay here until I get my green card."

"I thought you already had a green card."

"No, I had a type of entrepreneurial visa that I'm supposed to renew every two years. The problem is with my current renewal. Both my lawyer and the agent we're working with think there's an issue because I've been married with a spousal visa before. You know, that's how I lived here last time with Caitlyn before we went back to Hong Kong to start a business. I don't know what to do."

"I'd offer to help, but I have a feeling you've already thrown money at the problem. Oh, and I'm already married, so I can't help you there."

"Stop. The more you bring *us* up, the more I feel my mother's giddy energy dancing down my spine." Jane shuddered. Just because Willow hadn't disowned her youngest and stopped bringing up eligible men for Jane to date, didn't mean her mother wouldn't become religious the moment Jane publicly fell in with a man. Let alone one like Damon. *See? More than one reason we kept that old affair a secret.* Jane's sanity depended on it.

“So, are you remarrying Caitlyn? Am I invited? I’ll be your best man.”

“Don’t tease me.”

“Does that mean Rebecca is the contender this time?”

At least he cut straight to the point. “Possibly. We’ve already heavily discussed it. The more it looks like I’m flubbed, the more it looks like I’m tying the knot with Becca. For a visa’s sake, of course. Until I speed along the green card process.” She still kicked herself for not doing it sooner. *It was on the docket before the pandemic hit, and I was merely glad that my first visa renewal eventually hit...* There had been much more to fret over in those days. Like the safety of her family – and the health of her business.

“Doesn’t sound like you’re gung-ho about it.”

“Of course I’m not. The whole point of my arrangement is that we’re all ‘equal.’ Cait and I spent months convincing Becca that she wasn’t competing with our former marriage. Now I might be introducing *new* matrimony into the situation? I can’t believe it’s come to this. Not all of us are cut out for this display of monogamy, you know. Consider yourself lucky, Damon.”

“I do every day.”

“You weren’t supposed to actually say it!”

“What do you want me to say, then? That I know a guy who knows a guy and can get you a green card tomorrow? Not even I’m that good.”

“It’s... bollocks. That’s what it bloody is. You don’t understand.” Jane flopped against the arm of her chair, head hanging in the dark crevasse between the lush fabric and Damon’s hand hanging only a few inches away. “All getting married does is ensure I can *stay* living here. I’ll have to wait for a work permit or whatever it’s called before I’m allowed to legally work at my own business again. I have to sign everything over to Caitlyn and Rebecca in the meantime and ‘volunteer’ from the sidelines. Or if I wanted to wait for this to get sorted out without getting married, I have to go back to Hong Kong indefinitely! Do you know what that would do to my relationships? I can’t do long-distance. Not for that long. Nor can I take one of them with me and leave the other behind to man the business. It’s not fair to any of them.” She lifted her head again. “It’s not fair to *me*.”

Damon was silent, although his gaze continued to pound straight into Jane’s scalp.

“It really is the opposite of fair,” Jane continued. “I did everything right, you know! I followed everything to the letter and refused to cut corners. I pay millions in taxes every year, although I could probably save quite a bit by doing things differently. But I’m afraid to do that because the last thing I need is for the IRS to think I’m not paying my fair share to be in this country. Donations? I donate more to American causes than I do to any back in Hong Kong and let me tell you, there are some I care about back there. Except I want to look good with my donations. I have to keep the government thinking I *loove* America and being American. Like if I went back to

the UK and started screaming about my bloody obsession with crisps, biscuits, and blood pudding. All while personally funding the NHS.” She sat up. “Do you know why I speak English like this? I didn’t always. Not until I went to the UK and met the likes of you. Because I used to sound a lot more like my sister if you can believe it!” Jane sure couldn’t. The few recordings of her speaking English in the early 2000s made her, shall she say... *cringe*? Because she sounded like a valley girl on steroids.

“I always assumed it was your love of crisps, biscuits, and blood pudding that made it sound like you walked out of the posh factory.”

“I can’t even turn it off now. Because you’re right. I sound like an alternate contender for Princess of Wales. Proper, perfect posh. Bloody hell, Diana had nothing on me!”

“I don’t know if she would ever be caught saying ‘bloody hell’ in public.”

Jane rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean. I have to sound more Western than everyone else in the room, so people forget I’m ‘Chinese.’ When you’re a foreigner, you’re begging to fit in as much as possible.”

“I don’t envy the experience.”

“You don’t even know what it’s like.”

“No, I don’t.”

Jane helped herself to the rest of the bourbon. “I did everything right,” she reiterated.

“Except you didn’t, apparently.”

“You’re really not helping my predicament right now.”

“What do you want, Jane? I can offer you advice, or I can absorb your much-deserved rant. Doing both will result in my own demise, so choose wisely.”

Both of Jane’s hands ended up on her face. As middle fingers pushed into her eyelids and breath slowly filled her lungs, she said, “I’m afraid I’ll make the wrong decision. Because none of them are ideal.”

Finally, the silence lasted long enough for Jane to hear the piano music playing over the speakers and the conversations of other patrons in the corner. The lounge catered to the likes of Damon and Jane – CEOs of billion-dollar businesses who liked top-shelf liquor and a low-key place for a respite from the offices and boardrooms that often consumed their lives. While Jane wasn’t worried about someone seeing them together, even platonically, she was careful to not speak too loudly. Let alone in English, but Damon didn’t know Cantonese. Or Mandarin, for that matter. *I kept trying to teach him. Like a brick wall.*

“What are you most afraid of happening?” Damon eventually asked her. “Besides the worst-case scenario of you being deported? Which I don’t think is likely to happen, by the way. As you said, you generate a lot of revenue and pump donations into the city’s ass. Even when you can’t make a fundraiser, you cut a healthy check.”



Jane had dreaded that question, although she knew it was coming. *What am I afraid of most?* Implosion. Explosion. *Repulsion*. The outside forces, such as her natal family and the American government, threatened her way of life as much as getting married might threaten the domestic family unit she had built with Caitlyn and Rebecca. Yet how could she say that in as many words to a man who had never lived her life?

“Suppose I’m afraid of being the cause behind everyone’s unhappiness.”

“That’s a heavy thing to have hanging over you.” Damon reached for her hand. Jane was too worn out to bat him away. Besides, the comforting touch of a friend was exactly why she had invited him out, right? “What about your happiness, though? How can you look out for other people’s happiness when you are suffering?”

His fingers were so much bigger than hers that it felt like holding the hand of a giant. *A giant sandalwood pillow*. She tried not to laugh. Besides, there wasn’t much to laugh about. “You’ve really changed since getting married, you know that?”

“My priorities have changed. That’s all.” After squeezing her between the knuckles, Damon pulled away. “You and I have never been that different. We want to protect our families, and we’ll do what it takes. I’d take a bullet for my wife and children. I think you would, too.”

She didn’t know where he was going with this.

“Whatever it takes, Jane. Love them as they love you. Think of what they are willing to do for you and give back in turn. But if that means giving up happiness, then *nobody* wins.”

“I don’t want to make life more complicated for Rebecca.” Jane leaned forward, fingers in her short hair. “I don’t want to lose Caitlyn again because she can’t handle it.”

“Then I suppose you’ll have to reassure them both. It’s constant work, but worth it, right?”

She softly snorted. “Whatever it takes, huh?”

“There’s always a way, Jane. It might not be easy or comfortable, but you’ll figure it out. In the meantime... I’ll see if there’s anyone I know who I can call.”

“So you *do* know someone?”

“No promises. You’ve already got the best lawyers in town.”

“Which means I need to figure out exactly what to do because there isn’t much time to keep my family afloat.”

She kept coming back to the impervious look on Caitlyn’s visage when the plot to marry Rebecca was unveiled. *She cares. A lot.* There was a reason Jane hesitated to jump right into marriage again. What had she said after the first divorce? What had she told Damon when he first took her out for commiseration drinks? “*Never again. I’m never doing that again.*” Marriage could always end in divorce. Was Jane willing to take that chance?

Was she willing to alienate the first woman she ever loved?

A fire lit inside Jane. The more she thought of Caitlyn silently suffering for the sake of their family's tested happiness, the more Jane knew what she had to do – for Caitlyn's happiness, if not her own as well.



Jane marched into the office, where more than a few of her employees sat at their desks going over the notes and schedules of the day. That late in the afternoon, though, some of them were off running errands or rushing through the last of their work so they could get home earlier. That was assuming they were actually there – more and more, the assistants vied to work from home up to three days a week.

*They could be hosting a fight club in the middle of the lobby, and I wouldn't care right now.* Jane was on a mission. Namely, she stopped by the front desk and asked if Caitlyn was in.

“She should be in her office, Ms. Wong.”

Jane didn't thank her. She flew past the quiet typing, polite phone calls, and prying eyes of Constance-Grace to arrive at Caitlyn's door in record time.

“...Take your time, please.” Caitlyn turned around in her chair, phone held up to her ear. The moment she realized Jane had graced her with her presence, she held up a finger and continued talking. Meanwhile, Jane locked the door. “No, Joel, it's fine. Just, when you get here, inform the receptionist and she'll grab me. Or Ms. Wong, who literally just walked

through the door.” She hung up. “You look like you need a drink.”

Jane didn't reply. She closed the blinds on the big windows behind Caitlyn's desk and attempted to bring herself back down to reality. *Not that I know what reality is right now.*

Reality was this room. Reality was the only woman to ever look at her as if she were simultaneously the sweetest thing in the world – and the planet's biggest menace.

*God bless her.*

“What's up?”

Jane tapped her fingers against Caitlyn's desk, but the more she tried to look at her partner, the more Jane was overcome with the worries of a woman who didn't know the difference between doing the right thing and screwing everything up. “You know I love you, right, Cait? I'll always love you.”

The look on Caitlyn's face transformed: where there had been mild amusement or worry, there was now a sentimentality that slammed Jane in the chest harder than ever before. “What's gotten into you?”

Her chair turned. Not because Caitlyn offered herself to Jane, but because Jane turned it herself. She loomed over Caitlyn, remembering the first time they kissed.

It had been like this. Instead of a high-rise office that Caitlyn ruled over, it was an upscale Chicago hotel room. *Her friend was already so put out...* Yet Jane hadn't held herself back from the girl that caught her eye before all others.

*What's gotten into me?* Thoughts. Reasons. Fantasies. Jane was not the best at sorting between the three. Weren't they the same? She thought. She reasoned. She fantasized.

She wanted and yearned.

"Lin..." Only Caitlyn could say Jane's birth name like that without invoking ill feelings. *Not even my family calls me Lin.* She was Jane to the rest of the world. Caitlyn was the only one who saw the real girl behind the grown and polished woman. Jane could be whoever she desired with her beloveds. That was true if they were Rebecca or even those halcyon days with Olivia. Caitlyn, though?

*I'm Lin.*

Their kiss wrecked the silence simmering between them. Caitlyn slammed against the back of her chair, clinging to Jane's shoulders as they came down toward hers. Jane shrugged out of her jacket and tossed it onto Caitlyn's desk. When she landed in her partner's lap, the two of them squealed when the chair suddenly rolled backward.

It didn't deter Jane. As soon as the adrenaline faded, she took Caitlyn by the hand and drew her toward the couch along the wall. "I love you," she reiterated. "I need you."

"Now?" Caitlyn mouthed. Nevertheless, she plopped onto the couch and opened her arms to the woman pushing her down and crawling on top of her.

"Now."

“I’ve got a meeting in fifteen minutes.” Caitlyn accepted another kiss and didn’t protest when Jane slid between her legs. “That’s what that phone call was about. They’re running a few minutes behind.” Another kiss silenced her, but Jane’s grunt of frustration was easily mistranslated as arousal. *They’re the same thing right now.* Kisses. Candy. Seduction. Fear. Loathing. Hell. “You’re nuts.”

Jane took that as a compliment. “As I said, I need you. I’ve always needed you.” Jane settled as close to Caitlyn’s pelvis as she could manage with such a tight skirt around her partner’s thighs. *Nothing my hands can’t fix.* Caitlyn would annihilate her if Jane tore this dress, but she knew how to get what she wanted without leaving a trace of her presence behind. “Give me ten minutes to prove it.”

“*Lin...*” Caitlyn emitted the smallest protest when her partner went for the throat. “Hickies!”

Jane didn’t care. She wanted to live here in this moment. She wanted to give Caitlyn everything she deserved.

She would do anything for this woman, after all. *I’d go back to Hong Kong for a few months if it saved us. I’d marry Rebecca to keep us all together.* Jane unzipped her trousers and thrust against her ex-wife as if they had never divorced. *I’ll do something HR hates right here in her office to prove she’s as grand as gold.*

Jane meant every word. Which was why she wasn’t surprised to end up against the back of the couch, Caitlyn slowly but assuredly making her way to the top of their

embrace. Jane often joked that she couldn't bottom to save her life, but right now? Anything to save the thing she treasured more than a successful business and a fast car.

“Tear me apart, you angel.”

If Jane had learned anything from her first marriage, it was that one had to be willing to go places and ascend heights that they never thought they'd conquer. It was why she started an affair with Damon once the divorce was finalized and she and Caitlyn went their separate ways. *I had to push myself. This woman accused me of being complacent. I had to know what it was like on the other side.* When their paths crossed again, Jane had been ready. She knew what it was like. She knew what it took to be a part of Caitlyn's bombastic world.

Jane even loved it now. Sometimes. This time.

*If she's on top of me, it means she loves me. It means she wants me, too.* Jane reveled in the heft of Caitlyn's body and the sweet surrender of her perfume. *It means we're not going anywhere.*

Every kiss was another reassurance. While each passing minute brought them closer to separation, Jane was happier than ever.

Or so her foolish brain told her as she became so caught up in the moment that she forgot everything that brought her to this office and to this couch.

“Is this what you want?” Caitlyn's hand was already down Jane's trousers, her fingers playing a dangerous, frisky game

that could end with Jane wailing in pleasure for the whole office to hear. “Is this what you came here for, Lin?”

Her scalp scraped against the arm of the couch; her chest heaved right into Caitlyn’s waiting face. “I want whatever you want, Cait.”

She meant it, too. They only had ten minutes. Whatever Caitlyn wanted – and more.



Caitlyn’s meeting ran over – she may or may not have been a few minutes late herself – and Rebecca was out grabbing groceries for that night’s dinner. After finishing up her own affairs for the week, Jane left the office four minutes early, saying goodnight to everyone but Caitlyn, who was best left alone if everyone wanted her home by dinner.

Although they had carpooled to the office that day, Rebecca had taken the Porsche Cayenne to the shopping center with the promise to whip back around to grab Jane and Caitlyn. Jane didn’t want to wait. She’d rather hail a cab and walk the final two blocks to the riverfront condo.

She walked into the lobby of her high-rise, where the concierge caught her attention.

“Yes?” Jane asked from the middle of the otherwise empty room.

“Yes, Ms. Wong, you have a visitor waiting for you upstairs.”



Something already smelled fishy. “I didn’t think anyone was home. Who let them in?”

The concierge’s face paled. “Ms. Adams had your sister’s name cleared for visits.”

*Damnit, Caitlyn.* She must have forgotten to specify that Lilian was *not* supposed to get past the lobby without buzzing in. Yet what was Jane to do? Too late now! “Did she get inside my flat? Because she definitely does not have a key.”

“She and the other guest preferred to wait in the small lobby on your floor.”

“The *other* guest?” Had Olivia not left, after all? Surely, by now, Jane would have heard! “We’ll talk about this later.” She headed straight for the elevator. *God help me. Not how I wanted to spend my evening.* Her plans included changing clothes and putting the TV on something innocuous while waiting for her girls to get home. Lilian completely changed the whole vibe!

“Sweet, sweet sister.” Jane stepped off the elevator with a sigh in her chest and lead in her feet. “We really must speak of boundaries...”

Her voice trailed off when she turned around and beheld the two women sitting in the chairs by the corner windows. While the elevator clicked shut and the light hum of the hallway air conditioner taunted Jane’s senses, she almost dropped her briefcase on the gray carpet.

“Surprise, Jane!”

Yet no matter how much Lilian dressed it up, she couldn't hide what she had done. No matter how much she smiled and clapped her dainty hands, as if it were Jane's birthday and the greatest gift to ever land on this side of the Pacific had recently arrived.

"Hello," said the other woman, who was older, gruffer, yet no less sophisticated than her daughters.

Jane regathered her bearings. She would soon lose them again. "M... Mother."

Willow Wong rose from her chair and looked her youngest right in the eyes. "Your shirt is wrinkled."

It had already begun.

PART 3

MENAGE A MARIAGE





## CHAPTER 19

## *Rebecca*

Nothing was more upside-down than the ensuing two months. Because as soon as Willow walked into their lives, Becca received the impervious signal: things were not currently, had not been, and would not be okay.

*What is she doing here?* She still asked that at Thanksgiving, when plans to travel to Iowa were canceled so the family unit could “enjoy” a traditional American Thanksgiving with Jane’s mother and sister. By then, Willow had been in New England for several weeks, sharing a luxury apartment with Lilian and keeping her on a short leash. Becca didn’t ask what had happened. Her sole job was to help transition the new hire at Adams & Wong into secretarial life – all while keeping her two girlfriends from losing their damned minds.

She might have been planning a low-key wedding, too, not that it got past Willow, who had more than a few opinions about it.

“It’s absolutely beneath you to marry another American for the sole purpose of staying in this country.” Willow had said that right in front of Becca, who served her the choicest sweet potato for Thanksgiving dinner. The woman had already turned down turkey meat, declaring it no substitute for duck. *I spent all day helping Caitlyn cook this food.* Willow did what she did every time she came over for dinner: she passive-aggressively derided anything Becca handed her as if the mother-in-law bullshit had already begun. “If the Americans are too good for Wong women, then come back to Hong Kong and help your family.”

“Mother, I *am* helping my family.” Jane had aged ten years over the past two months. Becca hated to see it, and Caitlyn was always the first to comment on it. “*This* is my family.” Jane gestured to everyone at the table, but Becca knew she meant the two white women who kept out of the conversation. “It’s but a blip in our lives. I don’t have to tell you that it’s my intention to keep Becca around for as long as she’ll have Cait and me. So, that’s that. I’ve already changed my visa status. Believe it or not, it was easier than sorting out the one I already had.”

Becca kept her mouth shut, but she caught the excitement in Lilian’s eyes and the prim, pompous pull of Willow’s lips. “I should have known,” she said. “You don’t bring a girl home without intending to marry her.”

“Now, that’s not true. I’ve brought plenty of ‘girls’ home without marrying them. It’s not my fault you only remember the truly incredible ones like Caitlyn and Rebecca.” Jane



laughed into her ice water. “We lived with Olivia for years, and I didn’t marry her.”

Lilian’s mirth instantly drained from her face. The table was so quiet that Becca retreated to the kitchen, where she claimed she had left her drink of choice – in the fridge, but she had sworn she wanted it.

She didn’t know when Willow found out about Lilian and Olivia, but Becca *did* know that’s why she was in America, babysitting the bad wife and worse mother. *Or is she off the hook for being here instead of in Hong Kong?* Plans to bring the oldest daughter Cecelia to New England for her half-term break had fallen through when Willow arrived instead. *Every time we try to do something with Lilian without her mother along for the ride... you’d think we suggested taking her to get drunk in New York City.* Lilian couldn’t stay much longer, though. Her own tourist visa was about to run out, to the point she wouldn’t be able to stay for Jane and Becca’s wedding. The thought of Willow being the only one besides Caitlyn there...

There were worse ways to get married, Becca supposed.

“Are you really all right with this?” Willow asked Caitlyn, who did the honors of cutting into the turkey and serving up thin slices of white meat onto everyone’s platter – except Willow’s, of course. “Seriously. If I were your mother, Caitlyn, I’d be suggesting you relieve yourself of this mess immediately.”

“My mother doesn’t know about it,” Caitlyn promptly said. “Even if she did, it wouldn’t be any of her business. This is a legal affair between Jane and Rebecca.”

“You must be so excited, Rebecca.” Lilian held out her glass for another pour of wine. “You’ve never been married before, right? Oh! Let me go dress shopping with you! I’ve been walking by this bridal boutique every day since moving in with Mom. Makes me think of my own wedding. I had the *best* dress of the year.”

“Perhaps if you wore it for your husband again, he’d remember you exist,” Willow dourly said.

Everyone ignored her. “You’re right.” Rebecca sat back down in her seat. “I’ve never been married before, but it’s important to mention that I’m doing this for Jane. It changes nothing between the three of us.”

“Oh, you really are getting a treat then for your first marriage. Even without the family money to back her up, our Jane is quite the catch. What you see in her besides money is beyond me, though.” Willow’s gaze was completely leveled on her youngest child while she spoke. Jane, meanwhile, pretended she didn’t notice. “She barely looks like a woman.”

“All right.” Jane crossed her utensils on her plate and turned her tenor toward her mother. “New rule, Mum. You can’t insult me, either. I know you’re dying to insult poor Becca because that’s the only power you have as her future mother-in-law, but let’s not dig at me, too. This is my house, and I reserve the right to not be insulted by my own mother in it.”

“I think Jane is a lovely-looking woman,” Lilian whispered. “Your skin is the smoothest in the family.”

“Your house?” Willow continued. “Since when can a mother not tell her daughter what she is? It’s my job. I’d say that besides ensuring your education and contracting you the best marriages, it’s my *most important* job. For the love of God, Jane, think about what you’re doing. How do I explain your run for a ‘visa’ to your father? To your older brother?”

“Bart’s got his own problems, last I heard. Tell Dad and your friends that you’re so happy for your daughter because it deflects from your son’s constant cheating.”

“Your brother’s infidelities don’t matter at this table.”

“Neither does the way I look, Mum. Besides...” Jane stabbed a piece of turkey and slammed it into the cranberry sauce and gravy on her plate. “This is a temporary marriage until I get my permanent residency. Then Becca and I shall divorce after an appropriate amount of time passes. Back to square one, as they say.”

Becca looked up from her turkey cutting. “Huh? You never mentioned a plan to divorce.”

Caitlyn sucked in her breath; Lilian looked between everyone at the table as if this were better than reality TV. Becca, meanwhile, maintained her gaze on Jane’s unwavering visage. Waiting for her to say something gave Willow too much time to cut in instead.

“You see, Jane? She wants money.”

“Becca will be duly compensated, as written out in our iron-clad prenup. By the way, Mum, should the alphabet soup that makes up immigration come knocking on your temporary door, do me a favor and tell them how much Becca and I are in love. We can’t have this looking like the ‘visa grab’ it is.”

“I mean, I do love you, Jane.” Still, Becca’s fork clattered against her plate. “I wouldn’t be doing this, otherwise.”

“Aw!” Lilian exclaimed

Caitlyn got up from her seat. “Willow,” she sweetly said to the middle-aged woman on the verge of cracking, “you’ve hardly touched your sweet potato. Why don’t I get you some better garnish?”

“I am surrounded by degenerate women,” she muttered.

“You raised two of us,” Jane pointed out. “Why don’t you...”

Becca slid her hand over Jane’s knee to bring down the energy. It worked. It also did not go unnoticed by everyone else at the table.

“Looks like it will work to me.” Caitlyn presented Willow with margarine and a selection of herbs. “She already knows all the tricks for reigning in our dear old Jane.”

Becca released her girlfriend’s knee. Like Jane, she barely had an appetite to finish her dinner.



One of the more obnoxious things about Jane's visa change was the extra scrutiny everyone was now under. Kevin Downey, the lawyer who had led them into this mess, insisted that he thought Jane would be fine, but to be on the safe side, Jane and Becca had to look like the consummate couple in love. That meant Becca temporarily moving out of her room and in with Jane. Most of her clothes were still in her old room, but she now went to bed with Jane every single night as if they were away from home for an extended period. *Whenever the three of us travel, we get a two-bedroom suite. Or two separate rooms.* Jane and Caitlyn liked having their own spaces. Everyone silently assumed Becca would pick which room she liked best and crash with that person for a couple of nights. Usually, if the trip ran longer, she swapped rooms toward the end. It wasn't something she ever thought about. Not even when Jane and Caitlyn joked about it.

Tonight, though, there was something important to talk about as she and Jane attempted to fall asleep next to one another.

"Did you mean what you told your mother?" Becca asked the woman crawling into bed beside her. Jane reached over and turned off the light. "That we'll get divorced after your permanent residency goes through?"

"Becca, darling, that could take years. Kevin thinks it will be at least two. People with less money and fewer connections sometimes wait five or even ten years."

“It will also make it harder for you to get naturalized if we do that.”

“Sweetheart, whatever gave you the idea I want to be a citizen? Please. Nobody’s taking my Hong Kong passport. I use it too much.”

“Right. Dual nationality is not a thing there. If it was, though... would you want to become an American citizen?”

Jane fluffed her pillow beneath her head. “Why are we having this conversation? I simply told my mother whatever it took to get her off my arse. You and I are getting married. That’s all there is to it.” One of Jane’s arms ended up behind her scalp. Her fingers gently played with the curls springing from Becca’s head. “I love you. None of this changes that.”

“I know you do. I know it doesn’t.”

After another minute of awkward silence, Jane rolled onto her side and took Becca’s hand. “A lot has happened these past few weeks. I don’t know about you, but I could use a vacation.”

“We’re going to California soon enough.”

“I don’t consider making an appearance at someone else’s posh wedding a good vacation. We should talk honeymoons, Becca.” Such a soft, flirtatious voice brought a small smile back to Becca’s face. “Caitlyn had a few nice ideas, but since it’s your first and hopefully only wedding, I think you should get to choose. Of course, we should stay in the States for

propriety's sake. Oh, and I'm not going to Alaska. Or Iowa. I've had quite enough of Iowa, thank you."

Becca giggled. "How about the three of us spend our honeymoon in Hawaii?"

"Becca... we're planning on getting married at the end of the year. Do you know how expensive Hawaii is in January?"

"No idea. Sounds pricey."

"Very. So we should definitely go." Jane's finger brushed against Becca's cheek. "Anything for you, love."

Although those were very nice words – and a very nice offer to go to Hawaii after the nuptials – something still haunted the depths of Becca's mind. "Are you sure it's me you want to marry, Jane?" Her eyes had adjusted to the darkness of her girlfriend's bedroom. The chance to catch her hand in the air and entwine their fingers together could not be missed. "I can't help but think it should be Caitlyn."

"Darling." Jane pushed her arm beneath Becca's body and pulled her into half an embrace. The slight pressure of her small figure was all Becca needed to close her eyes and nestle her nose against Jane's chest. "The three of us have talked endlessly about this. Caitlyn is through with that. She's already had one tough run with me. We make... we make a terrible married couple."

"I keep coming back to that metaphor Caitlyn likes. You know, the one about the isosceles triangle."

"She really does like her silly metaphors."

“I’ve always thought of this arrangement as you two being the real equals. I don’t know what that really says about me. Since we strode forward in this relationship, I’ve never felt greater or smaller than you guys, but I’ve never thought for one second that I’m on... you know. Your level. It’s not a bad thing. It simply is.”

“Are you thinking that us getting married throws off the balance between Caitlyn and me?”

“I guess so.”

Jane lightly kissed Becca’s forehead. “Cait and I have had our own pillow talk about it. Without you there, no less. I don’t doubt that everything will be fine. You’ll see. You’ll still be stealing nights like these with her, and she’ll still be crawling beneath my covers to get a taste of ol’ Lin Hua. Marriage is a piece of paper. An important one, apparently.”

“Then why not remarry her? You know, if it’s only a piece of paper?”

Jane sighed. “Because Caitlyn got burned last time.”

“You don’t think she will this time?”

“If you don’t want to do this, Becca, tell me.”

Becca wrapped her arms around Jane and brought her down. As their limbs wrapped together and they shared a single kiss, Becca said, “Why wouldn’t I marry someone I love?”

“You’re too sweet for me. Now, are we doing this? Your leg has me tingling.”



“It *is* there, isn’t it?”

“I could put mine against yours, too”

“Why don’t you do that, and we see where this goes?”

Another kiss soon landed on Becca’s lips.



Lilian was only let out of her mother’s sight if someone from the household took her out. In today’s case, it was one of her favorite activities in the world – wedding dress shopping.

“Nothing ostentatious.” Becca entered the boutique without paying attention to any of the dresses on the mannequins. “You’ve seen me dress before. I like slick lines and few flourishes.”

Naturally, Lilian went straight to a poufy princess dress drenched in rhinestones.” *Looks like Caitlyn’s wedding dress.* Nope. Absolutely not.

“We’ve lost her.” Nadia was the last to enter the boutique. She shoved her car keys into her purse before readjusting the strap across her chest. “She’s gone, captain.”

“For the best. You know my tastes better than she does.”

The saleswoman assigned to Becca’s account was more than happy to introduce herself and learn everyone’s names. Upon hearing that Lilian was the future sister-in-law, the three of them were ushered to the back of the boutique, where they were handed flutes of Champagne and offered breath mints

instead of cookies. Becca got up on the dais, stripped down to her slip and tights, and had her measurements taken while the staff got to know what she wanted.

“It’s a low-key wedding at the end of the year. We’re talking justice of the peace.” Becca avoided her reflection, which currently showed off every freckle on her skin. The saleswoman handed her a light robe to wear before they perused the dresses in the gallery. “It’s a matter-of-fact thing, you know? Two witnesses before we jet off to Hawaii.”

“Hawaii!” Lilian almost dumped her Champagne on the white carpet. “That will be amazing in January! This weather is already killing me. Good thing I’m going back to Hong Kong in another couple of weeks.”

Nadia massaged the back of her neck, legs crossed away from Lilian. “So,” she began, “you want something no-frills and fairly utilitarian. But white. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be here.”

“It doesn’t have to be *white*. Off-white might not be bad. I’m really pale, anyway.”

“Your skin is like alabaster and pearls, Becca!” Lilian said.

The saleswoman smiled through the exchange. “Why don’t we come take a look? I’ve got a few ideas already.”

Up until that moment, Becca had been blissfully unaware of how many styles and forms of wedding dresses there were in the world. And the bigger, more extravagant they were, the more she desired to turn the other way. *I’m not a bombastic*

*person who needs to make a statement.* She thought that while eyeing a lacy strapless dress that had more volume than an '80s perm. *Especially for something that isn't meant to be anything more than a formality.* They weren't even hiring a professional photographer. The fanciest thing about Becca's first wedding was the dinner reservations at the fanciest French restaurant in town – and the honeymoon, she supposed. As soon as Caitlyn heard “Hawaii,” she went straight to work finding them the nicest honeymoon suite in Waikiki.

Once the saleswoman got the message, she suggested something out of character for someone Becca's age. *First time I've felt young since walking in here.* Becca was over thirty. Barely, but it was something she tried to not think about now.

Then she was led to the “mature brides” section and immediately understood what the saleswoman meant

“Oof.” Nadia touched something that looked like it walked off stage with Elvis. “Some of these might not fit your frame too badly.”

Becca already approached what could only be described as “wedding skirt suits.” Ten minutes ago, she had leaned toward a simple white slip dress. Now she saw the merit of something better suited for a winter wedding.

“It's not bad.” Nadia tilted her head before touching the sparse rhinestones on the wedding blazer that was more “mother of the bride” than “young, hot bride.” “If you pair it

with a slick pair of shoes and a nice cami, you get the point across without calling too much attention to yourself.”

“I can only imagine what Lilian will say.” Becca glanced over her shoulder. Already, Lilian was missing. “Where did she go?”

They found her back in the fitting area, phone glued to her head as she chattered away in sappy Cantonese. It took Becca five seconds to deduce that Lilian had picked this moment to sneak a call to Olivia. *I can only make out a few words.* “Wedding” was one of them because Jane had said it to her mother enough times by now. Yet Becca also swore she heard “*you’re my bride*” more than once. Or maybe that was the homonyms messing with her head again.

“What’s up?” Nadia asked.

“Nothing. I’m gonna go ahead and try this on.”

“Good luck. Can’t wait to see your legs in that.”

Becca disappeared behind a large curtain. She wished she could be half as giddy as Lilian, a woman who wasn’t getting married again anytime soon.

## CHAPTER 20

## Caitlyn

**E**arly December marked the final Ladies' Night of the year at The Dark Hour, and it was Caitlyn's idea that they all go. With Lilian, no less.

"We'll tell your mother we're taking her out to dinner with some friends. You know, American networking." That was Caitlyn's cover story when Jane was too agog to answer.

When she did speak, it was to say, "I hope you know that I will be holed up in the Diamond VIP area when she's gallivanting around a *sex club*, Cait. My sister. And me. In the same kinky club? I think not."

Caitlyn had expected as much, but she also knew that Lilian clawed at the walls and sorely missed the kind of excitement a well-to-do housewife expected. If Willow thought everyone was at the country club hobnobbing and sampling fine wine? All the better, because Willow was 100% *not* invited.

"Olivia told me all about this place when she investigated it." Lilian wore her heaviest coat over her skimpy black dress.

Caitlyn had been careful to cover up as well when picking up Lilian from her mother's temporary American apartment, although that wasn't out of the ordinary for her. Rebecca was the one sacrificing her usual fun for a night on the town with the imminent sister-in-law. Gone were the corset, fishnets, or crop tops with thongs. Rebecca was almost dressed well enough to head back into the office, thanks to the red skirt and white silk tank top combo she wore beneath her own coat. *Nobody's going to recognize us here.* That was both a boon and a detriment.

"What did she tell you?" Caitlyn was briefly distracted by Jane texting her from the Diamond VIP area. "*I am not here,*" she said. "*You know, in case my sister asks.*" That was the last Caitlyn indulged in her phone before someone employed by The Dark Hour was scandalized. "Oh, no phones allowed. Hope someone told you that."

"Of course!" Lilian shed her winter coat and piled it on the counter. As the coat check woman grabbed it and handed Lilian her ticket, Caitlyn had to admit that *someone* looked eye-catching in her body-hugging dress. Nobody who knew Lilian assumed she was here to flirt and hook up with someone – they knew she simply dressed like that when she was out on the town. *Still, we took no chances with Willow around.* The last thing anyone needed was for Mrs. Wong to know that *both* of her daughters cavorted in such places. "Caitlyn, I promise you that I know the rules. I've treated Olivia to a couple of trips to Taipei while we've been together. Ooh, that place *is fun.*"

Rebecca was completely out of the loop as the three of them entered the club without a hostess to lead the way. Lilian was only one step behind them out of respect for their seniority. Otherwise, Caitlyn didn't doubt that Lilian would beeline for the most happening room during Ladies' Night.

"I think she means the club in Taipei," Caitlyn said to Rebecca, who was already prepared to redeem their free drink tokens. "The one owned by Genevieve Liu."

"Oh. *Oh.*" Rebecca glanced at Lilian. "Is she like us? I mean... you know what I mean."

Lilian was already making nice with the bartender, a woman with flawless skin and hair – and Adam's apple that Lilian kept staring at as if she had never seen such a thing before. *Oh, boy.* At least Lilian's heart tended to be in the right place... but this still meant Caitlyn was on babysitting duty. "I have no idea," she said. "You're talking to someone who thought Lilian was straight and that Olivia was done with women. I don't know what anything means anymore."

"Perhaps introducing her to some of our friends will discover things for us."

"Whatever the answer, don't tell Jane. It's the last thing she would want to know."

"Obviously." Rebecca chuckled. "It's weird enough for Jane that Lilian is dating one of her sister's exes."

"Has she told you that?"



Rebecca shrugged. “You can tell it’s weirded her out. She’s good at hiding it, though.”

“She certainly is.” Caitlyn had her own suspicions, but it had been a while since she and Jane had a meeting of the minds – and feelings. “All right. Promise me that one of us will always be by Lilian’s side tonight. We won’t hide who she is, but regardless of her predilections, she is *not* integrated into this lifestyle. Not to mention the cultural barrier... what flies in the Taipei and Hong Kong nightclubs doesn’t necessarily translate to New England.”

“Already ahead of you.” Rebecca approached Lilian at the bar. Although Caitlyn couldn’t hear what they said, she garnered from facial expressions and body language that Rebecca had suggested a drink to the woman who was still all starry eyes. The bartender returned with three cocktails, including one for Caitlyn. Rebecca always knew exactly what her girlfriends wanted, and tonight was no exception.

*At least I have her to rely on.* That wasn’t a dig at Jane, although having her help would be amazing. *If my sister was in town and wearing a skimpy dress in The Dark Hour, you wouldn’t find me anywhere near her, either.* Caitlyn couldn’t fathom it, though. Her sister was the quintessential Midwestern housewife, much like their mother.

“I think some people we know are over this way.” Rebecca already led the way down the main hallway linking the front bar to the more intimate spaces in the back. She exchanged a look with Caitlyn as they bypassed the entrance to the

performance room. They had both agreed that they were *not* partaking in talent that night. Not with family in tow. “Remember Nadia? She knows we’re coming tonight. She probably brought her wife. You’ll *love* her.”

Caitlyn heaved a sigh of relief when they entered the VIP room and discovered it busier than ever. For every stranger’s face, there was a familiar one that lit up to see her. It took an extra five minutes to get to an empty loveseat because Caitlyn had to chap her lips with air kisses along the way.

“Don’t tell me that’s Jane.” Adrienne Thomas and her long-term girlfriend Amber must have been there for a while already because Adrienne was *more* than tipsy. She was barely able to stand up! “I know I’m drunk, but I can’t imagine Jane growing out her hair that quickly...”

Adrienne wasn’t the only one doing a double-take in Lilian’s direction.

“Is this who I think it is?” Caitlyn didn’t have the chance to see Nadia before her towering wife came into view. Eva Warren knew how to part a crowd with her presence, and tonight was no exception as she approached Lilian and extended a hand of greeting. “You must be the lovely, lustrous Lilian that my Nadia has told me so much about. My, you’re like a feminine rose blossom, aren’t you? My apologies. I’m Evangeline Warren. Call me Eva.”

Lilian hesitated before taking Eva’s hand. Two seconds later, she melted into a puddle of laughter and girlish giggles.

“I have this effect on women, I know,” Eva murmured to everyone else around her. “How are you liking America, Lilian? Come, join us in our corner. You can have my seat. I need to stretch these long legs of mine, anyway. My doctor says I have to keep my heart pumping.” Nadia rolled her eyes. “He said that you’re at risk for heart trouble *because* you’re so tall. Remember? Your extremities are father away from your heart, so it has to pump ha—”

Eva cut her off. “Nobody wants to hear about my doctor visits, Nads!” Her sing-song voice made Lilian giggle again. “What did you all get to drink? I’m thinking of getting a Long Island iced tea. Have you had the pleasure, Lilian?”

Nadia sat with Caitlyn and Rebecca as Lilian and Eva talked – or squealed, in Lilian’s case. “What did you tell them, Becks?” Caitlyn asked with a chortle. “Lilian might explode.”

“She really can’t help herself.” Nadia looked on in reverent awe as her own wife leaned in toward Lilian and continued to make her shatter into fits of flirtatious giggles. “Like, I don’t think she does it on purpose. You tell her to distract a woman, and this is what happens.”

“You’re gonna end up in a situation like mine sooner rather than later,” Rebecca said. “Eva’s gonna bring home another hottie and you’ll have to deal with it. Like those old Bollywood stars.”

“Since when do you watch Bollywood?” Caitlyn asked.

“I like celeb gossip, and there’s plenty out of India. And Japan. And Brazil...”

“Regardless, no way *that’s* happening,” Nadia said. “I’ve got the prenup to prove it.”

Rebecca laughed, and eventually, Nadia grinned. Caitlyn didn’t know what any of that meant, but she was too busy watching Lilian and forgetting how to relax.

“I’m going to check on Jane.” Caitlyn touched Rebecca’s leg when she said that. “If Lilian asks, I had to go say hello to someone I haven’t seen in forever. You okay with her?”

“As long as Eva beguiles her, I think we’ll be perfectly fine.”

“Thanks so much.” Caitlyn kissed her girlfriend on the cheek. “I’ll be back in a bit. She’s supposedly upstairs.”

First, Caitlyn had to survive the gauntlet through the VIP room once again. There were more people she missed the first time around. Then, some were half-drunk enough already that they forgot to say hello to her earlier. Caitlyn had barely touched her own drink but already smelled like two cocktails and a beer by the time she reached the entrance to the Diamond VIP and flashed her credentials to the bouncer on duty.

“...She brings my bloody Mother! Right there! Sitting by my front door and acting like the Queen of Bloody Sheba!” Jane had collected two empty glasses before Caitlyn arrived. She also collected a captive audience in the form of Damon Monroe and his wife, Alice. The two of them sat on a separate couch from Jane, who had slammed her jacket on the cushions and sat with her arms dangling between her legs. *Great.*

*Another tipsy person in my life.* Caitlyn was used to it in the club, but she preferred if she was not responsible for the person in question.

“Hello.” Caitlyn stood at the fringe of the group, which was currently the only one in the Diamond area. “Sorry to crash the party, but I was told this was where I could find my partner.”

Damon gestured to Jane’s couch. “We’ve been hearing the fascinating tale of family flying all the way from Hong Kong for the sole purpose of meddling.”

“You have no idea, Damon.” Jane closed her legs when Caitlyn sat next to her. “My mother treats *meddling* as a personal sport. Why, if it were in the Olympics, she’d be the bloody Gold Medalist. Hng! How are things, Cait?”

That sudden question made Caitlyn chuckle. “Fine. I’ve fed your sister to the Warrens. She’s completely putty in Eva’s hands.”

“Great! Maybe she’ll leave Olivia for her! Then they can all live here for the rest of their lives. I bet *she’d* have no trouble getting her visa sorted.”

Caitlyn patted her partner on the arm. “How much have you had to drink?”

“Only two piss-poor pours. Honestly, Damon, a girl like me should be able to get something stronger in a place like this.”

For the first time since Caitlyn’s arrival, the quiet Mrs. Monroe spoke up. “Believe it or not, you *do* get some of the stronger drinks, Ms. Wong. Damon sees to it.”

“She’s right. I love you when you’re drunk. You’re a lot of fun.”

“Please, drink on my behalf.” With her hand enclosed in her husband’s, Alice leaned back on the couch, her other hand on her protruding stomach. “Not that I drink on the job, anyway, but I’m banned for the next four or so months.”

“Congratulations.” Caitlyn figured it was fine enough to acknowledge the pregnancy that was the talk of the town that fall. “Hope it’s all right that Jane told me about it before it hit the press. Via your PR manager, of course.”

“I know Damon tells Jane everything.”

“That’s right, I’m one of the boys, Cait. You should’ve seen me in Cambridge. Couldn’t go to the pubs with these boys without being somebody’s wingman. Did they ever help Jane out, though? No. Never!”

“We tried,” Damon said. “She was usually too drunk, though.”

“You did *not* try. You lot were too busy sniffing your own girls looking for a good time.”

Alice pushed herself up onto her feet. When her husband offered to help, she turned him down and said, “I think that’s my cue to check how things are going in the back of the house. I doubt I’ll come back up since those stairs are hell on my swollen feet.”

“You sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

“Damon, I’m pregnant, not broken.”

He offered her a pleasant smile. Nobody spoke until she was out of earshot. “Pregnant with pregnancy brain,” he muttered. “Did I tell you she accidentally ordered twice as many oranges as we normally do? So that’s why some of you are getting orange wedges on your drinks where they don’t belong. We can’t let them go to waste.”

Jane slammed her body against Caitlyn’s. “I love you.”

Caitlyn wrapped her arm around Jane. “Your sister is having a good time. Don’t worry.”

“Don’t remind me that she’s here. This is a sacred place.”

“I made sure she didn’t follow me. As I said, Eva Warren is making short work of her attention span.”

Jane pointed an accusing finger at Damon. “Your ex-fiancée.”

“That never happened,” he said with a shake of his head.

“You told me all about your date with her.”

“It was not a date. It was our parents being assholes.”

*I can’t imagine for two seconds Eva ever agreeing to that.* While Caitlyn considered herself a lesbian in the strictest sense of the definition, Eva possibly beat her out in the so-called competition. *You’d catch me kissing a man before Eva Warren ever does.* If nothing else, Caitlyn wouldn’t vomit afterward. Probably.

“Are you going to the wedding next weekend?” Caitlyn asked, making light conversation with the man who owned the

club – and some trifling piece of Jane’s soul. “Seems like everyone over a certain income bracket is invited.”

“We have been, but Alice isn’t allowed to fly until the baby is born and I’ve decided to renege my RSVP as well. I hear Jane and Rebecca are going, though.”

“Unlike you, I can’t get out of it.” Jane plopped her head into Caitlyn’s lap and kicked her feet up onto the couch. “I’m too Asian.”

“What she means is that her family knows the bride’s family. You know how it is.”

“Yes, I get the gist. I hope you and Rebecca have a fantastic time, especially since it’s before...” Damon stopped. “Apologies. I know you don’t want to talk about it.”

That caught Caitlyn’s attention more than anything else. “About what?”

“He means the wedding. Me, Becca, and you awkwardly watching with my mother.”

“I hear there’s a trip to Hawaii afterward.”

Caitlyn sighed. “Who else have you told, Jane?”

“Only Damon! It was only fair, Cait. He told me about the baby booties his mother is knitting. Quid pro quo is the name of the game.”

“At least we know who else to ask to witness should I be laid up that day.”



“Don’t be like that, Cait.” Jane rolled over, looking right up at Caitlyn’s face. “We need you there.”

At first, Caitlyn didn’t know how to take that. Was Jane being flippant? Was this her way of conveying a layer of love she usually kept closer to her heart? Sometimes, it was hard to tell with a woman who was raised to keep all emotions to herself.

“You need me in *general*,” Caitlyn teased.

“Yes, yes. I need you like the earth needs the rain – and the sun! Because your hair is blond.”

Caitlyn caught Damon’s mildly amused look from a few feet away. “She has such a delicate way with words.”

“Don’t I know it.”

If nothing else, at least Caitlyn found some peace in a busy, electric nightclub that catered to the sorry soul. She’d need the renewed energy for what came later.



Caitlyn shouldn’t have been so worried about Lilian. She was, at her heart, a social butterfly who easily made friends with women who were tangentially like her. *Jane’s the same way, so I really shouldn’t be surprised.*

Which was why the next two hours went by without incident. After Caitlyn rejoined Rebecca and the others in the main VIP room, she discovered Lilian already making fast friends with an eclectic mix of women, some of them Caitlyn

didn't recognize. She relieved Rebecca of babysitting duties, which allowed her to run off to the bathroom with Nadia to "powder their noses." *I know that partially codes for taking a break from the crowd.* Both women were introverts at heart. If they were to survive more partying and more socializing, they needed a break in the restroom's quiet sitting area.

Unfortunately, this made it easy for Caitlyn to lose track of Lilian as the hour wore on.

"Excuse me, have you seen Lilian?" She had pulled Eva away from one of her friends to ask that right as the panic settled in. "She was here a moment ago, I swear."

"She's not with Nadia?"

"No, they've been gone a while to recharge."

"Mm. No idea, then. I'm sorry."

Caitlyn sucked in a breath of strength and plunged deeper into the crowd, keeping her eyes open for that head of long black hair and the skimpy dress that left little to the imagination. *Don't tell me she's letting loose.* Or, worse, that she was hooking up with someone. Caitlyn had no patience for cheaters, and she'd have even less patience for someone cheating on Olivia of all people. *I don't care if she's Lin's sister. I'll clock her right here in the club.*

Yet her instincts told her that Lilian was in a different kind of trouble. Caitlyn didn't know what or where, but wasn't that what she investigated?

After asking the third server if she knew where Lilian was, she finally had a lead. “I think I saw her in the blue room,” a gal with pink pigtails said. “She ordered a hard drink and put it on her sister’s tab. Poor thing looked a wreck.”

“A wreck?”

“Er, don’t tell the bosses I put it like that. I’m new.”

Caitlyn wasn’t worried about that, though. She had to find Lilian and make sure she was all right – before Jane had to! *Nothing. Worse.*

Sure enough, in the far dark corner of one of the public sitting rooms was a familiar face buried in a handkerchief.

“Lilian?” Caitlyn stood before her, unsure of what she saw. *Is she... crying?* Those certainly were some puffy eyes looking up at her when Lilian took a break from wiping her nose. “Oh, gosh, are you okay?” Before anyone said anything else, Caitlyn sat with her, one arm wrapping around Lilian’s shaking shoulders.

“*Bù hǎo yì si...*” Lilian said in Mandarin, a phrase even Caitlyn recognized as a way of apologizing... or expressing embarrassment. “I don’t know what has come over me. I was having a good time.”

“Did someone say or do something? Are you uncomfortable?”

Lilian placed a reassuring hand on Caitlyn’s thigh. “You are so sweet,” she said with a sniff. “You came looking for me?”

“Of course I did. I noticed you were missing and had a bad feeling.”

“You truly are a sweetheart, Caitlyn. I understand why Olivia thinks of you so fondly.”

Before Caitlyn had the chance to acknowledge the slight pang in her chest, Lilian resumed her crying. Her handkerchief was completely soaked with tears. And snot, probably. “What’s wrong?” Caitlyn asked.

“Ah, it’s no use,” Lilian continued to sob. “I miss Livie so much!”

*Is that what this is about?* Caitlyn didn’t know what she expected, but Lilian having a meltdown because she so desperately missed her girlfriend back in Hong Kong was... not it. *Time to change tactics.*

“Aren’t you going home soon?” Surely, that was the highlight for Lilian, who probably missed Olivia more than she desired to see her own children. “She’s waiting for you, surely.”

“You don’t get it, Cait-*ah*.” Great. Now someone else in the family called her that. “I’ve missed her this whole time, but it didn’t really hit me until tonight. When I go back to Hong Kong, do you think I’ll get to be with her like these women are with their girlfriends? We’re a secret to everyone, including our friend groups! I don’t know what to do. Seeing all of these women enjoying each other’s company and kissing their girlfriends in front of everyone... it’s everything I want, but everything I can’t have if I don’t want to ruin our lives.”

*Crap.* How was Caitlyn supposed to reply to that?

“I know it’s not easy.” Caitlyn rubbed Lilian’s back before pulling away. “Your mother hasn’t been a help, either.”

“The only reason my mother isn’t here tonight is because we’re all good liars, but we won’t get away with it again. She’s already on to us. Before I left, she asked me if we were going somewhere to meet *your* friends... or *Jane’s* friends. I said it was yours. *Aiya*, I felt like a girl again! Like my mother was waiting to ground me!”

*Thanks, Willow.* At least this meant Willow still thought of Caitlyn as “semi-respectable.” Maybe. *As long as I stay in her good graces.* Which was always a perilous place to be with Willow Wong, the woman who liked Caitlyn as long as she was pretty and well-mannered.

“Your mother is a thorn in everyone’s sides, this is true. I think that she wants what is best for her family, though, and that includes you.”

“She’s so old-fashioned! I’m forty years old, and still dealing with her traditional thinking!” Lilian lowered her voice. “Don’t you tell any of these people that I’m forty, by the way. I’ve told them all that I’m thirty-three.”

Caitlyn nodded. “I’m sorry you’re having to deal with so much drama in your life. Maybe I don’t understand *exactly* what you’re going through, but I’ve had to deal with my fair share of guilt and the like as well. Why... ah, never mind.”

Lilian sniffed. “What?”

“My parents were never in a position to tell me what to do with my life, but in some ways, that makes it hard, too. Your mother sees herself as the matriarch of a family that has to maintain its position in society. The reason Jane gets away with murder and you don’t is because Jane never set herself up as a matriarch of anything. You, however, are your husband’s wife and your children’s mother. You’re married to the first son of a well-to-do family.”

“He’s the *only* child!”

“Exactly. You’ve always known it’s a lot of weight on your shoulders. Your mother cares more about you because, in a way, you’re following in her footsteps, and she wants to make sure you do it right. My family wasn’t like that. I was completely on my own making my own life decisions. I could be ‘anyone I wanted to be,’ and that causes fun things like decision paralysis and an endless supply of second-guessing yourself. I’m sorry that coming to a place like this has upset you so much. I’m sure that, were I in your shoes, I’d be feeling the same way about Jane.”

“I’ve always envied my little sister,” Lilian said. “She finds these charming, gorgeous women like you and Rebecca, and you make the life seem so *easy*. Why can’t I have that?”

“Because you made other decisions in the meantime.”

Lilian sighed. “I should be happy enough that my sister supports me, and my mother knows and hasn’t disowned me. I think she despises Olivia, though. I think she believes that she’s the reason Jane and I have become infected. Bless our

mother, but she still has ideas that being gay and the like are down to environment. Like people can infect you...!”

“Olivia is a darling woman who has a magnetic pull on women like us.”

“*Hn*, I think you still have a thing for her, Caitlyn. Don’t worry, I’m not upset. I get it. I’ll always have a thing for her, too. But let me have her, huh? She’s all I got right now that makes me happy. I can be myself around her. I can’t even be myself around my children.”

Caitlyn sighed. “Maybe one day you can be. I don’t have kids, but I bet if you cultivate good relationships with them now, they’ll support you no matter what happens.”

Lilian considered that with a peaceful countenance. “You’re right, of course. Jane said something similar but with different words. She said my kids need their mother, so I shouldn’t jeopardize my ability to be with them. I wish I could move us all to America, though. Start over with Olivia and our kids.”

“Do you think you could really handle starting over like that?”

With a shake of her head, Lilian stood up. “I think I’m tired. I’ll show myself to the ladies’ room, but if it’s all right with you and Rebecca, I’d love to head back soon. I’m burning to text everyone back home, and I can’t do that here, apparently.”

“I understand. I wouldn’t mind heading home, either.”

What Caitlyn left out, however, was that Jane was probably soused. Sure enough, she returned to the Diamond VIP area to

find Jane asleep on the couch. It took fifteen minutes to track down Rebecca and ask her to drive Jane home in the Jaguar while Caitlyn dropped Lilian off at her mother's.

Willow waited in the lobby of the building.

"Mother." Lilian offered a kiss to her mother's cheek. "Is there something wrong?"

Willow only had a stern gaze for Caitlyn, who stood her ground. After all, she had nothing to hide or defend. "Go on upstairs," Willow said to Lilian. "I need to speak with Caitlyn for a moment. I'm assuming Jane is not with you?"

Caitlyn shook her head. "She's indisposed for the evening. It's been a long week."

"Quite." Willow glared at her daughter until Lilian finally disappeared into the elevator. "I trust that Lilian behaved herself with decorum tonight?"

*How do I respond to that?* Besides laughter? "We had fun. Lilian's probably worn out from all of the socializing."

"I see. Perhaps that's good for her. She's been a bit glum lately."

*Is she kidding?* "I wonder why, Willow."

The corners of the woman's mouth twitched. "You may no longer be legally related to me, Caitlyn," she curtly said, "but I'm not inclined to let that tone slide."

"You're on my turf. I won't let you bully me around here."



“Bully you? I have no desire to do that. My investment in you is limited to how you help my youngest daughter. To your credit, you’ve somehow always been fitter for polite society than Jane, but now you’ve involved yourself in Lilian’s personal life as well. I need you to understand that she is a different beast from her sister.”

“Trust me, I know. I’m well aware of everything she stands to lose should word get out about her and Olivia. I’m also invested in her well-being. And Olivia’s. Do you think I want the ex-girlfriend I still care for to lose her marriage and child?”

“So you *do* understand? Good.” Willow took a strong step forward, her chin pointed upward, and hands clasped before her. “I’m pleased that an outsider can appreciate the situation I find myself in. My youngest has always been a... well, who she is. Now my middle child is having a mid-life crisis. As for my oldest... you’ve heard all of the rumors about Bartholomew, I’m sure.”

“How many mistresses is it now?”

“I know how to cover his steps and how to deflect attention from Jane’s activities. I cannot help Lilian should things get out of hand for her. You know her. She gets in over her head and starts to drown. Having a rigid life script has always been crucial for her well-being. Until the past two years, she has acted her part far better than I ever expected. But I. Can’t. Help. Her.” Willow looked away for a moment, although her focus was not on the monstera plant propped up in the corner of the apartment building lobby. “I only want what’s best for

my children. For Lilian, that's simplicity and harmony. Jane can burden chaos. Her sister cannot."

"Jane's having quite a bit of chaos right now, for sure."

"Yes, and I shall be out of your hair in time for the New Year when my family needs me back in Hong Kong for the Western calendar celebrations. I don't want to leave Lilian in Hong Kong by herself for long, anyway, but I would be remiss to be absent for Jane's... second nuptials."

"We all accomplish what is within our grasp."

Willow slightly snorted, her eyebrows arching. "Sometimes I forget how articulate you are. You know, there was a time when I was grateful for your presence in Jane's life. I figured... if she had to be a sexual delinquent, it might as well be with a well-put-together foreigner such as yourself. It's a pity she's not marrying you again if she must marry any woman."

Caitlyn felt that right between the eyes. "Rebecca is a great person. Besides, I can't put myself through that again. Once was enough."

"I understand. Also, I said nothing about Ms. Pruitt's wifely abilities, as loathed as I am to think of them like that."

"You're the one making it sexual, Willow."

"Oh, I know. I am on your 'turf,' after all." She turned away. "Yet you may find yourself on mine soon enough. You know what will be expected of you three should you ever return to Hong Kong."

Caitlyn did not deign that with a response. Not until Willow was at the elevator. “Good night, Willow. Sweet dreams.”

Willow said nothing as she entered the elevator. She was not a woman who believed in always having the last word. *Sometimes, silence is more effective – and memorable.*

Caitlyn certainly chewed on that as she drove home in silence.

## CHAPTER 21

## Jane

If there was anything she hated more than her own wedding, it was *other* people's weddings.

Then again, that was an opinion Jane usually held toward the monotonously tiring and soul-crushing course that was the Heterosexual Union. She had been to a number of those in her life, including Damon's in the Czech Bloody Republic, and they never got any easier for her to get through sober.

Two women were more palatable, but Jane remained a woman who could hardly stand such grandiose pageantry – and Ms. Erica Mann and Ms. Natalie Chen had gone *all out* for this wedding. To the point that it was nearly identical to either Damon's or Bartholomew's weddings.

“They even tell us where to sit.” Jane and Becca followed the usher once they were properly checked in for the ceremony, located at a quaint chapel in the Californian redwoods. Yet there was no chance to appreciate the breathtaking beauty of a drizzly, foggy day in the ancient rainforest. Jane and Rebecca had arrived the day before, with

barely enough time to check into the nearby resort where they were staying for three days. *One day to settle in, one day for the wedding, and one to recover from the wedding.* They hadn't been to the bachelorette parties, weren't invited to the rehearsal dinner, and were not a part of the bridesmaid brunches, so here they were, seeing everything for the first time.

The usher gestured to their labeled chairs. Much to Jane's chagrin, she was in the aisle on the bride's side. Neither of them recognized the man on the other side of Rebecca, who was old enough to be Jane's grandfather. *I'll have to double-check, though. My grandfather looks like everyone else's grandfather.* Fine thing if Grandpa Lam was in town and she didn't know about it! *Straight from Heaven, no less!*

"Are you hot? It's rather humid in here, isn't it?" Jane pulled on the collar of her three-piece suit while Rebecca nonchalantly sat up straight and smoothed the skirt of her baby pink sweetheart dress. She had straightened her hair for the occasion, although Jane had begged her not to. *"You don't get it, Jane. I can't be crammed into a crowd with big, frizzy hair. People are so precious about my hair touching them."* Now here Jane was, confirming that it was a bit humid because Rebecca's hair attempted to curl where she sat.

"Why don't you take off your jacket?" Rebecca asked. "You still look plenty formal without it. Half the people in here aren't wearing their suit jackets."

“Half of the people here are American and don’t know how to layer up in anything above twenty degrees Celsius without melting.”

“Aren’t you someone who should know how to do that?” Rebecca nudged her girlfriend. “Someone’s uncomfortable for other reasons.”

“I’m at a bloody wedding, Becca. What do you want from me?”

She leaned in closer, red hair draping across Jane’s shoulder. “Think about me naked.”

“Are you trying to make me sweat more?”

“I’m simply appealing to what comforts you.” Rebecca took Jane’s hand between them. “Isn’t this chapel adorable? Apparently, it’s a historical site that belongs to a state society instead of any denomination. Must have cost a pretty penny to rent this place for a wedding.”

“Did you read that in today’s program?”

“It’s amazing what you find out via Google Maps when you’re bored in your room.”

“Is this about me being stuck in the bathroom for an hour last night? Again?” Jane couldn’t help it. She swore she ate something disagreeable, and her nerves about attending a wedding had nothing to do with how upset her stomach was. Nor was she cranky because she couldn’t stay asleep the night before. Jane was a rational woman. She needed few excuses.

Rebecca squeezed Jane's hand. "Live in the moment. Stop thinking about tomorrow."

"This moment is unbearable."

"You know that's not what I meant."

*Yes, yes, mindfulness and all of that rubbish.* For a moment, Jane wished she had brought Caitlyn instead. *She'd curtly tell me where to stuff my attitude.* That's what Jane needed right now because Rebecca's quiet admonishments weren't doing the trick.

They were also fashionably early, which was not on purpose. If Jane really had her way, they would have shown up with five minutes to spare. Instead, she had a front-row seat to see who arrived with whom and where they had the honor of sitting. Jane was the first to notice that the front corner seat was left empty and roped off by a blue garland. *The "groom's" side... must be one of those acknowledgments to dead relatives.* Unfortunately, Jane didn't personally know Erica well enough to know which ghost was summoned to the ceremony that day. She could only imagine how Natalie's Taiwanese family liked the thought of *dead relatives* having a place of honor at the wedding. If they were at all superstitious... *whew.* Jane was glad it wasn't her problem. *My mother isn't even religious, but she'd give birth to a cow right there.*

"Do you like weddings?" Jane hated being alone with her thoughts right now. Better to keep talking about her fears and insecurities instead of drowning in them alone. "Have you



ever been to them before meeting me?” They had only been to a couple since meeting, but this was by far the biggest and more grandiose. *Plus, that pandemic delayed – and even canceled – a few.* The Manns and Chens had planned to unite their families the year before. Yet here they were, a whole year later. “How much do you think this one cost? My wedding with Caitlyn only cost ten grand. Quite the steal. One thousand of that was her dress.”

Rebecca fluttered her eyelashes in disbelief that this conversation had continued. “I don’t mind them half as much as you do.”

“Promise me that ours is nothing like this.”

“I don’t know how it could be when it’s in two weeks, and all we’ve done is buy me an outfit and make an appointment at the city hall.”

“I’ve bought an outfit too, Becca.”

“You mean you’re not wearing this same suit to *our* wedding?”

Jane pursed her lips. “I don’t wear this suit more than twice a year. It’s my wedding suit.”

“Exactly.”

“You know what I mean, love.”

Rebecca was about to reply when a looming shadow caught her eye. She turned on her charming smile long before Jane registered that someone loomed over her.

It took her way too long to recognize a face that should have been instantly familiar.

“Well, well.” Jane appreciated any decent reason to forget where she was at. Especially if it meant catching the shadow of Cindy Ling’s breasts, currently secured in a starched white shirt with the top three buttons undone. “How did you get invited to such a fair and lovely American wedding?” Jane switched to Mandarin, although she knew everyone around her – except Rebecca – could still understand what she said. “You must have bribed the bride.”

“Good to know you’re your usual delightful self, Wong.” Cindy’s trademark slick ponytail and bold red lipstick matched her light complexion and the ruby-red jewelry on her hands. “Believe it or not, I do regular business with Ms. Mann. Why shouldn’t I be invited to the *tóngzhì* wedding of the year?”

“I’m guessing you want to take notes for your own nuptials. When are they, again? Or have you yet to propose to your darling woman? Where is she, by the way? I’m sure you’ve dressed her in the finest finery.”

“Rose is holding our seats for us. I had to get up and stretch my legs. Saw you here and...” Cindy sighed, before switching back to English. “Rebecca. How are you, darling?”

Rebecca’s posture perked up. “I’m wonderful, Ms. Ling. Thank you for asking.”

“Has this one taught you Cantonese or Mandarin yet?”

“If you’re thinking of talking to Rebecca in Cantonese, spare us all, because your accent is dire. Stick with what you know, Ling.”

“I do love good banter with you. Send Caitlyn my regards, would you, Wong?”

“Caitlyn, my mother, my sister... I’ll send *everyone* such regards when I return to New England the day after tomorrow.”

“Good. Because we missed you at the stag party.” The Mandarin returned. “It was a real party and a half. Don’t suppose you heard who put it on?”

Jane glanced at the wide-brimmed hat in the second row on the groom’s side. “Why do you think we didn’t go? I only have so much partying like that left in me.”

“Big shame. Felt like losing my virginity all over again.”

“I can only imagine!”

“I’m not supposed to talk about what happened, of course, but I’m sure you’ve heard what happened at Natalie Chen’s hen party.”

“No, I haven’t heard a thing.”

Cindy lowered her voice. “You remember that couple from the Summit? The ones who put on that show you wouldn’t shut up about? I hear they were hired as the entertainment. Can you imagine? I’m rather sad I missed that.”

“The Summit feels like a year ago.”

With a grin and a pat on Jane's shoulder, Cindy caught the attention of someone else farther up the rows. That was her cue to say farewell for now.

"Can you imagine dressing like that at a wedding?" Jane asked Rebecca, who pretended to have not paid attention to anything. "Quite the look, isn't it?"

"Something tells me you know what to look for beneath her clothes, Jane."

"Honestly, love, you would too if you had the chance."

Rebecca rolled her eyes. "Behave yourself, huh?"

"Don't know why I bloody well should."

"For my sake? I'm the one who has to explain to Caitlyn what happened if you burn too many bridges here."

That at least made Jane shut her mouth. Yet it didn't soothe her soul as they waited for the last of the guests to arrive and for the ceremony to begin. Because once the background piano music turned into a four-string quartet launching into "Clair de Lune," the show was rolling.

"Christ," Jane muttered. "This must be someone's fantasy because this is *the* most common wedding I've been to. I'd never have guessed it was for two big ol' women."

"I think it's lovely," Rebecca said.

A few phone cameras raised into the air, although there were professional cameramen and photographers already on standby. The only reason Jane saw what happened at the end

of the aisle was because she sat right on the runner. The big blue satin bow on her chair would fall off if she weren't careful! *Move your face before you get a flash in it, Jane.* Someone must have been standing at the top of the aisle because a photographer hopped into the middle and took a hundred shots. The other guests whispered that Erica, standing at the front in a sapphire-blue blouse that draped over her bound breasts and cinched at the waist of her tailored trousers, was uncharacteristically calm for someone about to tie the knot. *I wanted to marry Caitlyn with every fiber of my being, but I still pissed my knickers on the wedding day.* Was Erica that good at masking her nerves? Or had she been waiting for this moment her whole life?

Jane didn't have time to contemplate that. A flower girl in a bulbous dress stumbled down the aisle and cast red rose petals on the floor. The amount of cooing and chuckles coming from the crowd was deafening.

"Ooh, I really like this color they picked." Rebecca wrapped her arm around Jane's and leaned in when the first of the bridesmaids came down the aisle. "I want a dress this color. Do me a favor and charm one of these dark blue dresses off a woman at the reception."

"For you, I absolutely will."

"Yesss."

Everyone stood long before Jane and Rebecca realized that the bride had appeared for her grand march. As Jane struggled to rush to her feet, Rebecca helped her up and fixed the hair

that had fallen into her face. Although Jane didn't want to admit it, she peered around the hat of the woman sitting behind her to get a look at Natalie Chen's dress before it sashayed past her.

“Oh, my God,” Rebecca whispered. “She's goddamn radiant.”

*Of course she is. She's got Mann money.* Jane didn't say that, though. Partly because she thought the same thing as the woman glowing like a ballroom chandelier walked herself down the aisle, a large bouquet of roses and baby's breath hanging down her sequined bodice and the detachable train held by one last bridesmaid.

Natalie didn't notice a single person around her. Even when she passed Jane, chin up and smile as natural as the sun or moon in the sky, she didn't avert her gaze from the person waiting for her at the altar.

*Now that's love.* Jane knew it manifested in different ways – different couples had different levels of passion, after all. For Caitlyn, her walk down the aisle had been marked by sharing kisses with her cousins and stopping long enough to hug her sobbing mother. By the time she had reached Jane, who shook hands with her future father-in-law before he sat down, Caitlyn had already been touched by a dozen other people. She came to the altar with the wholesome glow of someone adored and supported by her whole family.

What was it like, though, to stand there like Erica and realize that your bride only has eyes for you?

Like she was the last to stand, Jane was so lost in her own thoughts that she was the last to sit as well. Rebecca curled their hands together while the officiator spoke into a microphone. She thanked everyone for coming and commented on what a joyous day it was for two people in love.

Hell, she said it in Mandarin, too.

Jane didn't have the attention span to memorize everything said between two people getting married. She kept her eyes respectfully forward, but all of her focus was on the warmth of Rebecca's hand.

*I'm marrying this woman before the end of the year.* Although Jane was aware of the fact, she could hardly comprehend the feelings now overwhelming her. *I'm getting married. Here we go again.* She had almost forgotten what it was like to have so many butterflies in her stomach.

The ceremony was short and sweet, which was probably how two people who didn't like a lot of attention wanted it. As the bride and bridegroom clasped hands and leaned in to kiss at the end of the ceremony, people stood up to clap and cheer while others, like Jane, kept her polite applause to herself.

Rebecca's arm was still wrapped around hers, although they both clapped. A moment later, Jane realized that all of Rebecca's attention was on her.

"What?"

Rebecca shrugged. "Thinking."

“About what? Us?”

“A lot of things.”

They missed the couple coming back down the aisle and the biodegradable confetti raining upon the audience. Jane was too busy kissing her girlfriend to care.



## CHAPTER 22

## *Rebecca*

**W**hat did one expect from a wedding of this magnitude and wealth? For Becca, it was a matter of not embarrassing herself around well-to-do strangers.

As soon as she and Jane entered a stretch limo transporting guests from chapel to reception, she was surrounded by people she didn't know – and many of whom did not speak English around her. She had known that Natalie's Taiwanese family was extensive, and Erica's business partnerships in the same area were vast, but Becca had not expected to be constantly surrounded by older men and women who were more interested in their phones and lozenges.

“What are you up to?” The limo lurched down a half-paved road in the middle of the woods. “Texting Caitlyn?”

Jane looked up from her phone. “Mm. She wants a detailed report about the food. To be fair, that's the true worth of a wedding – the food.”

Becca didn't necessarily disagree, but she knew it would be at least another hour before she saw any. There would be Champagne in her throat before anything else.

Neither Jane nor Becca were surprised to discover that the reception was held in the large ballroom area of Erica's family ranch. Since it was drizzly outside, everyone was immediately asked to enter through the main entrance and make their way down a wide hallway to an egregiously marked "Reception Area," where a live jazz band played standards and ushers were at hand to direct everyone to their new place cards at circular tables decorated with blue silk tablecloths and impressive rosy centerpieces.

"They had a theme and stuck to it." Jane unfolded the white napkin at her place setting but did not immediately drape it across her lap. Instead, she refolded it into a pleasing fan on top of her plate. A waiter in coat, tails, and white gloves began taking orders at another table. "I'm ready for the alcohol, and for the others to arrive so I have someone to talk to. That's the whole point of a wedding reception: getting pissed and spreading gossip."

Becca checked the place card next to her. "Who is 'Priscilla Huang?'"

"That name sounds vaguely familiar. Who is next to her?"

"Ladies." Before Becca had the chance to check, a woman with long black hair and a purple cocktail dress greeted them. "Looks like we're sharing a table today. Always lovely to recognize who I'm speaking with for the next two hours."

Jane's face lit up. "Genevieve, I haven't seen you since the Summit, and we barely had the chance to talk! How are you? Where's your smoking hot girlfriend Caitlyn talked about stealing from you?"

Genevieve laughed, although Becca couldn't tell if it was genuine or simple nicety. "Working, I'm afraid. I came by myself." She sat in her seat. "I thought I saw you at the ceremony. This is...?"

Becca's feelings weren't hurt. She had only met Genevieve Liu once before, and she didn't expect everyone to memorize her name and face after only one meeting. "This is my darling girlfriend, Rebecca Pruitt. I'm afraid Caitlyn couldn't make it, either."

"Such a shame. Lovely to meet you again, Rebecca. I'm sorry if I should remember you – it's always a risk that I might embarrass myself when I see people."

"No worries at all."

"Your dress is adorable, by the way. Is it Vera?"

Rebecca blushed. "I'm afraid I don't know 'whose' dress this is. I got it from a local thrift store back home."

"Oh! How lovely. I'd never be able to tell. It's in pristine condition, isn't it?"

"Our Rebecca has impeccable taste, like you, Genevieve." Jane nodded in greeting to the other couple coming to sit at their table. "Look who it is, again. Are you stalking me, Ling?"

“*Aiya*, they’re clumping all the Asians together.” Cindy pulled out her girlfriend Rose’s seat and sat down between her and Jane. While Rose and Genevieve exchanged pleasantries, Cindy said, “Except for you, of course. Rebecca, was it?”

“Yes. Lovely to see you again, Ms. Ling.”

“It’s a lovely day for a wedding.” Cindy gestured to the large windows not so far away. “It’s almost gray enough for a funeral. I somehow thought winter in California was a sunny affair.”

“You quickly learn the difference between NorCal and SoCal,” Becca said.

“Oh? Are you from here?”

Becca blushed. “No, I’ve simply traveled around California a bit.”

“Our Becca is a well-traveled woman,” Jane cut-in. “Before I met her, she was taking a year off from work to travel the country. Weren’t you, Becca?”

*God, do we have to bring this up now?* Last time Rebecca was north of San Francisco, she cried herself to sleep because she was tired of running from her recent past and self-medicating with dangerous one-night stands. *I don’t even remember who I slept with...* Some of them ran together in her memory. *Probably some backpacker...*

Jane caught the look on her girlfriend’s face and said, “How was the flight from Taiwan? Did you fly into San Francisco?”

“Yes, yes, we’ll take that airport over LAX any day, not that we often get the choice,” Cindy said.

Becca breathed easier now that she wasn’t expected to relive some memories she’d rather forget. “I have better luck with immigration at LAX. No idea why,” Jane said. “Although that might be changing soon. I’m sure you’ve heard the news that I’m finally digging into a permanent residency card as soon as I can make it happen.”

*So, two years?* Becca didn’t say that, although Kevin Downey had suggested that was how long it took for a marriage visa to translate to a green card should they go that route.

“Fascinating. It’s been a while since I’ve heard of someone permanently moving to the Americas.” Cindy looked at her girlfriend. “Isn’t your brother talking about getting a job in Canada?” She then asked that again in Mandarin. Becca didn’t understand the answer. Apparently, everyone had forgotten that Rose wasn’t fluent in English, although she certainly tried her best when she reintroduced herself to Becca a few minutes later. Becca in turn tried her rusty Mandarin on Rose, who gave her the same quizzical look in return. *Great. Can’t understand each other.* Becca needed to hit the books more.

“Donate more money,” Cindy said right before the server arrived. “It’s not so different from anywhere else. Bribe your damn way in.”

Jane was saved from answering when she was asked if she would prefer the elk or the lobster for dinner. She ordered the

lobster, and Becca went for the elk. *Haven't had that in forever.* Everyone else ordered lobster, including Priscilla Huang, who showed up fashionably late and only cared to speak with Genevieve when she deigned to talk to anyone at all.

The drinks were poured and the conversation bubbled by the time the bridal couple arrived to take their seats at the banquet table at the far end of the room. Natalie had detached her train and sat like a delicate princess while Erica slouched in her seat, the two of them as casual as they could get at their own wedding. Already, family members and close friends came up to congratulate them. Becca didn't doubt that her and Jane's turn would come soon enough.

"Almost makes you want a wedding of your own, doesn't it?" Cindy asked the couple to her left. "Ah, you've been married before, right, Wong? Was it anything like this? You married an American."

"Not quite like this, no," Jane said. "Much smaller. Only my mother and sister on my side came. It was mostly Cait's acquaintances."

*I didn't know only two people came to support her. Wasn't Willow coming to witness the nuptials in a couple of weeks? What did that woman really think about her daughter marrying not one, but two American women? The first for love, and the second for...*

Well, whatever the real reason was.

“Seriously, though, when are you and Rose having your big to-do in Taipei? I hope you have it at the Dynasty Imperial. I haven’t had a reason to go there in decades.”

“*If* we get married, it will be somewhere far enough away from Taipei that we could have some privacy, but close enough to fly in her family.” While Cindy spoke, Rose continued to stare at her phone, oblivious to the conversation happening in English. “There are so many affairs to get in order before something like that, though.”

“Indeed. At least it’s legal in Taiwan. Not like in Hong Kong.”

“And you have an American girlfriend. How about that? It’s almost like Hong Kong doesn’t matter anymore.”

Even Becca knew that Cindy Ling had a way of cutting straight to the point. It took Jane aback, who soon asked for more Champagne the moment a live vocalist joined the jazz band in their corner. Soon, everyone was serenaded to “You’d Be So Nice to Come Home to.”

Becca sent a picture of her meal to Caitlyn, who texted back she hadn’t had elk in years. While everyone ate, their entertainment consisted of long, languid speeches that meant nothing to anyone but the family sitting at the front of the room. Nevertheless, Becca clapped when prompted. She also forced her phone back into her purse when the happy couple took the center of the floor to have their first dance as a married couple. After that, the mood lightened in the ballroom.



People got up to mingle, dance, and make full use of the open bar in the corner.

“Such a down-to-Earth affair,” Jane said when she and Becca were alone at their table. “You know, I’ve been to weddings on Greek islands and Swiss mountaintops. Don’t get me started on the Caribbean beaches and country-western plains.” She snorted. “Give me sitting around and not being directed this way and that to watch fireworks and behold firebreathers. Come along. We need to congratulate the couple before we have a dance.”

They lined up at the end of a short queue in front of the banquet table. The closer Becca came, the more intricate detail she saw on Natalie’s dress. It was while she became lost in the delicate beadwork that must have cost a fortune that she began adding up how much this whole wedding probably paid the local economy. Everything may have been “down-to-Earth,” but between the food, employees, and locations, Becca wouldn’t have been surprised if at least a million dollars had been invested into the wedding nuptials of the two people soon giving her their undivided attention.

“Congratulations,” Becca said while Jane shook their hands. “May you have a happy marriage.” *God, that wasn’t awkward to say at all.* Have a happy marriage? Ugh! She might as well have quipped about happy wives making happy lives!

“You must tell me your secret,” Jane said to Erica, who looked at her with mild curiosity. “How did you stand up there

so cool and collected on your big day? When I got married, I almost threw up on my mother-in-law's shoes."

Erica shared a knowing look with her wife, who glanced down into her lap. "It's much easier when you register the marriage a few days before the big event. We've been legally married all week. Makes today more a formality than something we can't come back from."

Natalie gently elbowed her spouse. "Can't come *back* from?" she chided.

"You know what I mean." Erica leaned in toward her bride. *We've lost them.* "You're already mine. What's a party celebrating that?"

Jane tugged on Becca's arm. "Let's go before I throw up."

"I think it's sweet." Becca held Jane's hand as they returned to their table, where Becca stashed her purse and followed Jane to the dancefloor. "They're so in love with each other. You can see it so easily."

"Can you?"

They found a spot near the performing jazz band. "Do you think people see how much *we're* in love when they look at us?"

"I'm not sure, love. Why don't we test that out right now?"

Becca never had many opportunities to go out dancing, but Jane was a natural leader who helped her partner find the simple steps. *You'd think I'd feel silly being taller than her while she leads...* Yet she didn't. Becca immersed herself in

the steady beat of the music and the flow of the movements between her and Jane. Their mutual energy engaged its own tempo as Becca forgot where they were – and who she was with.

Because that wasn't *Jane* dancing with her. Nor was it some faraway figure that had always haunted her fantasies. If anything, she saw Jane as someone from another plane of existence: a masculine form who was still as feminine as the heart beating in Becca's own chest. *When we first met, I instantly fell for her.* She hadn't known it at the time, of course, since Becca nursed her fresh wounds from a previous relationship. Everyone looked good – everyone was a potential threat. Yet here was Jane Wong, casually dressed down in an airport lounge. The same Jane that had invited Becca – a stranger – to come fly with her on a private plane and have the affair of a lifetime.

Becca had turned her down at the time, yet fate was determined to set them up together. Caitlyn was a blessed bonus. One Becca hadn't even known about when she first met Jane.

*I never thought I'd fall in love again.* Becca was whisked from one end of the dancefloor to the other, where the jazz quartet was so loud that she went temporarily deaf. How could she care, though? She was in love with the best dancer on the floor. Unlike Becca – or even Caitlyn – Jane had grown up in such finery that there was no discussion as to whether she could properly dance. Leading? As second nature as her flirtatious habits. For all of her faults, since Jane was as full of

them as any other mortal, that had never been one of them. If anything, Becca found it charming. She loved having someone so confident and self-assured in her life. Because she was rarely either of those things.

Especially since her last relationship. One she was still in therapy for.

Laughter rang out on the dancefloor. It took Becca a moment to realize it came from her own mouth.

“Glad you’re having a grand time, love.” Jane brought Becca to the far edge of the dancefloor and offered to dip her toward the nearest table, where they had amassed a small audience. Before the motion began, however, Becca protested with more laughter in her throat. The last time someone tried dipping her on the dancefloor, she crashed right on her ass.

“Are you having a good time?” she asked Jane as they departed the floor. A new song struck up behind them. More people filled in the space they left open. Becca only had eyes for the woman who promised her the world and more.

“I’m always having a good time with you.”

Becca sat with her at their table. Their dining partners had left to either converse with other guests or raid the open bar. *This still doesn’t feel real.* Not being at someone else’s wedding, and not planning her own. *My wedding won’t be anything like this.* For a single, rapid second, Becca wished she could have something as grand as what Erica Mann had arranged for her darling bride, the woman in the white dress

who looked like she had never been spoiled in her privileged life.

“What’s on your mind, love?” Jane asked. “Your feet aren’t already sore, are they? I keep telling you girls that you should wear more sensible shoes, but does anyone listen to old Jane?”

Becca leaned forward and kissed her girlfriend on the cheek. “Thinking about us getting married.” She was blushing by the time she finished speaking. Perhaps she hadn’t meant to say any of that.

“Ah.” Jane’s own face fell. Momentarily. As if she was such a master of her own emotions that she didn’t think twice about turning on a different kind of charm. “I’m glad you’re looking forward to it.”

“Are you?”

“If I may be frank, it’s a matter of course to me. I love you, Becca. I know you know that. Except getting married helps keep our family together faster than anything else does. No matter what happens, I’ll take care of you. That’s the promise I’m making with our nuptials.”

“Suppose it’s different if you’ve been married before.”

Jane looked around the ballroom, a new sense of comfort crowning the table. “Caitlyn and I didn’t have a wedding as big as this one, but it’s not so different in feeling. It was never my kind of thing. That was all for her. Ideally, I always wanted something quick, intimate, and no-frills. Marriage is more about the experience for me. Not the ceremony.” Jane turned

back to Becca. “I’m sorry if this is something you wanted. Maybe I can make it up to you in the spring.”

“No, no, that’s not what I was trying to say.” Becca took Jane’s hand on the table. “I think the way we’re doing it is the right way. We’re supposed to pretend that it’s not even happening, right?”

“Who said that?”

“Suppose I did. I wouldn’t want Caitlyn feeling more left out than she already is.”

Jane did not refute that statement. Instead, she said, “We’re on the same page there. I don’t think either of us wants Caitlyn feeling a certain way.”

“Has she said something?”

Jane shook her head. “Cait’s pride won’t let her say a thing. I can tell, though. When you know a woman long enough, you can tell.”

“Tell me about it.”

Jane chuckled. “Why don’t we go get something to drink? I think they’re cutting the cake soon, and I want to be good and top-heavy by the time I have to sit through that.”

Becca knew her well enough to guess that Jane wasn’t getting drunk. She’d want a good buzz, though, and Becca supported that as they waited in line at the open bar and received their drinks in time for the aforementioned cake-cutting. Slices of decadence were soon offered on a table.

Becca took one plate, also knowing that Jane would only want a couple of bites before turning down more.

She didn't know what she expected from the end of this trip. Perhaps Becca wished that the romantic atmosphere would inspire some romance in her own relationship. *If anyone gets inspired, it's usually Jane.* She would never admit it, though. Not even when the bouquet toss resulted in one young woman screaming her head off in glee.

“There goes two of the richest bitches in the country.” Jane knocked back the bottom of her drink as Erica and Natalie piled into the back of a black SUV and were driven off to their wedding night. Guests began their returns to their temporary stays. That included Jane and Becca, who joined two strangers in an Uber that was already on standby. So happened they were heading to the same resort.

The quiet of their room lulled Jane to sleep in record time. She didn't even bother removing her suit.

Becca lay next to her on the bed and stared into the darkness soon swarming the room. If nothing else, she'd embrace the blanket of the night.

## CHAPTER 23



## Caitlyn

Scheduling the private plane was always a mess at this time of year, especially since the plane wasn't technically *theirs* anymore. The pandemic had made sure of that. Instead, Jane and Caitlyn had partially sold their company plane to cover the maintenance costs – but that meant vying for peak travel times with the other people who now lay claim to the schedule that was meticulously kept by an impartial third party. Namely, the flight staff.

Yet Caitlyn had prevailed for Christmas. As soon as Jane and Rebecca returned from the west coast, the plane was in someone else's hands. Except Caitlyn would be damned if they missed Christmas in Des Moines, a time-honored tradition that was only missed once, all the way back in 2020.

She also didn't care if she was the only one going. At first, Jane insisted she was too tired and had too much work to catch up on. Besides, she had spent so many Christmases in Iowa that she didn't see the point anymore. Surely, Becca and Caitlyn would like to spend some time together. Alone. Lest

Caitlyn thought that was Jane's way of having a few days to herself, she laid down her own rules: Jane was coming, damnit.

Besides, Jane always had a good time, even when the sleeping arrangements were also a mess. Caitlyn always had dibs on her childhood bedroom but bringing home more than one person meant someone slept on the floor or the couch downstairs. Usually. Jane was always the wild card in that regard.

Yet Jane had one final argument that Caitlyn could not refute: Willow was still in town, and Jane had a few things to discuss with her mother which would be better accomplished if one of them *wasn't* in the Midwest. So before Rebecca had the chance to recover from the wedding, she and Caitlyn were back on the plane heading to Des Moines, where sugar cookies, baked turkey, and a giant Christmas tree in the front window awaited.

Rebecca was still a novelty to most of Caitlyn's extended family. While her siblings knew the deal, the cousins and their parents always forgot if Rebecca or Jane was Caitlyn's current partner. The fact that *both* could be the answer fell on deaf ears time and time again.

"I couldn't possibly have another!" Rebecca was cornered on the living room couch, crammed next to Caitlyn's sister and a cousin whose name was sometimes Jennifer, sometimes Jenny (depending on the year.) "Seriously, though, they're so good! I'm afraid I might get diabetes if I eat another!"

Christie laughed. Sugar cookie crumbs tumbled off her platter as she patted Rebecca on the shoulder and moved down the line of people. Rebecca exchanged a look with Caitlyn and offered a tired smile. After a heavy dinner of turkey and all the fixings, the entire Adams crew had convened in the living room to share what they had received for Christmas and to sing carols around the upright piano. Caitlyn always forgot that one of her many cousins was a church pianist and knew every religious carol by heart.

“Let me help you with those.” Caitlyn jumped in to catch the platter of half-eaten cookies before Christie accidentally dropped them on the living room carpet. “Kitchen?”

After her mother nodded, they headed into the other room, where Caitlyn put the tray on the island counter and her mother grabbed some paper towels to clean up a spill on the floor. Before they headed back into the living room, however, Christie said, “Come upstairs with me, hon. There’s something I want to give you and I haven’t had the chance. Too much going on.”

Curious, Caitlyn followed her mother up into the primary bedroom, where her parents had slept for the past few decades. As Caitlyn sat on the holiday-themed quilt draped across the queen-sized bed, her mother opened the walk-in closet and grabbed a small box off the top shelf.

“I want you to give this to Jane for me.” Christie sat next to her daughter on the edge of the bed and handed over the box. “It’s something I keep thinking about whenever you two aren’t

here. Oh, don't let Rebecca take it the wrong way, though. It's just I always thought of Jane whenever I saw it."

Caitlyn popped the lid off the box and gasped. "Ah! Didn't this belong to Grandma?"

"Yes, yes. One of her many famous additions to her pearl collection." Christie's mother loved one thing, and that was the oceanic pearl. At the time of her death, she had such an impressive jewelry collection that the family had no idea what to do with it. *Besides split it up and give it away to every girl in the family.* Caitlyn had a few pieces already, although pearls had never been her thing. Especially the traditional strings of pearl necklaces and bracelets that her grandmother always wore. Other family members had acquired the earrings, hairclips, and brooches, but this was Caitlyn's first time seeing a ring like this. "Unless you think Jane will hate this, I want her to have it. Out of everyone I know, she's got the kind of style and dainty figure to pull this off."

Caitlyn held the ring up to the light. A single flawless pearl sat on a simple gold band. It must have been a size 5, at the biggest. *That's Jane's ring size.* Caitlyn would never forget it because she always struggled to believe that a grown woman could have such a tiny finger. Then she remembered her own grandmother had existed. *Makes my size 8 ring finger feel like it belongs to a giant.* She must have gotten it from her father's side.

"You know Jane isn't a big ring wearer," Caitlyn told her mother. "I barely get her to wear *our* ring." It was true. Jane

had to sleep and bathe with her ring on to ever remember it. Caitlyn joked her own partner would become one of those women who never took off her wedding ring, to the point it fused with her finger. *Like my grandmother, probably.* “If you really want her to have it, though, I’d be happy to pass it along. She’d appreciate how understated it is, but probably wonder why anyone would want her to have *my* grandmother’s ring.”

“Oh, you know how it is. Your grandmother had so much jewelry that we’re still uncovering some we forgot about. Better to have it go to family, whether blood or not, than end up in an antique store or on that eBay. Besides, don’t you think it would look pretty on Jane? I don’t care if she never wears it. She can give it away if she wants.”

Caitlyn laid a hand on her mother’s knee. “I’m sorry she couldn’t make it this year. She wanted to come, but her own mother is in town, and they have a lot to talk about.”

“Trust me. I’m aware. Not every rumor only makes it to Ms. Willow Wong.” Christie sat up as straight as a prim rod. “I hear a few for myself. Sort of like how Jane and Becca are sorting out the visa issue?”

“Who told you that? Becca?”

“No, no. Something I’ve put together between conversations here and there. I also hear from some of my *own* birdies on the east coast that she’s getting married to get a spousal visa once again. Know anything about that, Cait?”

She didn't bother refuting it. After all, her mother had already figured it out. There was no use lying to a woman who didn't usually butt into her daughter's unconventional relationship lifestyle.

"I'm not remarrying Jane if that's what you're asking. That kind of life is behind me now. I intend to keep it that way."

"Ah. I see." Christie stared straight ahead as well. Downstairs, the sounds of tickled ivories and the off-key singing of the extended family cajoled them to return, but neither Caitlyn nor her mother moved. "So, Rebecca is standing in this time?"

"You make it sound like it's only a legal matter."

"Are you telling me that's not why you married Jane all those years ago? To get her a spousal visa?"

"It wasn't like that. Not really." Caitlyn sighed. "Our marriage was as real as any other, but if immigration asks you any questions, Rebecca and Jane are absolutely getting married for love and no other reason."

"Must not be easy for you. You're still with them, right? I mean, you brought Rebecca here..."

"Of course I'm still 'with' them. What are you talking about?"

"Sorry. You know it's hard to wrap my mind around some of what you and Jane do. I simply assumed that you might struggle with them getting married. I worry about you."

It was those last few words that touched Caitlyn more than any others. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve always had an emotional heart. You never let it show on stage or, heaven forbid, when you didn’t win a competition, but I’m your mother. I know these things.” Christie tapped her daughter’s thigh. “You’re also quite a possessive girl. Some people like that about you. I know Jane and Rebecca do.”

“So it works out. I’m possessive over both of them. They’re getting married.” Caitlyn shrugged. “Do me a favor and don’t tell anyone about it, though, especially in the family. You know people don’t really understand what’s going on between me, Jane, and Rebecca. They’re nice and polite about it because we give them money when the family’s in need.”

“It’s not like that.” Christie sighed and readjusted her hips on the edge of her bed. “People know it’s the 21<sup>st</sup> century and women love women and sometimes more than one! I think people are simply worried about saying the wrong thing and accidentally offending any of you. Well, it *is* difficult for a lot of people to understand things like visas and immigration. I daresay your father thinks Jane is rich enough to pay for whatever visa she desires.”

“To be fair, we kinda thought that, too.”

“Are you going to be okay?”

Caitlyn shrugged. “It is what it is. It’s something we’ve talked about at length. The nuptials are next week, so...”

“Next week! Really?”

“It has to be done by New Year’s. Actually, we could do it next month, but Jane wants it out of the way. She comes from a culture that really believes in taking care of unfinished business before the new year.”

“Don’t we come from that same kind of thinking? Which is why you have to assert yourself in your arrangement before it’s too late.”

“What are you talking about?”

Christie pointed to the ring in her daughter’s hand. “I’m giving that to Jane because I think it would be nice on her, and because I want her to have something from my family. I consider her part of my world as much as I do Rebecca, and you know that’s always been true. I don’t ask questions. I simply ask if you’re happy and respected by the people you’re with. I didn’t raise a daughter who is easily walked all over by other people. I raised someone who went on to become a beauty queen *and* one of those ventura capitalists who handles a million dollars a year!”

“It’s a venture capitalist, Mom.” Caitlyn didn’t correct her mother about the amount of money, either. There was no point when the real answer was “billions.”

“Whatever it is, I like to think it’s proof in the pudding that I’ve raised a woman who thinks for herself and knows what she wants. She doesn’t let anyone, no matter how much she loves them, leave her out of anything she has a say about. You know what that means. You know what you might have to do.”



Caitlyn looked askance at her mother. “I’m honestly not sure what you’re on about.”

Christie stood up from the bed, arms akimbo and her round face not so far from Caitlyn’s. “It means I support you in whatever decisions you make, baby girl.” Her words were softer than Caitlyn anticipated, if only because such a stance often meant that Christie had a harsh point to make. *Classic Midwestern mother*. Nice and sweet on the outside, an absolute firecracker of hard truths and aggressive-passive-aggression on the inside. The only thing that separated Christie from a Southern mother was a lack of collard greens in her kitchen. “I have to believe that I raised you to make the right choices for your life. Yet I also must believe that I’m the kind of mother who can welcome you back home, no matter what choices you’ve made.”

Caitlyn stood up as well. “Thanks, Mom.”

They hugged, Christie’s squeeze on her oldest child filled with tender, motherly love. “I love you,” Christie whispered, “and I love those girls you keep bringing home. Treat them well, and make sure they treat you well in turn.”

“I always do.”

With a satisfied smile, Christie suggested they get back downstairs before people started missing them. Caitlyn had to steel herself for the clattering of dishes, the boisterous voices, and the clang of the piano before heading out of her parents’ bedroom. Yet when she stepped downstairs and found Rebecca leaning against the living room wall, deep in idle conversation

with Jennifer (or was she going by Jenny now?) Caitlyn instantly relaxed.

“Come out the back with me,” she whispered into Rebecca’s ear when Jennifer was distracted by another cousin. “I wanna show you something.”

They stole through the kitchen and out the back door that led to the porch jutting out into the big, suburban backyard. Three inches of snow blanketed the grass. While white Christmases were not uncommon in that part of the world, Caitlyn had to admit that the pristine, freshly fallen snow was exceptionally lovely that year.

“Watch your step. There’s some ice right there.” Caitlyn carefully avoided it when she walked to the edge of the porch, wrapping her sweater tightly around her torso and grateful for no breeze that frosty Christmas evening. “Isn’t it nice to get some quiet?”

Rebecca let out her pent-up breath. “I always forget how boisterous your family can be. Then I’m suddenly grateful to steal up to the bedroom and have a moment to myself.”

“Imagine a whole childhood of this.”

“I can’t. I grew up an only kid to a single dad. I never had a Christmas like this until I met you and Jane.”

Caitlyn breathed in the fresh, crispy air. It smelled of moisture and cinnamon, a powerful combination that almost drew her back into the house. “Sometimes, when I was a kid, I’d get so overwhelmed by all the cousins in the house that I’d

come out here and sit in the snow. One year it didn't snow, and it was raining for hours. Even so, I sat on the picnic table over there. Back then, we also had a playset, and I remember one Christmas I came out here, beat the snow off a swing seat, and sat down for a whole hour before anyone realized I was missing. It gets so dark out here at this time of year that they couldn't find me even though I was wearing a pink parka."

"Were they mad at you?"

"No. I only realized they found me because I suddenly saw my mom standing in this spot, watching me. I think she didn't want to disturb me. Not until she decided it was too cold for us both. I was a good girl, you know. I had worn my hat and mittens."

"You're a real introvert, huh?"

"You too, I think."

"I like socializing, but yeah, it's nice to have that quiet to break it up."

Caitlyn glanced up at the clear night sky. Stars twinkled. The moon was bright enough to make her vision adjust. Between the voices inside the house and those next door, she almost forgot that she had brought Rebecca out here for them to be alone.

"It's good to cut away and clear one's head. I wouldn't be surprised if that's the real reason Jane didn't join us this year."

"You think her mother being around is an excuse?"

“Not *just* an excuse, but a convenient one, yes.” Caitlyn looked away from the moon. “She wants some time to herself before the big day.”

“You mean...?”

Caitlyn shoved her hands into her sweater pockets. She instantly felt the ring box her mother had given her upstairs. “It’ll be a big day for the both of you.” *And for me.* She could only amend that in her head.

“I’ve never been married before.”

With fabric dangling over her hand, Caitlyn swung her arm around Rebecca’s shoulders and held her close. “I have. Want some advice?”

“Of course.”

Caitlyn chewed on her chapped lip and slowly nodded, aware that Rebecca didn’t feel a thing. “Never lose sight of yourself and what you want from your life. As long as you know that, you’ll never get backed into a corner.”

She honestly didn’t know if she said that more to Rebecca, or to herself. Caitlyn supposed that it didn’t matter in the end – it was good advice for anyone to hear. Including her mother, who watched them from the opened backdoor.

## CHAPTER 24

## *Jane*

**A**s Jane had claimed, she was not religious. Therefore, such holidays like Christmas should have had no bearing on her. Yet here she was on Christmas evening, having dinner in a Chinese restaurant with her mother. Just the two of them. Just. The two. Of them.

“There certainly are a lot of *yóutài rén* around here.” Willow placed a mint on the tip of her tongue, eyes scanning the room for every American in attendance that night. Jane had to hand it to the joint: they were probably the only people of Chinese descent in the whole place, not counting the staff who prepared and served the food. If Jane were a betting woman, she’d wager that most of these people had standing reservations for Christmas dinner every year. The only reason Jane got in was because it was for two people, and the best Chinese restaurant in town happened to have a small table available.

“One of the first things I learned about Christmas in America is that it’s when all the Jewish people flock to

Chinese restaurants.” Jane admired her clean and buffed nails before pulling her cloth napkin across her lap. “Apparently, it’s a tradition in this country.”

“Why Chinese food?”

“Probably because it’s one of the only types of cuisine open on such a big holiday.”

“How strange.” Prim and proper even when surrounded by a crowd of dining Americans, Willow gently unfolded her napkin and tucked it into her collar. It fanned across her chest, looking like a proper adornment she had put on before leaving the house. Their bottle of wine was the only other showing of finery in a place that boasted portraits of pandas and gilded barriers adorned with the characters for “luck” and “happiness.” Jane’s family did not often dine in such establishments back in Hong Kong, but Willow was the first to admit she – and others – gravitated toward them when abroad because “you always know what you’re going to get from a place that serves duck liver and practices proper feng shui.” Caitlyn had once quipped it sounded like the same reason her family ate at McDonald’s whenever they went abroad. *My mother would faint.* That woman had never eaten at a Mickey D’s in her life. She barely knew the directions to White Fir’s closest 7/11.

*This was a dumb idea.* Jane should have had something delivered to her mother’s apartment and had dinner there. Instead, she subjected herself to a public outing on the biggest holiday of the Gregorian calendar. *What was I thinking?* Had

this been Caitlyn's idea? Willow's? Or was Jane the culprit, and she merely searched for a scapegoat?

Perhaps it was nobody's fault. Maybe Jane was always meant to eat a Chinese Christmas dinner with her mother as if this were something they did every year.

"How is Caitlyn doing?"

Jane looked up from her nails. "Hm?" She surely must have misheard her mother. Willow was not one to ask after Caitlyn unless there was some ulterior motive.

"She went to her family's home for the occasion, did she not?" Willow switched to Cantonese once a family of four sat down at the nearest table. Their boisterous laughter and garish "ugly" Christmas sweaters were almost too much for either Willow or Jane to take. "I will never remember what city she is from, but I suppose it does not matter. I take it she and her family are well?"

"As far as I know." Jane was aware that her mother had left out someone else. "Rebecca is fine as well. We enjoyed last week's wedding in California."

Her mother inhaled so deeply that Jane worried Willow would pass out. "I am sure that winter in California is quite nice. Not as nice as Hong Kong, though."

"I didn't mind it. A bit warmer than it is out here, for sure."

This small talk was more draining than a full-blown argument with her mother. *At least I know how to handle an argument.* How sad was that? Jane and Willow were so much



more likely to be at each other's theoretical throats that a simple, quiet dinner in a Chinese American restaurant filled with boisterous patrons felt strange. Something that so many other families took for granted only made the bile rise in Jane's throat.

"They'll be back the day after tomorrow," Jane said, breaking the silence. "Right on time for us to get hitched."

Finally, Willow's eyebrows arched up her forehead. "Please do not put it like that, Lin Hua." Great. The real name was out. "Getting married, even for your reasons, is a very serious thing. Besides, this is your second marriage. Please do not embarrass us by doing it poorly."

"I'd think I was already embarrassing everyone because I'm marrying an American woman. Again."

"Believe it or not, there are ways to embarrass us more. At least you have better restraint than your sister."

"You mean I didn't marry a respectable Chinese man, have his children, and *then* start the lesbian affair?"

Jane pushed buttons, and she knew it, but she also couldn't help it. *As I said, I only know arguments.*

Yet Willow didn't take the bait. Her elbow uncharacteristically touched the table, finger on top of her lip and her attentions elsewhere. "Yes, well..." She cleared her throat before sitting back again. Willow rearranged her utensils, including the lacquered chopsticks, before continuing. "You've always known who you are and what you want. If I

could say nothing else about you, it's that you have a strong will. Some will say that it's a terrible trait in a daughter, but it's a new world and a new era. I actually think that having a strong-willed and head-strong daughter like you is a boon in this modern age. At least you can take care of yourself. That's all a mother like me asks for. It's why I fret for your sister as much as I do. Surely, you understand that."

"I do. I've told Lilian as much."

"Hn. Well." Willow did not look up when the server brought out their first course. As greens drenched in sauce remained neatly arranged for their amusement, neither Willow nor her daughter picked up their chopsticks. "Perhaps you know, although I've never told you children about why I feel this way."

Jane vaguely recalled something her sister had said back in early October. "Does it have to do with you and your parents escaping to Hong Kong?"

Willow touched her mouth again. Her other hand gathered the fabric of her tight pencil skirt. *She's never looked so old.* Wrinkles and the occasional dark spot were not uncommon on Willow's skin, but for the first time since Jane had known her mother, the woman looked her age. *It's hard to imagine her as someone my age, and yet...* Jane knew she looked into her future. She always took more after her mother than her father.

"I was not raised to take care of myself," Willow said. "My life was planned out for me when I was born. Your grandfather was a well-respected doctor both before and after the

Revolution. Both of my grandmothers had the bound feet of the aristocracy, although my mother did not. It had fallen out of favor by then, and it was her luck because after the Revolution she was expected to help in her husband's clinic. It was a lot of running around helping people. I remember that much. Part of the reason my father remained in the Party's good graces is because he went out of his way to make house calls whether you were a former landowner or a beggar. My mother often went with him when she didn't have to look after me or the clinic."

"I see. You've never talked about living on the Mainland before."

"There was not much to ever tell you children. The only reason you knew I was from the Mainland is because your father's mother never let me forget it."

"Are you sure you didn't say anything because you were ashamed?"

Willow lightly snorted. "Ashamed? No. A girl cannot help her circumstances as a child. My mother, though... I was too young to go to school when we left, that much I remember. Even so, my mother, who was a bit older for a new mom, was convinced that she would find me as good of a match in a husband as her mother had found for her. I was taught all of the finer things like manners and needlework. As much as a young child can learn such things. I remember her and my father fighting about it all the time... he was worried that it would bring us a black mark as if we were as bourgeois as

ever. I didn't understand at the time, but people were severely punished for stepping out of line. Some, like my father, could be made examples of. I mean.. people were killed, Lin Hua. Sometimes in public. I have memories of those, too."

Jane absolutely had no appetite now. "You don't have to talk about this. Come on, Ma, it's Christmas. It's like talking about these things on my birthday."

Yet Willow's floodgates had opened. While what burst forth was a trickle in the grand scheme of things, they were words that could not be taken back. "I never really knew what the impetus for our escape was. I simply remember my parents began playing a game with me. They wanted me to crawl into a trunk, shrink up really small, and hold my breath. My mother also told me to pray that I didn't get any bigger. We did that every day before bed."

*Lilian wasn't kidding.* Jane insisted to the server that everything was fine. Still, she could not bring herself to eat her appetizer.

"One day I got into the trunk, and I did not get out for a whole day. I was jostled about and fed air through a small hole my mother had made on the side. At times, it was damp. A blanket was under and over me, but I was afraid. All around me were voices... terrible, threatening voices. I remember my father trying to stay calm amidst train and ferry whistles. I remember my mother pleading with some guard. He wanted to inspect the trunk. She was afraid, naturally. If they caught them smuggling me across the border without a visa, I'd be

taken away, and they'd probably be killed. I don't know what she said to keep that guard from looking in the trunk. All I know is that when they let me out, the flag was different, and people spoke a Cantonese dialect I didn't recognize. My mother held me for a whole day. She never stopped crying and thanking God. My father was a changed man. He was more emotional after that. Good emotions, dangerous emotions..."

Jane sighed. "I'm sorry you had to go through that. I had no idea."

"Why would I have told you before now? I've never had two willful daughters insisting on their own destinies. It was enough when there was only one..."

"You mean me?"

"Who else could I mean?"

"Still, your family did well for themselves when they made it to Hong Kong."

"Yes. My father's skills integrated him well. We lived frugally for the first few years, but my mother was allowed to become a refined lady once more. Thanks to them, they met people like your father's family, and the rest is history. Now I spend most of my time wondering what it would have been like had my own mother taken off her blinders and raised me to be stronger."

"How could a situation like that not make you a stronger person, though? It was trauma, wasn't it?"

“We never thought of it that way. It was a situation. You lived through it. You got through it. Or you died, you know? That was the fact of the matter. Lots of people were alive one day and gone the next. You’d still hear their laughter echoing in your yard when they were already dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing. My goodness. Maybe you’re soft, after all.”

Jane wanly smiled. “I don’t know how I could be. Such a strong woman raised me, after all.” She didn’t mention the army of nannies who helped. Now wasn’t the time.

“Do you see now, though?” Willow picked up the small teapot they shared and topped off her daughter’s cup. “I don’t want to be like my own mother. I want my daughters to take care of themselves. That has never been a problem with you. Once I came to terms with... you know.”

“That I’m a big, fat *tóngzhì*, Ma?”

“Yes, well, it took me a while to realize that set you up for the modern world in a different way. Being the way you are means you’ve had to toughen up and learn your own way. You not only have created a successful business, but you’ve surrounded yourself with trustworthy people who look out for you. You’ve also made it clear that Hong Kong is not the place for you, anyway.”

*This is the most she’s ever complimented me.* Because Jane had to take that as a compliment.

“Lilian is the exact opposite of me,” Jane said.

“She will understand. Eventually.” Willow sighed. At the same time, both women picked up their lacquered chopsticks and plucked food off their plates. “Your sister is a lot like me. In the worst ways.”

“I’m not so different from you, you know.”

Jane put food in her mouth. Willow hesitated, staring at the greens drooping from her chopsticks. “You must have spat out those words. Or have you been holding them all this time?”

“I don’t think it’s a terrible thing, to be kinda like one’s mother. We’re still both women at the end of the day.”

The slightest of smiles tugged at the corner of Willow’s mouth, but she would never say how much that sentiment pleased her. *She’s always tried to relate to me but failed.* Willow said a lot of things about her own history, but in the end, she was still stuck in her own mindset. The one that dictated she raise well-to-do daughters who were prepared to take care of themselves, but to also conform. *She must either see me as a girl or a boy. To be neither is to deny my personhood.* Jane had always been comfortable with her femininity, but to Willow (and Lilian,) she was too butch to be the kind of woman they best understood. *I don’t marry men. I don’t have children. I don’t wear pretty dresses and the kind of makeup they prefer.* Willow wasn’t as insufferable as she had been when Jane first came out, but she would never see life through her daughter’s eyes.

“Now you’re marrying again.” Willow’s chopsticks clattered against the plate. “It should be what I want for you. A mother always wants her daughter to marry well. It means she can die with no unfinished business.”

“Don’t talk about death on Christmas. Besides, you make it sound like you’re upset about the wedding. I told you, it’s only for visa purposes. I’m still with Caitlyn, too, you know.” Jane cocked her head. “Because that’s what you’re getting at, right? You and Lilian have always liked Caitlyn the best, even if you’ve never personally gushed about her.”

“Were you a son, I could be content with a wife like Caitlyn. She is beautiful, polite, and makes her own way. Not too bad of a head on her shoulders, either.”

“I’m not a son, though.”

“No. You never were, try as you might. Which meant I had to protest when you initially announced your engagement to Caitlyn.”

“Yet you came to the wedding.”

“Of course. Because you were my daughter, and I had to ensure you married well.”

Jane shook her head with a curt laugh. “I will never understand the things you say.”

“I was quite sad for you when you announced your divorce. Of course, I knew about it before you told me, but I was still sad to hear that tone in your voice. I thought that, for a woman



like you, she was the best marital match you would find in America.”

“Is this your roundabout way of saying you do not approve of Rebecca?”

“Rebecca is a fine woman as far as your random American goes. Do I think she is the best match for you in marriage? That is not for me to say, because you will do as you please.”

“Which means you don’t approve at all.”

“I did not say that, Lin Hua.”

“Well, you’re right. I will do what is necessary to keep my family together. Even your parents understood that.”

Willow’s small, glistening eyes widened. “Do you not think I’ve done everything to keep this family together? I am the reason you’re still welcomed at White Fir. If your father and older brother had their ways, you would come through the back door and defer to the servants.”

*It can’t be that bad.* Jane kept that feeling to herself. Her mother would not be swayed.

“I’m sure you two love each other, but will she be the person you need when this place gets tough on you?”

“Rebecca and I have already been through much together, with and without Caitlyn.”

“I’m not talking about your domestic arrangement.”

“Then what are you talking about, Ma?”

The server was not convinced that they enjoyed their appetizer, no matter how much Jane waved him away. Willow was not keen on explaining herself before they were alone again.

“I’m simply a blathering old woman,” Willow said. “Let’s talk about something more pleasant. Like how Americans do well to appreciate colors like red and gold at this time of year.”

Jane cracked a smile. When it came to her mother, there wasn’t much more to say.

## CHAPTER 25

## *Rebecca*

**S**he never knew what to expect from her own wedding day. *Especially after the one I went to a couple weeks ago...* That was about romance and grandeur, a celebration of two souls finally uniting beneath holy matrimony.

This? Quite perfunctory.

Their appointment at city hall was in the early afternoon. Becca awoke early, unable to sleep even though she had gone to bed late. After a shower and a languid breakfast in the living room, where she was alone with nothing but her thoughts, she yearned to know that someone was coming to support her that day. But her mother was gone, and her father only maintained a passing interest in her existence. The few friends she had who knew about the wedding were told they'd all have dinner together at a later date. For as soon as the ceremony was over, Becca, Jane, and Caitlyn were off to the finest honeymoon suite for the night. Then life would go on as usual, all the way up until their early January vacation in Hawaii. *A honeymoon, but not really.*

Caitlyn was the first one up after Becca. They sat together in the living room, gazing out the window and upon the lazy winter river flowing by. Their mutual silence was only punctured by the clacking of Caitlyn's nails against her cup of coffee.

Eventually, she went down the hall and roused Jane from her slumber. Only those two knew when Willow was due to arrive, but everyone was aware that Jane should be presentable before the representative from White Fir came to watch her youngest child get married again.

"Is this what you're wearing?" Willow followed Becca into her room, where she beheld the white three-piece outfit. "I suppose it's modern, and old-fashioned at the same time."

*Says the woman wearing the same thing, but in lavender.* Becca bit back that observation. She was well aware that her outfit looked more matronly than bridal, but even Caitlyn had commented it suited the occasion well. Nevertheless, she allowed Willow to help her with the makeup and pick which pieces of jewelry to wear.

"I thought you'd be helping Jane," was all Becca said to her new mother-in-law.

Willow didn't dare touch Becca's hair. That was left to the woman who clipped a barrette into her bangs and dithered between wearing the rest either in front of or behind her ear. "Caitlyn insisted on helping Jane," Willow said. "I am not in charge here, so who am I to say who helps who? I will go where I am needed."

The four of them took a chauffeured limo down to city hall, where a small crowd gathered on the sidewalk to watch the main couple emerge in wedding finery. While congratulations rang out from one end of the sidewalk to the other, Becca imagined these strangers throwing birdseed while she and her new wife burst forth from a cute, sizable chapel.

Instead, they were at city hall. This was nothing but business.

Like a well-oiled machine, they were ushered to a private room on the third floor, where they would sign the marriage license and hold the short ceremony officiated by a judge who Damon Monroe personally knew. *Anyone he knows, we use in times like these.* Hands were shaken. Compliments were doled out. Becca felt like she was at a graduation ceremony more than her own wedding.

“How practical.” Willow looked over the wedding license and took her place by the wall. “Much cheaper than your first wedding.”

“You should see the cost of our honeymoon,” Jane mused. “It’s not cheap getting a nice suite on the beach in Honolulu. In January, no less.”

“You’re going to Hawaii?” asked the judge. “How lovely! I went to Hawaii for my honeymoon as well. You’re right, though. It’s an expensive time of year to go. Shall we?”

Caitlyn handed Becca the small bouquet of flowers that had been in their fridge since the day before. A base of poinsettias was interspersed with a few white lilies. When Becca brought

them home from the florist's, Jane quipped that they perfectly matched Becca's hair and bridal outfit. *Maybe they match too well.*

"You all right?" While Jane went over something with the judge, Caitlyn fussed with a lily in Becca's bouquet. "You look lovely, by the way."

"Thanks. I'm fine. Simply a little nervous." Becca glanced at the diamond brooch on Caitlyn's breast. "I don't feel half as pretty as you."

"Becca..." Caitlyn smoothed the tops of Becca's fine bangs. "Today is your day. Don't get hung up on what I'm wearing." She said that while looking radiant in a royal blue sweater dress that hugged every curve of her body. Her blond hair was curled on the back of her head, a few strands dangling past her ears and the sapphire studs in her lobes. She looked nothing like her own wedding photos from several years before. Of course, she didn't look like the woman of back then. Why would she? She wasn't the one getting married. "Let's focus on you. Come on." She opened her arms for a hug. Becca walked into that embrace, savoring the moment.

A kiss touched her forehead. When Caitlyn backed away, Jane was right behind Becca, waiting for her to join everyone else at the front of the room.

"Let's go, love," Jane softly said. "He's a busy man."

Becca took Jane's hand and stood before the judge. He offered a simple smile and assured both women that he wanted

this done right for their sake as well. Willow remained by the wall. Caitlyn stood off to the side, eyes cast downward.

Becca's stomach tumbled. She told herself it was nerves. After today, she was legally a married woman. Things would change, whether she liked it or not.

"Everything all right?" Jane whispered to Becca while the judge donned his reading glasses and picked up the correct script. "You're sweating, love."

"And you're not," Becca noticed.

"I've already done this before. Are you sure you don't want to time out for a few minutes?"

How could she ask something like that? At a time like this? The judge was ready to go. Becca had her flowers, had worn the right outfit, and now stood in front of everyone she loved – and a woman who would soon be her legal mother-in-law. Sure, she had no friends or family here. And, sure, she wasn't sure who she would invite at such a last minute, besides maybe Nadia and a couple other people she trusted to keep a secret. *Maybe that's part of the problem.* Here was Rebecca Pruitt: red hair, freckled skin, early thirties. Over three years ago, she had pledged to love two women equally, even if there were days when she related to one more than the other. Over three years ago, she had also pledged to keep harmony in her household. She knew her place when it was her, Jane, and Caitlyn. She knew her role in the home. What was so special about what they shared was that it was never, ever supposed to wobble.



Her marrying one of them changed a few things, didn't it?

“Thank you to everyone who is here today to witness the union between Jane Wong and Rebecca Pruitt,” the judge said, louder than Becca’s own thoughts. Today, they begin a new life together, but it is my humble understanding that it is a life already in medias res.”

Becca felt Caitlyn’s eyes on the back of her head. Even though Caitlyn stood off to the side, Becca felt it. *Now she’s looking at Jane. Now Willow. Now the judge.* Yet Caitlyn said nothing, her prim lips closed, and her hands clasped before her. The ring she wore to symbolize her household with Jane and Becca was prominently on her finger.

“This marriage, like all marriages, is founded on the principles of love, honor, and respect,” the judge continued. “Like all other contracts, this is not one to enter lightly. The intention behind today’s vows is a lifelong one. If for any reason, there is someone present who believes that these two do not intend to uphold their vows or should not otherwise be wed, please speak now.”

The only sound in the room was the low hum of the heater in the corner. *I’m in somebody’s office getting married in front of a humming heater.* Becca slowly exhaled her breath, her mouth so small that she swore the judge never noticed. He was too busy getting to the next part of the short ceremony.

“Do you, Jane Wong, take Rebecca Pruitt to be your lawfully wedded wife? Do you promise to take care of her, in sickness and in health? To support her in rich times and poor?

Will you be by her side for the rest of your natural lives, watching your marriage grow stronger and more secure as the years pass?”

Jane squeezed Becca’s hand. Was she afraid that Becca might choose now to run away?

“I do,” Jane said.

The judge’s neutral smile did not waver as he looked at Becca, whose nerves had her shaking so badly that the petals of her bouquet threatened to fall to her feet. No matter how much Jane clutched her bride’s hand, however, the sweat between them was so intense that they struggled to stay together.

“Do you, Rebecca Pruitt, take Jane Wong to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

He said the other words. Words that no longer held any meaning to Becca, a woman who was in so over her head that she was afraid to look at Willow or Caitlyn. Willow might find her wanting as a daughter-in-law. Caitlyn might be disappointed in her.

“Ms. Pruitt?”

Only then did Becca realize that everyone waited for her to answer.

“I...” She cleared her throat. This time, as she stood up straight and tipped her chin forward, she would say the words. *There is still the ring portion of the ceremony after this.* The vows didn’t matter as much as the judge pronouncing them

legally wed and watching them sign the license before it was filed with a clerk downstairs. *Then it's real. Only then.* She should say the words. Two little words. They really didn't mean anything in the grand scheme of things.

Even though she dearly loved Jane. The problem wasn't with her commitment to Jane or wanting to help her keep their family together, uninterrupted.

The problem was... everything else.

*What about Caitlyn? What about when Jane and I fight, and this is held over our heads?* Becca was on the hook for all things legally related to Jane. Sure, the prenups were written, signed, and filed, but what if immigration or the IRS had questions in the future? Was Becca prepared to handle that? Was she ready to ask Caitlyn the hard questions about what she should do, and what that might do to *their* relationship?

Becca glanced over her shoulder while everyone waited for her to answer. Caitlyn spared her a brief glance but attempted a neutral countenance. Nevertheless, she could hardly keep looking forward into nothingness. Not when Becca gave her a look like *that*.

"Cait." Jane dropped Becca's hand and turned around. "What are you doing?"

Becca stepped out of the way. Caitlyn took the flowers and stood next to Jane.

"Doing something I should have agreed to do a long while ago." Caitlyn sighed. "I know this is highly irregular, your

honor, but humor us, would you? I need to marry this idiot. Again.”

Becca stumbled back toward Willow. As much as she knew she should protest, she couldn't. The weight off her shoulders was too great.

And the words coming out of Willow's mouth were too honest.

“Thank God,” she muttered. “This is more like it.”

## CHAPTER 26

## Caitlyn

The writing had been on the wall for the past few weeks. Every time Caitlyn imagined a world where Rebecca and Jane tied the knot – even for legal purposes – she bit her tongue but still tasted the weird flavor in her mouth.

It didn't make sense. It never had.

*Our family isn't built to sustain that kind of dynamic.* From the beginning, Rebecca's biggest fear about getting involved with an established couple like Caitlyn and Jane was that she would always feel beneath them. That they had somehow transcended some great relationship secret that she was never privy to, no matter how much she matured or grew into her own woman as the years went by. Yet, in the end, that had been the preferred dynamic. Caitlyn and Jane's original marriage had been born from a deep and desirous love for one another, but the divorce came because Caitlyn wanted to take on a different role in the relationship – and Jane could not abide. *Rebecca is the woman who holds the balance between us.* Once upon a time, that had been Olivia's role, but she was

a figment of Caitlyn's past. She had moved on to another phase of her life.

There was still a chance to save Rebecca's role, though.

*I'll be damned if this family crashes and burns because I was too chickenshit to do what had to be done.* Yes, the pain of divorce was always etched upon Caitlyn's soul – even when a woman got back with her ex-wife and figured out a new life, it didn't change what had happened, or the raw, covetous feelings they endured. Yet Caitlyn couldn't let that define her relationship with Jane. The woman who would always be a part of her life, come hell or high water, needed her help. Rebecca needed her help. Caitlyn was in a position to change everyone's fates – for the better.

She could help Jane, the original love of her life, stay where she wanted to be most – and she could help Rebecca, the other half of her romantic soul, maintain the precarious balance that kept them whole.

“What are you doing?” Jane asked her again, as they stood together in front of a bemused judge. “Cait, you can't.”

“Why not? Who are you to say what I can and can't do? My husband?” Caitlyn wrapped her arm around Jane's, the poinsettia and lily bouquet wrinkling in her grasp. “I've never had any use for a husband. A wife, though...”

“We're divorced.”

“I don't know how they do things in Hong Kong, Lin, but here in America you can marry someone you've already

divorced.”

The incredulous look on Jane’s face said it all. *Are you nuts?* Yes, Caitlyn was “nuts” right now. Her heart thundered in her chest, and her fingertips moistened with sweat. Yet her mother’s words continued to pound in her head. “*Know who you are and what you want.*” That was the gist of Christie’s comments. Caitlyn was destined to be a woman who took control where necessary. Wasn’t that what led to the first divorce between her and Jane?

“We don’t have a prenup – Becca and I do,” Jane continued.

“I’ll give you two a moment.” The judge backed away. “Because this *is* highly irregular.”

Jane took Caitlyn by the arm and dragged her toward the window, as far away as they could get from Rebecca and Willow. Caitlyn did not look at anyone. For a moment, her attention was reserved for the dreary, overcast sky that always hit this city at the end of the year. When she looked at Jane again, it was with the understanding that this conversation could go one of two ways.

Either they were getting married again, or everyone but Willow walked out of this room still single. Jane would eat the cost of that.

“Cait, I love you.” Jane shook her head when she said that. “You know that, but I can’t let you do this. You said so yourself that once was enough for you. I can’t let you go through this again knowing that you feel the way you do. Even



though...” She sighed, sharing Caitlyn’s view of the drizzly cityscape beyond the city hall. “Never mind.”

Caitlyn cupped her hand around the back of Jane’s head, feeling the soft, shorn hairs that faded from her scalp to the back of her neck. “I love you, too. I always will. I don’t see that ever changing. Do you?”

“Of course not.”

“Lin, when we divorced, it was because we didn’t know who we were or who we wanted to be. Now we know. We’ve got a home and a family that we’re committed to. We have a business that challenges us and lets us do as we please in our personal lives.” Caitlyn lowered her voice. “I’ve been thinking about this for a long time. Ever since you said what you had to do. I’ve felt terrible about putting all the pressure on Becca to help keep us all together. She doesn’t know what she’s in for with you as her wife.”

“What does that mean, Cait?”

She didn’t fall for the huffy bait. “I think you know. You’ve been married before.”

They held tenuous eye contact until Jane looked away again, her bottom lip inside her mouth and her shoulders slumping toward the window. Although she was as stunning as ever in her three-piece suit, Caitlyn saw right past the subtle makeup and silver studs in her earlobes. Jane was as fragile as she had been when she and Caitlyn first met in that Chicago bar. *Running away from her family and running away from Hong Kong.* Jane had no future where she had been born. Not

unless she brought back the strongest person she could ever add to her team.

*Which is exactly what she did when she met me.* They had been different people then. They were stronger people now.

“It’s not only about you and me,” Caitlyn said. “It’s about Rebecca, too. We’ve dragged her into our mess. Let’s not drag her in deeper. Marriage crap... that’s our business. Besides, the way our home and business life are set up, it makes more sense for us to do it like this. You must know what I mean, Lin.”

Although Jane’s visage couldn’t have been more surprised, she didn’t say anything to refute Caitlyn’s statement. Instead, she quipped, “My mother must be really pleased by these developments.”

Caitlyn didn’t know what Willow had to do with any of this, and she wasn’t about to ask. *As far as I’m concerned, she’s not here.*

“Are we doing this or not?” Caitlyn asked.

“Shouldn’t we talk it over with Rebecca first?”

Caitlyn glanced at their girlfriend, who stood speechless by the wall. The way she hugged herself insinuated that she would rather be anywhere else but here right now. Yet she hadn’t run away. She was here to help and support the women she had attached herself to three years ago. *That’s Rebecca. Ride or die.* Caitlyn could relate to that.

“I think she understands.”

Jane nodded. “No prenup, though.”

“We’ll get a postnup. Lucky you, we’re still not in a 50/50 state.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

Caitlyn nicked her partner’s chin. “You won’t have to. Come on, Lin. Let’s get hitched.”

She stepped toward the judge, who looked up from his phone. Jane was soon behind her. Nobody said anything. Their intentions were implied through the tight vibrations in the air.

“Does anyone object?” the judge asked the witnesses.

They both shook their heads.

“What’s your name, hon?” he asked the new bride. “For the ceremony.”

“Caitlyn Adams.” She looped her arm around Jane’s again. This time, they resolutely stood side by side, as if this had been the plan all along. “Of Adams & Wong.”

The only reason the judge didn’t jump right in was because Rebecca had tentatively stepped forward, her hand on Caitlyn’s arm. “Don’t mind me,” she said to Caitlyn. Then, to the judge, “I hope it’s all right. They’re sort of my girlfriends. I should support them.”

“That’s right.” Jane’s finger moved in Rebecca’s direction. “So we’re clear, though, I’m apparently marrying the curvy blond to my right. Not the vivacious redhead.”

“Ms. Wong, I don’t care who you marry, as long as it’s legal and they consent.”

Caitlyn flashed him the on-demand beauty queen smile that once brought several *other* judges to their knees. “Not only is it legal, your honor, but I wholeheartedly consent to be attached to this woman for the rest of my natural life.”

Jane lifted Caitlyn’s hand, kissing the tops of her knuckles. Her ring already glistened beneath the lights blaring above them. Caitlyn had half a mind to take it off for the ceremony.

“Cait, love,” Jane whispered. “Are you crying?”

“What? No.” Nevertheless, Caitlyn brushed something wet from her eye. “Allergies.”

She knew she was crying. Not a lot, but enough to know that she felt every passing second as if it were a whole minute. When time slowed like that, she had no choice but to get emotional. A woman only married twice, after all.

*Because I am definitely – most definitely – never doing this again.* Caitlyn wiped another tear from her cheek. Willow stepped forward and handed her an embroidered piece of silk with the initials WW emblazoned in the corner. Caitlyn was careful to not mar the needlework. It was already enough that Willow had shown her tacit approval of the change in plans.

“Do you, Jane Wong...” the judge began again, “take Caitlyn Adams to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

“I do,” Jane said.

“And do you, Caitlyn Adams, take Jane Wong to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

Caitlyn placed the handkerchief back in her mother-in-law’s hand. With her other hand now free, she took Rebecca’s, determined that she shouldn’t feel left out. “I do, your honor.”

She didn’t hear many of his words after that. Caitlyn was too lost in the moment, for as long as it dragged out.



Willow took a separate taxi on the way to the restaurant where they would have their celebratory meal, complete with a house-made cake that was set up to Jane and Rebecca’s tastes. Caitlyn didn’t care. When she and the others piled into the back of their chauffeured limo and began the twenty-minute drive across town, she only had eyes for the women who helped her make a family.

That included Rebecca, who doubled over and started sobbing as soon as the limo moved.

Caitlyn folded over her, rubbing Rebecca’s back and smothering her face in jasmine-laden hair. Behind them, Jane offered her silent support.

“What’s wrong, baby?” Caitlyn’s coos of reassurance only made Rebecca cry more. Caitlyn pulled back ringlets of soft red hair, determined to get to the source of that crying. *If I don’t get to cry at my second wedding, you don’t get to cry in my honeymoon limo.* That was the attitude she adopted as she

urged Rebecca to sit back up and enter a warm, cushioned embrace.

“I’m... s – sorry,” Rebecca sputtered. “I was supposed to do it, but I couldn’t. I don’t know what came over me.” The more she spoke, the easier it was for her to articulate what she wanted to say to the women now giving her their undivided attention. “I was ready to do it, Jane, really, I was. But when he asked me if I was going to commit to you, it felt so wrong. I felt like I was leaving Caitlyn out. This whole time I’ve felt like you’ve been left out, Cait. Jane’s your wife. She always has been. That used to make me jealous, but now I know it’s the way it is. I love you both so, so much. I’m so grateful that you two love me, too, but... I couldn’t do it. I’m sorry, Jane. I let you down. I made you do something you didn’t want to do, Cait.”

“Rebecca.” Caitlyn folded her hands in her girlfriend’s lap. Jane slipped onto the floor of the limo and pressed her head against Rebecca’s knees. Caitlyn couldn’t resist the temptation to trace the natural part in Jane’s hair. It was no coincidence that her commitment ring was soon tangled in strands of black. “You haven’t let anyone down. It’s me who should apologize. It was always me. I’m the one who should have married Jane, like I married her last time. It’s the only way our dynamic could survive.”

“Bugger it all, I’m the one who should be sorry!” Jane propped her chin on the small divot between Rebecca’s knees. “Am I not the one who got us into this whole mess? I was so up my own ass when it came to my visa status. I should not

have rested on my stupid laurels. You two need me. I need you both. If I'm going to be here, taking care of you two as I should, then I need to be more attentive and careful. What am I doing, anyway? Acting like a complete idiot!"

They drove the rest of the way in the quiet of the limo. Caitlyn waited for Rebecca's tears to finally subside before placing a kiss on her salty cheek and whispering that she wouldn't have this arrangement any other way. Jane wondered aloud how suddenly marrying Caitlyn instead of Rebecca might affect her visa status. Rebecca questioned whether she should tell her closest friends the truth when everyone returned from the big honeymoon in Hawaii.

Caitlyn shushed them both. By the time they arrived at the restaurant, where Willow already stood outside speaking with the maître d', Caitlyn was exhausted enough to collapse back against her seat and have a nap. Instead, she was off to eat with her family.



What she had done didn't completely hit her until they reached the hotel, where two of their overnight bags were already dropped off and ready to take to the honeymoon suite. Caitlyn, who carried the leftover cake from their dinner, checked in the group while Jane and Rebecca remained in the lobby. Paired together, they certainly looked as if they were the ones who got married that day.

"That will be the three of you tonight?" the concierge asked.

“Yes, and be sure that the Champagne is delivered before the end of the hour.” Caitlyn gestured to the cake beside her. “They’ll pair well, don’t you think?”

A slight smile appeared on the young man’s face. “The Champagne is already chilled in the room. It comes standard with every reservation.”

“Oh? Lovely. Can I also request that no calls except emergencies be forwarded to the room? One of us has a very nosy family.”

“Of course, Ms. Adams.”

By the time Caitlyn returned to the others, an elderly couple was congratulating Rebecca and Jane on their obvious nuptials. Caitlyn said nothing. Not even when Jane politely corrected the couple and said, “The lovely blond behind me is the real bride around here.”

Confusion masked the couple’s faces. Caitlyn gently chided Jane for making things unnecessarily awkward. When she presented everyone with their copies of their suite key, they headed toward the elevator, cake in Caitlyn’s hand and bags hanging from Jane and Rebecca’s.

She didn’t know what she expected from a honeymoon suite, besides the Champagne, the rose petals on the bed, and the Jacuzzi recently inspected to ensure it worked for the happy couple staying there that night. Yet when Caitlyn was the first one through the door, she instantly realized that the view wasn’t that different from the one she first shared with Jane on their original wedding night over ten years ago.



Of course, it wasn't the same city. They had originally married in Chicago, the city they had met in, and the most convenient Midwestern metropolis for Caitlyn's family to visit for the wedding. Yet Caitlyn wasn't crazy for seeing the similarities. *A moon, a cityscape, and plenty of lights.* She stood in front of the large windows while Jane whistled at the Champagne selection and Rebecca inspected the bedroom. "I think we're okay," she called over her shoulder. "We could fit five people in this huge bed."

Something cold and wet brushed against Caitlyn's arm. It was the Champagne bottle, wielded by Jane's hand.

"Thank you, Cait," she said. "I don't know what I would have done had you not stepped up. I couldn't make Rebecca do something that wasn't right for her."

Caitlyn glanced over her shoulder. When she confirmed that Rebecca was still in the bedroom, she took the bottle of Champagne and said, "If Rebecca marries one of us, it's because the other is dead and buried."

"Don't say things like that, love."

"One of us has to die first, Lin. Hopefully for not many more years."

"Hopefully, yes."

"Besides," Caitlyn continued, as the two of them sauntered toward the large couch in the center of the living room, where Jane procured three Champagne glasses. "You know our Rebecca. She wants a lavish wedding like the one we had the

first go-round. Justice of the peace isn't her style. Even if she's being married by one of the biggest judges in town."

"Whom she has never heard of before today."

Jane held up the glasses. Caitlyn removed the sealer and poured the first glass.

"Cheers." Jane held up her glass and took a sip before Caitlyn finished filling her glass. She filled a third for Rebecca, who continued to take pictures and be agog over the views from the bedroom. "You know we'll have to absolutely rock her world tonight, right?"

"I like to think of it as rocking each other's world. We all deserve it, Lin."

"Bloody right you are, Cait. Now, what say we con those clothes off our girl's body and get in that hot tub? I want out of this suit. Now."

Caitlyn brought Rebecca her glass of Champagne. As soon as they toasted to each other's lives and health, Caitlyn pressed the button that lowered the blinds on the windows. She wanted to look at that familiar cityscape as much as she wanted the rest of the city to look at her and the women she loved.

"Last one in has to rub my feet." Jane tossed her empty Champagne glass onto the bed and headed toward the chamber between the bedroom and the bathroom. Her jacket soon landed on the floor. Giggling, Rebecca finished her glass of Champagne and went with her, stopping halfway across the room and looking back at Caitlyn.

“Go on,” Caitlyn said. “You can take off your pantyhose without me.”

“She wants to rub my feet!” Jane called from the Jacuzzi that soon bubbled into life. “That’s why, Becca!”

“But she loves ripping my pantyhose off...”

Caitlyn chuckled. She wasn’t so deep in her own desires that she couldn’t detach herself from the moment. Especially when she wanted to take time to drink her Champagne and contemplate what she had done that day.

Laughter and cajoles echoed from the Jacuzzi corner, Caitlyn sat on the edge of the bed and gazed at the design painted on the back of the window blinds. She didn’t know what came first: becoming caught up in the swirls and embellishments or thinking about how she’d tell her mother what had happened.

She knew how Christie would respond, though. *“Of course you did, dear. You always take my advice in the end.”*

Caitlyn wouldn’t lay such decisions at her mother’s feet, though. It was Caitlyn who interrupted the ceremony and took Rebecca’s place. *Not my mother. Not Jane’s mother. It was all me.* She wondered what it was like to have a daughter she knew so well that it was plain she was marrying the wrong woman.

Would she have said the same thing as her own mother?

“You’re missing out, Cait!” Jane called from the Jacuzzi. “What are you doing over there, love? Why don’t you bring us

all some more Champagne?”

Although she sighed, Caitlyn couldn't help but smile as she finally got up. “It's only been a few hours, and you're already bossing me around like you own me?”

Jane was nothing but emphatic apologies when Caitlyn got close enough to see that her wife wore nothing but her birthday suit in the Jacuzzi. So did Rebecca, who happily took another glass of Champagne as she leaned back in the far corner. Her long red hair was piled on top of her head with nothing but a clasp holding it all together. Caitlyn realized she'd have to figure out how to get her sweaterdress off without messing up her hair. *Like hell I'm getting it wet tonight.*

“Aren't you two a pretty picture?” Caitlyn remained dressed, heels and all, as she sipped more Champagne. “Seems a shame to get in and ruin the dynamic. This thing is meant to hold four people. Right now it's perfectly balanced with two.” She kicked off her shoes, losing three inches off her height. “Then again, I've never been known to respect the integrity of artwork.”

“Is this your fancy way of saying you like nudes?” Rebecca kicked her foot out of the water, toes wiggling in the air. Caitlyn's eyes went straight to what she could not see beneath the surface. “Because that's the only kind of artwork I think you could be talking about right now.”

Caitlyn sat on the edge of the Jacuzzi. An inch of her royal blue sweaterdress was instantly damp. Jane flicked more water

onto her wife, enticing Caitlyn to put down her glass of Champagne and ask for help getting the bottom half of her dress up her thighs.

“Ooh, I get a show.” Rebecca’s arms wrapped over the edge of the Jacuzzi as she watched Caitlyn take off her clothes. Jane was no help. The lazy lout was in no mood to get up from the hot water, and Caitlyn had to take care of everything herself – including her hosiery, which Rebecca quipped she could have made shorter work of.

“You’re in there, though, aren’t you?” Caitlyn tossed her black tights toward the bed. All that was left was her bra and underwear. As she unhooked the bra and shrugged it off her arms, she said, “You both are acting like you’ve never seen me naked before.”

Jane met Caitlyn’s naked body at the edge of the hot tub. Before a chill could settle over Caitlyn’s skin, Jane said, “To be fair, love, she’s never seen married Caitlyn naked before.”

“She’ll get to see her plenty of times over the next few years.” Caitlyn dipped a foot into the water. It was hotter than she imagined, and that was with the intense steam wrapping around her nudity like a warm blanket. “She’s also never seen married Jane naked before.”

“We’ve both seen single Becca naked, though, and she’s as plenty pretty now as she was back when we first met her.”

“You mean when you first seduced her?” Caitlyn remained on the edge of the hot tub. Unlike her partners, she preferred to ease into the hot water instead of immediately submerging

herself. “I remember the order of events, Lin. You got her all to yourself first.”

“Are you saying you had my sloppy seconds? Come on, Cait, that’s not your style.”

“So, then, you know I’ve never thought of it that way.” Caitlyn tipped back her head to finish her Champagne. She was aware that both Rebecca and Jane ogled her like a piece of fine artwork. *As God and nature intended.* The beauty queen in her had never died. “I don’t do sloppy seconds. I seduce what you love for myself, Lin.”

“Does this mean you’ve seduced yourself? Because I definitely loved you before you knew it.”

Caitlyn leaned in toward Jane, who draped herself along the edge of the Jacuzzi. Not that their noses could touch at that distance. *It doesn’t stop us.* Jane’s fair face was now flushed red from the hot water bubbling around her body and the steam wafting against her eyes and mouth. *I’ve never been so in love.* Caitlyn had half a mind to reach out and caress a rosy cheek, but Rebecca was right there.

Things were true about her, too.

“I seduce myself all the time,” Caitlyn cooed, her big toe poking out of the water. “I also seduce Rebecca more than you’ve ever known.”

“It’s true.” Champagne made Rebecca giggle more than any other kind of alcohol. She slapped her hand against her mouth when one of those current giggles made her burp. *She burps*

*like such a lady, though.* Caitlyn's former pageant coaches would be proud. "If I'm sleeping in someone else's bed, it's probably Caitlyn's."

"Which is why it's so good that you were stuck in my bed the past two months, love."

Caitlyn's foot nudged Jane's arms. "You like hogging her."

"*Hogging?* I don't know what that means, but it sounds ludicrous."

"You're clever. You can figure out what it means."

Another girlish burp sounded from the far corner of the Jacuzzi. "Excuse me," Rebecca sheepishly said. "I should probably stop drinking this. It's sooo good, though."

"They don't skimp with the honeymoon suite." Caitlyn placed her empty glass behind her. "Only the finest for the folks getting married in this city in the middle of the week."

"You know this place is booked solid for this holiday weekend."

"I'm sure it's booked tomorrow, too. We only have it for one night."

Jane grinned. "We only need it for one night."

"Right," Rebecca interjected. "Because we only live like five miles from here!"

Caitlyn couldn't help but chuckle at how bright and bubbly Rebecca was, with or without the Jacuzzi to keep up her spirits. "We've got plenty of time to relax and indulge in our

feelings when we go to Hawaii. When are we going, again? Next weekend?"

Rebecca finally handed over her Champagne glass, although there were still a few sips left. "I tried to get us there earlier," she said, "but between some high-stakes meetings happening for you two next week and everything in Hawaii being booked for the holiday season, I wanted to make *sure* we could get the time off and the best view of Waikiki. There is this suite I've had my eyes on for quite a while, you know. It's going to be perfect."

Almost immediately, Jane and Caitlyn shared a look. "How many beds does it have, Becca?" Caitlyn asked. "At least one more than this suite?"

"Oh, don't worry about that." With a sputter of the lips, Rebecca smacked her hand into the water, gently splashing Caitlyn's naked thigh. "There are two bedrooms, and a very comfortable couch if you're both angry with me because I'm hogging the whirlpool tub in one of the bathrooms. It's got the big TV, anyway."

"Who's to say I won't be the one floating between bedrooms for once?" Caitlyn glanced at Jane. "Or maybe it'll be you, Lin. Isn't it about time we danced between one or the other?"

"Honestly, we should get a one-bedroom that is all for Becca, and the two of us fight every night over who gets to sleep with her. The other gets the sofa."

"Do you think you'll win every night?"



“Hell, no. That’s part of the fun, love.”

Caitlyn rolled her eyes. “I can’t imagine you sleeping on the couch. When you’re not sick, anyway.” Now that everything beneath her knees was acclimated to the water, she submerged the rest of her torso into the heat. As the sting of hot water subsided, Caitlyn eased back into the corner between Jane and Rebecca, allowing a jet to pound water against her lower back. She wished she enjoyed the sensation as much as some people. *Relaxing? Yes. Intense? Oh, yeah.* The thing about Caitlyn and hot tubs was that she spent the first five or ten minutes adapting, and the next twenty desperately wishing for some skin-to-skin contact. Jacuzzis were an aphrodisiac of the highest order – and here she was, surrounded by two other naked women.

They had fallen right into her mischievous trap.

“I so rarely get sick,” Jane said, snapping Caitlyn’s attention back to reality once more. “In fact, I’ve been sick the least out of us. Not counting your reaction to that vaccine, Cait.”

“Don’t remind me.” Out of the three of them, Caitlyn had been sick the most. If it wasn’t the flu that ripped through her a few months ago, it was her reaction to every vaccine – including flu vaccines. Jane would slap a band-aid on her arm and go about her merry way. Rebecca would sleep all of the following day and complain of a bit of lethargy before being all better. Caitlyn? *Out on my ass with a fever, chills, and cramps everywhere.* “We’re not going to be sick these next two weeks. I want to be perfectly fine for Hawaii.”

“You’re perfectly fine now,” Rebecca said with a flutter of her eyelashes.

Caitlyn turned toward Jane. “I think she might be flirting with me.”

“Everyone’s flirting with you, Cait.”

“More like I flirt with everyone.” Rebecca raised both arms into the air, water dripping from her limbs. When she lowered them with a content sigh, Caitlyn knew the next phase of her plan was about to begin. “You should have seen me a few years ago. Kissing frogs in every direction. Not a single one of them turned into a prince, either.”

“Because you had yet to kiss me.” Jane’s foot met Rebecca’s halfway across the tub. When she elicited a fitful of giggles, Jane continued, “I was already a prince, if you ask me.”

Caitlyn had to respond to that. “You always have been, Lin. First time I saw you in that bar, I turned to my friend and said, *‘I hope that’s a woman because I want to eat her alive.’*”

“If I had been a bloke?”

“Eh.”

Jane laughed. Rebecca’s chortles were louder, though.

“You were allll over me at the airport,” she reminisced. “You told me to join you on your private jet. Like I didn’t know what that meant.”

“I should have hoped you knew what it meant. I wanted to shag you from here to wherever the fuck I was going.” Jane nudged Caitlyn. “Where were we flying that night?”

“Chicago, I think.”

“Always Chicago. Only thing that city is good for is meeting pretty girls like you.”

“Yet you spent so much time there.”

“Because I was destined to meet you. Wasn’t my fault you took forever to show up.”

Rebecca held her arms close to her chest. “Does this mean I was destined to meet you at the airport? Where you flirted with me right in front of your partner?”

“Yeah, Lin, how was that supposed to work? You seduce her back to our plane, and surprise, here’s Caitlyn? She likes to watch?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time a cute girl got a bonus woman in the bed. You’re as guilty sometimes.”

“Not anymore! Why, you’re still an atrocious flirt.” Caitlyn splashed water in Jane’s direction. “I think it’s a sport to you. You love to see how many women still want you. Including us.”

“Yes, including you! Which is why I’m always dragging one or both of you off to bed. Isn’t that right, Becca? Caitlyn’s over here saying how many times she’s seduced you, but we haven’t talked about how many nights you’ve spent with *me*. Especially these past few weeks. They haven’t been all

platonic, now have they? Why, we've been very, very busy because sometimes you think you're going to sleep, and instead... voila! You're on top of someone having a grand time."

Rebecca bit her lip, the white of her teeth bright against the darkened water. "She makes it sound like it was every night. More like twice a week, at most."

"Still at least one more time a week than we would normally have sex."

"Really? Only once a week?" Caitlyn asked. "I'm getting in that at least twice a week."

"What a braggart. You know I have to give you attention, too, Cait. Do you two think I can go all night, every night? Please. If you're lucky, I'm not asleep by ten."

"At least you're adorable when you're asleep." Caitlyn turned her foot's attention over to Rebecca, who immediately returned the favor while curling up in her corner and still giggling. *My God, what have we done to her?* How many glasses of Champagne did she have? Couldn't have been more than one, maybe one and a half! "Remember what you said about kissing frogs and finding a prince? I'd love to see an example of that."

"Now, Cait," Jane chided her. "Are you telling her to seduce me?"

"What? Do you think it would take more than a minute? Come on. It's the big wedding night. You two don't get out of

it.”

“Who said we wanted to get out of it?” Rebecca parted the water with her hands, some of her red hair falling to the bubbling surface. “When I woke up this morning, this was the part I looked forward to the most.”

“What? Seducing us? Or us getting *you* into bed?” Caitlyn asked.

“I think she means getting it on with me.” Jane slammed her elbows on the edges of the Jacuzzi and lifted her torso until there was no imagination left. That was her, half-naked, the same sight Caitlyn had seen thousands of times since she first got into bed with Jane Wong over ten years ago. *Time flies when you’re having fun*. Even their temporary separation after their divorce felt like so long ago. *I hope that never happens again*. The separation, that was. If for some reason she and Jane deemed it suitable to divorce (or annul) again, Caitlyn hoped it was for practical reasons, not because they didn’t see a romance working between them. *I can’t stand the thought*. Jane was a part of her heart as much as Rebecca was. Like them, Caitlyn would do anything to keep the family together.

In fact, hadn’t she done “anything” already?

“Humor me.” Unlike Jane, Caitlyn completely pushed herself beneath the water until the bubbles touched her chin. Her hair came dangerously close to getting wet, but she didn’t care. “I’d love to see how tonight would have gone should Rebecca have gone ahead with the legal deed.”

For the first time since getting into the tub, Rebecca blushed hard enough to set fire to her freckles. “I’m being put on the spot,” she said to Jane.

“Sure seems that way, love. Works for me, though. I wouldn’t mind you putting in the effort while I reap the benefits. Think of all the times I did most of the work. You owe your ol’ Jane who was almost your wife.”

“You two are impossible,” Rebecca whispered, barely audible over the jets.

“No, Becca,” Caitlyn said with a forced sigh, “we’re horny.”

“Very, very randy.”

“Aren’t you?”

Rebecca bashfully turned toward her private corner, where one wet hand touched her cheek and the other stifled the shrillest giggles yet.

“Damnit, Cait, we broke her.”

“It’s you she’s thinking about, Lin. I think it’s you who technically broke her.”

“You’re saying this lady isn’t thinking about what we’re going to do to her?”

“What *are* we doing to her?” Caitlyn asked.

“You tell me.” Jane leaned so far back into her seat that the bubbles from the jets rippled around her torso and happily popped along the ledge. “I’m simply along for the ride, love.”

Caitlyn studied both Jane's and Rebecca's profiles. *It's not like I haven't watched them before.* When everyone was into it, didn't Caitlyn have a great time? Didn't she forget the things in her life that made her want to tear her hair out and scream? The matters both professional and personal? Over a decade ago, Jane offered her an escape – and three years ago, that same woman offered Rebecca a similar escape. *Only with me helping.* There was a joke about the teacher and the graduate in there. Except Caitlyn refuted that idea. All Jane had done was see the potential and unlocked everything dwelling deep within Caitlyn. She was a different woman from the one who first married Jane Wong in a lovely Chicago ceremony. She was even different from the woman who announced it wasn't going to work anymore and served the divorce papers.

Because while the decision to divorce had been mutual, Caitlyn did the serving. They had also decided that was easier since she was a citizen and their marriage was only recognized in America, not in Hong Kong.

Now here they were again. Two different women, but the same love simmering between them for the rest of their lives.

“I think...” Caitlyn pursed her lips in thought. Meanwhile, everyone's attentions were on her, the queen of the hot tub court. “I should get a snapshot of what would have been going on in here had *Becca* been the one to tie your knot, Lin.’

“Why are you telling me that? *Becca's* the one who is doing the work there.”

“Is that what you think?” Rebecca’s arms parted the water as she leaned in toward Jane and Caitlyn. “Don’t give me the excuse that you’re too tired to do some work, Jane.”

“Ah-ah!” Jane’s finger dripped with water when she lifted it toward Rebecca’s oncoming lips. “You’re forgetting yourself, love. You’re the third side of our triangle. Now Cait and I are legally shackled up again. You know what that means, right?”

Rebecca’s shoulders shimmied as she covered her smiling face with a pruned hand. “What? I have to do everything you two say?”

“And then some,” Caitlyn added. “I think you’ve forgotten yourself a bit these past few months, Becca. Here it is, Jane and mine’s wedding night, and you’re calling us *so* informally. We don’t go through what we do and put up with the crap that comes our way for our dependent girlfriend to call us by our names.”

“Bloody hell, Cait, don’t scare her away.”

“I’m not scaring her.” Caitlyn cocked her head as she caught Rebecca’s bashful attention once again. “Am I? See? She likes it.”

“Maybe,” Rebecca chirped.

“What are you supposed to call us, Becca?”

She brushed her shoulder against the ledge nearest Jane, whose arms hung open in invitation. Still, Rebecca kept her distance until she was told to come closer. *And other kinds of coming, I’m sure.* The more they delved into this scenario, the



warmer Caitlyn's skin became. She couldn't blame it on the water, either.

She blamed it on how badly she wanted to kiss these women.

"Please don't tell me you're too worn out to show me some affection, Mistress," Rebecca sweetly said to Jane, whose visage instantly melted. "I'd be really sad."

"Helpless, too, apparently," Caitlyn muttered.

"Aw, Rebecca. Come over here. I can't say no to that pleading face."

Caitlyn didn't want to take credit for this, but she indulged in the happy look on Rebecca's face all the same. *She's as beautiful now as she was when we met her.* Granted, that was only three years ago, but a lot could happen in three years. That had been true for Rebecca, who dealt with a nasty breakup with her previous girlfriend, depression, moving in with Caitlyn and Jane after only knowing them for a short while, and a global pandemic as soon as they finally settled into their new routine. For the past two years alone, Rebecca had taken care of their home while Caitlyn panicked over her family and Jane took control of the reins of their business. Even though the three of them were physically closer than ever before, the emotional distance had been great for several months.

But Rebecca kept them glued together. Caitlyn would always love her for that.

She didn't need Rebecca to look at her when she pulled herself into Jane's embrace and curled her hands around the ledge of the Jacuzzi. Caitlyn wasn't left out. Not when she had such a fantastic view of Rebecca planting a kiss on Jane's mouth and sliding her thighs over a lap too submerged in hot water to see.

"That's what I'm talking about." Caitlyn grabbed Rebecca's Champagne glass and helped herself to the last few drops. "Finally, some wedding entertainment."

Both women were too lost in their own world to hear her. Or maybe that was the loud jets sounding over Caitlyn's soft voice. *Don't know, don't care.* She was already lost in the world that Jane and Rebecca crafted as they wrapped their arms around one another and kissed like it was their wedding day, after all.

In a way, it was, though.

*In a perfect world, we'd all be married to each other, and that would be that.* Even if Jane were an American citizen and Rebecca was as independently rich as them, it was illegal. Impossible. Instead, the best Jane and Caitlyn could sort out was what they had already planned should something unfortunate happen to one or both of them – because one never knew when they might be in the same accident or succumb to some communicable illness. They were dedicated to taking care of Rebecca, although the woman didn't know to what extent. Half of their cumulative estate was left to her in their wills. The condo would instantly go to her, as well as a trust

that should cover the taxes and maintenance for the next seven years, should she choose to not sell. While Caitlyn lived far away from her family and Jane didn't want anything to do with most of hers, Rebecca had *no* family beyond the two women in this hot tub with her. That always weighed on Caitlyn's mind.

It also made her want to make even more love to the woman whose life had been changed by a pair of crazy billionaires who had more money than sense.

*I want to make love to both of them.* Caitlyn folded her arms beneath her head and watched both of her life partners get so wrapped up in their erotic world that it was only a matter of time before Rebecca grinded in Jane's lap and the soft moans carried across the tub. As more of Rebecca's hair came undone from her clasp, it curled against her bare and water-dripped back. Yet she raised so high out of the water with every thrust of Jane's oncoming finger that the tips of her long hair never once touched the bubbles making merry.

*This is the life.* Champagne, Jacuzzi, and two women making naked love right in front of Caitlyn. She couldn't help but smile at her good fortune as she finished Rebecca's Champagne and placed the empty glass back where it belonged. As soon as her hand was in the water again, it slipped between her thighs, and she joined her wife and girlfriend in eager spirit.

Something whispered between Jane and Rebecca before one slammed herself against the other, their energy rippling

through the water with every budding gasp escaping Rebecca's throat. Caitlyn's finger kept the beat with Jane's, and every time Rebecca thrust down into Jane's lap, Caitlyn pretended she was in the thick of it. She might as well. She was close enough to hear Jane tell Rebecca to ease off because one of the jets had given up the ghost.

"You destroyed it with that amazing pussy of yours, love." Jane stretched both arms above her head with a satisfied sigh as Rebecca slumped back into her corner, looking like she had won a million dollars (with interest.)

"Did you finish her off already?" Caitlyn asked. "She looks like she needs to be carried out of the tub."

"Absolutely not. I saved some for you."

"How was it?"

She had asked Rebecca, but Jane answered. "Tight and unrelenting, the way you like it."

Caitlyn smacked Jane's arm. For that, they followed it up with a kiss of their own.

## CHAPTER 27

## *Jane*

**W**hen Jane woke up that morning, she only knew one thing: she was getting married. She simply didn't know to who.

Oh, Rebecca had volunteered as willing tribute, but deep down Jane had suspected things might go another way. Had she expected Rebecca to get cold feet in the middle of the ceremony before Caitlyn stepped up to save the day, though? No. Jane knew her women could be dramatic, but that blew all other expectations out of the water.

Now here she was. Married to Caitlyn. Again.

Was she grateful? Of course. Was she anxious? Naturally. Yet she had been anxious about marrying Rebecca, too, although for different reasons.

In the end, Jane only cared about one thing: maintaining the integrity of her family, by any means necessary.

The fact they were both fantastic lovers was a grand bonus. Then again, Jane supposed she would never end up in this kind

of arrangement with women who *didn't* light her fire or kill a Jacuzzi jet because their knee banged into it one too many times.

“I am the luckiest idiot in the world.” Jane stood at the edge of the only bed in their suite, her knee pressing into the comforter while Rebecca splattered into spread eagle and Caitlyn fluffed the pillow on her preferred side. “Do you two think I deserve to have the hottest women I’ve ever met naked on my wedding night bed?” What she didn’t mention was that one had the kind of curves that caused heart attacks and the other was a veritable fantasy with her freckles and soft red hair. Honestly, Jane didn’t know which one to throw herself on first. “Because I have a high evaluation of myself, but even I don’t think I deserve *this*. My God. Maybe one. Two, though? I feel so greedy.”

“As long as you have enough energy for the both of us.” Caitlyn crawled onto the bed behind Rebecca and grabbed her. Rebecca squealed in delight as her limbs instantly entwined with Caitlyn’s. The only reason Jane knew one’s began and the other’s ended was because she had memorized every freckle on Rebecca’s skin and every mole on Caitlyn’s. When a woman saw them naked as often as Jane had those past few years... well, it was inevitable, wasn’t it?

“I think you deserve it.” Rebecca wasn’t quite smothered by Caitlyn. At least not enough that Jane couldn’t ogle those perky breasts with the pleasantly tiny nipples that dotted Rebecca’s chest. “Anyone I love as much as I do you must deserve it.”

Jane slapped her hand over her own chest. “Why, how romantic! Now, do Cait.”

“Yeah. Do me now.” Caitlyn jostled Rebecca. “How much do you love me?”

While Rebecca collected herself, Jane slipped onto the bed, careful to avoid the foot flying in her direction. She placed herself precipitously in front of Rebecca, teasing her with a kiss before diverting to Caitlyn’s elbow. Soon, they were all laughing, although Jane was the loudest of them all.

“I love you just as much.”

Any other day and Caitlyn would have chided Rebecca to come up with something better. Yet tonight, when emotions were high and everyone in the mood to make love, Caitlyn merely nuzzled the back of Rebecca’s neck and said, “I don’t think I will let you go.”

“You look like you’re serving her up on a platter for me,” Jane said.

“Think of her as my wedding gift. I got us something to share.”

“My, my.” Jane didn’t hesitate. While her hand smacked against the heft of Caitlyn’s ass, her mouth lowered to Rebecca’s bellybutton. “You’ve really gone off the deep end, Cait. When I met you, you were too shy to get naked in front of your friend.”

“No, I wasn’t. I was shy about all the attention you paid me over her.”



“What can I say? I know wife material when I meet it.” Jane’s tongue briefly dipped into Rebecca’s navel. The shudder ripping through her passed to Caitlyn, who kept a strong grip on the woman who might wiggle away. “Two for two. I’d marry either one of you any day.”

“You did technically almost marry both of us today.”

“Unfortunately, the law only lets me have one on a piece of paper, but I can stick my mouth on the other whenever I bloody well please.”

Caitlyn grabbed Rebecca’s leg and pulled it up so Jane’s head could disappear between two warm thighs. “Nothing stopping you now. Let’s make her squirm.”

Jane knew how to make that fantasy come true. She was already there, after all. The tip of her tongue brushed against Rebecca’s soft nether lips, and that was that. *She’s dying from pleasure, and I’m intoxicated by her scent.* She smelled Caitlyn, too, although Rebecca was the strongest aphrodisiac in the room. Jane hardly held herself back once she had that first taste.

And the second. And the third.

Rebecca’s cries echoed in the room as Caitlyn goaded her with dirty talk and Jane pulled her weight by sinking her tongue as deeply as it could go into Rebecca’s folds. *I love her. I love Cait. I love all of this.* The young and dumb Jane of her youth had gotten into plenty of spots that made her life more thrilling – and difficult. Today, the Jane that soon approached forty wanted nothing more than a constant. *Constant love.*

*Constant affection. Constant nights like this.* She knew her limits. She knew *all* of their limits. They talked about threesomes more than they participated in them. Usually, they paired off or didn't bother at all. The trick was making sure everyone got the attention they wanted and never felt left out. Jane was the first to admit that she was the most likely to get caught up in her own rubbish and forget who needed her attention the most. Caitlyn was the most aggressive, though. If she yearned for Jane's touch, she sought it out.

Which was especially nice, since Jane often had an open-door policy in her room. Assuming she wasn't sick or had otherwise announced she wished to be left alone for the night, either of her girls was welcomed in whenever they wanted. Rebecca was the one who got there before Jane fell asleep. Caitlyn, though? Once a month, Jane woke up to her wife getting cozy with her in bed. "*I need you, Lin,*" she'd whisper beneath the covers. "*Tell me you still need me, too.*" It was role-playing as much as it was desperation, and Jane almost always indulged.

Like now. When she fed into Caitlyn's fantasies by making Rebecca's come true.

"Keep her leg open, Cait," Jane said as Rebecca edged toward the cliff of climax. "She's almost broken my nose twice now."

"Did you hear that?" Rebecca's thigh was no longer a hindrance to Jane's goals. As she dove in and smothered her face in Rebecca's pussy, she heard Caitlyn say, "You're not

cooperating, Becca. I think you want me to hold you like this forever.”

Jane swore she heard a meek *yes* from Rebecca’s mouth. It was difficult to tell when all Jane *really* heard was her heavy breath and the cries of delight as Rebecca fell over the edge.

Taste, scent, and heat all overwhelmed Jane, but her fingers dug deeply into Caitlyn’s flesh, a testament that the three of them shared in the pleasure of the moment. Caitlyn had been gently thrusting forward this whole time, after all. Jane felt it. Like she felt the intense, drowning heat of Rebecca’s pussy as she was the first to come completely undone that night. *Exactly how we like her.* When Rebecca Pruitt went for “married couple’s favorite doll” in the roleplay machine, she was more dedicated to her craft than a thespian who couldn’t give up method acting.

Except that was a part of Rebecca Jane understood fundamentally, and Caitlyn grappled with on the sexual level. Rebecca confided in Jane; she was carnally freed by Caitlyn. After all, Jane’s domination style was less intense than Caitlyn’s. *Why do you think we got divorced that one time?* It was too much for Jane on a monogamous level. With a supreme submissive like Rebecca to soak up the energy, though? *Bloody brilliant.*

As Rebecca’s orgasm gradually subsided, Jane licked a trail from her girlfriend’s thighs to her breasts, which were currently covered by Caitlyn’s hand. When Jane perked her head up and stretched her back, she met Caitlyn’s lips. The

ferocity with which Caitlyn absorbed Rebecca's taste from Jane's mouth almost crushed the woman between them.

Jane apologized. Caitlyn quipped that Rebecca liked it.

A lazy hand landed on Caitlyn's leg. Jane took that as her cue to sit up and embrace them both. "Let's push our limits," Rebecca grunted. "Tell me what to do. I'm yours, Mistress."

"Who is she talking to?" Jane flicked Rebecca's nipple and laughed when she squirmed again. "You? Me?"

"Both of us. Because she's lost all sense."

"Then... here's how I see it." Jane swung her leg over them, barely capable of straddling both women as they lay on their sides. Caitlyn's hold on Rebecca slackened, but she was still in charge – of that, there was no question. "So far, I've been doing *all* of the legwork. I've fingered Becca, I've eaten her out like dessert, and now I'm dirty talking! So, what, Cait? When do I get mine? I think I've earned it."

"Are you implying you want *me* to make you come?"

"Could ask Becca to do it, but she's passed out at the moment."

"I am not." Rebecca wiggled in Caitlyn's embrace. "Somebody fuck me again already."

Jane shook her head. As her thighs stretched open to accommodate both women beneath her, she said, "I'm going to climb off you two, but with the understanding that you're going to my overnight bag, Cait. I brought us a little something."

“I hope it’s not *too* little...” Rebecca said.

“Good Lord.” Jane gracefully slipped off behind Caitlyn. “Listen to her. She’s a total size queen when she’s been taken out for a round already.”

The moment Caitlyn sat up, Jane took her place and wrapped her body around Rebecca’s. She was not prepared for how fitfully they melded together while Caitlyn brushed lint off her naked body and sauntered toward the bags in the corner of the room.

“You’re no better, Lin.” Caitlyn knocked over Jane’s suitcase and fixed up her hair.

“I did *not* bring anything we cannot handle.” On the other hand, Jane might not be able to handle how clingy Rebecca was now that she was awash in pheromones. “I should have brought two, though! Make you both work!”

“Surprised you didn’t.” Caitlyn dropped Jane’s present onto the bed. “Your wedding night is the perfect opportunity to fuck your ass.”

“Only as long as you’re doing the honors. I know *you’re* good for it, love.” She said that, but all Jane could think was *oh, hell no*. Besides, if anyone was getting anal tonight, it was the sex-drunk woman who would probably shove Jane out of the way and stick her ass up in the air.

Never a dull moment in this arrangement!

“When’s the last time you wielded that thing?” Jane’s toes crept up Caitlyn’s leg as she pulled the straps taut around her

waist. “Should we trust you? You know how delicate I am, and I know how rough you are when you get like this.”

Caitlyn only responded with a smirk and a knowing glint in her eye. *Oh, I’m in trouble.* She wasn’t usually turned on by dominant Caitlyn, but tonight was different. *Anything goes. I’m a vulnerable lass.* Caitlyn was her wife again. Everything had come full circle.

“Here. Start with this.” Jane rolled onto her back and pulled Rebecca over with her. As limbs kicked in the air and voices shrieked, Jane contained the sudden panic that she had bitten off more than she could chew. Yet physics took over, and Rebecca rolled a full 180 until she was planted on the other side of the bed. Caitlyn grabbed Rebecca by the hips and pulled her back. Jane saw an instant opportunity.

She simply had to wait until Rebecca succumbed to Caitlyn’s machinations and that unrelenting rhythm that rocked the bed and knocked the grin right off Rebecca’s face.

“We really should be careful with you.” Jane propped herself up on her elbow and bit her lip at thoughts of what Rebecca must be feeling at that glorious moment. *If I look Caitlyn in the eye, I’ll die.* So Jane focused on her other partner, who pressed her face into the bed and curled her fists around the comforter. *Am I jealous? Yes. Of who? No idea.* She liked the idea of fucking Rebecca with a strap-on. She also liked the thought of getting on the other end of it for herself. *So many possibilities!* “If there’s one thing we can say

about you, love, it's that you always give our rubbish your all. Christ, Cait, you're making *me* vibrate over here!"

Caitlyn flung herself forward, palms on the bed and gaze boring into Jane's forehead. Her hips spun small, tight circles as Rebecca groaned into the comforter. Only then did Jane finally return Caitlyn's look. *Yes. Right to the loins.*

"I don't know how much longer she'll last," Caitlyn said, as if the sentiment didn't pertain to her as well. "You better do exactly what I'm seeing in your mind right now."

Jane huffed. "Now I don't want to do it. Not if you're expecting it."

"Come on, Jane." Caitlyn so rarely called her wife by her "real" name during such intimate moments that it took Jane by surprise. "It's not about what *I'm* expecting. It's about us tag-teaming her before she seriously can't take anymore."

"Save some of that bad bitch energy for me." Jane sat in front of Rebecca before opening her legs and pushing her hips forward. *I love it when I don't have to give orders.* That was more Caitlyn's kink. Which Rebecca surely knew. Wasn't that why she immediately did what Jane wanted without having to be asked?

Until that moment, Jane hadn't really thought about her own pleasure. Not the kind that existed beyond living in the night and thinking, *This is it, this is the life I've always wanted for myself.* Yet when Rebecca massaged her hands into Jane's thighs and eased them farther open, Jane had to admit that she was ready for this.

After all, she had done a lot of the work already. It was her turn to lay back and relax for a few minutes. Or at least for as long as Rebecca lasted on the other end of Caitlyn's strap-on.

*There are worse ways to live one's life.* Jane had always been aware that her charmed life was the envy of millions of others. Regardless of the personal challenges she had faced because of who she was, her circumstances of birth always trumped the rude stares and inappropriate questions about her gender. Still, Jane would never shake the strange sensation that declared what she did was inherently shameful – a private but pivotal declaration that having not one, but two female lovers was an affront to the universe. She had defied her family. Her oldest schoolfriends. Her community that raised her to be a well-to-do feminine daughter of prestigious Hong Kong wealth. *Did my mother suffer through childhood trauma for me to turn out like this?* Such thoughts might be sacrilegious to other women while they made love to their partners, but not to Jane. She had a blunt approach to these things. Like the finest mindfulness meditator, she accepted the thought and brushed it away.

Nothing mattered, yet everything was at stake. That's how it was for Jane Wong, a woman who could think a million thoughts while simultaneously banishing every image in her head. She didn't care. She was in love, and it was time to celebrate that.

“Holy shit, you two.” Jane collapsed onto her back, arms spread wide while her heavy eyelids insisted on closing. “You



know how to make a girl forget how old she is.” She didn’t like to dwell on it, but she *was* the oldest one in this bed.

*Not as old as my sister!* She would always have that. Like she’d always have a woman like Rebecca to kiss her inside and out.

Jane had to force her eyes back open when she realized that Caitlyn’s thrusts had slowed. Was it because she had grown tired? No! It was because Rebecca groaned so loudly that Jane felt it vibrate all the way from her clit to her toes. *Unreal.* Rebecca was finally pushed to her limits, based on how easily she rested her cheek against Jane’s thigh and sighed in relief – only for Caitlyn to thrust forward again.

“Save some for me, you beast.” Jane brushed her foot against Caitlyn’s arm. That earned her a purr and a tug of Caitlyn’s teeth against her bottom lip. “It’s been a while since I last had the real American experience.”

Caitlyn waited for Rebecca to roll over onto her side before crawling forward and meeting Jane halfway across the bed. “Dare I ask what that is?”

She was going for Jane’s pussy next, but it wasn’t happening like that. Not if Jane wanted to maintain *any* control over the situation. “Cowgirls, Cait. Sometimes I like to be one. Come on.” She wouldn’t stand for that fake pout on her wife’s voluptuous face. “I’ll let you set the pace if it makes you feel better. I just want to go for a ride.”

Jane wiggled out of Caitlyn’s oncoming grasp and toppled her at the top of the bed. Rebecca caught the pillow flying in

her direction. As she clasped it to her chest and looked on with tamed mischief in her eyes, Caitlyn accepted her place in Jane's machinations. Which was good, because Jane had been fantasizing about this since she told her wife to get the strap-on.

"Five bucks says you don't last five minutes."

"Do you owe me a dollar for every minute?" Jane always felt like she climbed the finest peak whenever she straddled Caitlyn's wide thighs. "I technically have more money than you."

Caitlyn smacked both hands upon Jane's ass. She wasn't letting go. "No need to brag about it. I've seen your bank accounts."

The sudden surge of her wife's hips tossed Jane forward. Caitlyn's feet may be firmly planted on the bed, but that meant Jane had to securely plant *her* hands on her wife's chest. *I hope Rebecca gets an eyeful.* Jane's palms were barely big enough to hold what they found.

"Is that the reason you married me?" Jane had to compromise her balance to push the sweaty hair out of her face. "Both times?"

"Just the first time. Second time was so I could watch you ride me like a cowgirl."

A big, expectant grin crowned Jane's countenance. "I'm already halfway there, love."

*Here I go.* They were rarely graceful when it came to such seductive contact, but Jane was the kind to say nice things or laugh off the silly moments when she was in charge. When letting Caitlyn think *she* was in charge? *Lots of gratitude.* Jane didn't mind. Not even when Caitlyn grew frustrated that her excitement had made the strap-on hide deeper between her curvy thighs. *If she thinks I'm complaining, she doesn't know me well at all.* Caitlyn knew her, though. Which was why Jane gave her an explosive show when contact was finally made, and she rode high on Caitlyn's undulations.

*This is what sex is all about.* Jane didn't mean the specific act of riding her wife's strap-on. She meant the wild and wanton connection they made when they trusted each other so much that Jane's sexual vulnerability was only trumped by Caitlyn's impressive desires. *She's going for the gold, and I'm the medal.* Jane didn't hide how deliriously raw and feminine she felt. Nor did she think it beneath her to beg, since it was as much fun to do that as it was to inflate Caitlyn's confidence as a Domme. As for Rebecca? Once she released the pillow clutched to her chest, she sidled up next to Jane with a shit-eating grin that implied she loved seeing this side of a woman she almost married.

"You're really sweating." Rebecca's upper lip lingered against Jane's shoulder, a raucous giggle tickling the whole length of Jane's arm. *I can barely stand it.* There was such a thing as overstimulation, and Jane was on the verge of exploding. "I want to kiss you all over."

“Help her out, would you, Becca?” Caitlyn grabbed Jane’s hips and pulled her forward. Everything inside of her shifted, including the center of her pleasure. *Fucking brilliant, finding my G-spot on accident!* Only Cait. Rebecca always found it on the first or second try, but she was perceptive like that. When Jane’s gasp of pleasurable shock subsided, Caitlyn took her chance. She knocked her wife onto her back and climbed on top of her. Jane didn’t fight it. She didn’t say no.

Why would she? This was exactly what she wanted.

“Not sure how I could help.” Rebecca enjoyed her role as Domme’s Helper a little too much right now, but Jane couldn’t begrudge that smug look as Rebecca’s naked body came closer. “She’s already one minute away from coming.”

Caitlyn laughed. “She could always come faster.”

*You’d love that.* One second ago, Jane was ready to get on with the orgasms, but now she had pride to maintain. Namely, she wasn’t coming on *Caitlyn’s* command. *You have to earn it, darling.* Plus, maybe Jane wasn’t quite prepared for this moment to end.

“Don’t you two dare wear yourselves out before I get any.” Caitlyn thrust forward, driving herself deep into Jane, who buried her scalp in the pillow and swallowed a cry of thigh-splitting pleasure. “It’s my wedding night. Somebody better fuck me next.”

“Ah, shit, I think she means me.” Jane barely got those words out of her mouth. When Rebecca took it upon herself to pinch Jane’s nipple before inhaling it with her supple lips.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck. They've got me.* Both of them! A dream come true, at the wrong time! *Maybe I have to give in to her. To them both.* That meant accepting everything Caitlyn did to her in that fervent moment. Jane grabbed Rebecca's hair and held on. If gripping the life out of somebody else's body was good enough for Caitlyn, it was more than acceptable for Jane, who finally unleashed the sounds reverberating through her soul.

"Ah, God!" It was a good thing she had fallen on her back because Jane could not have withstood this onslaught on her tender senses while sitting upright on Caitlyn's hips. *At least I maintain some pride.* She also almost strangled Rebecca with her own hair as the headboard met the wall one final time.

She didn't know what she said when the moment finally struck. Quite frankly, Jane probably spoke her own terrible language when she came so hard that her brain gave out on her. What use were words, anyway? They only served to get in a way of a good time.

Caitlyn knew better than to stop. Like with Rebecca, she eased her thrusts as Jane came down from the euphoria that consumed her mortal body. *Like a scuba diver coming up to the surface. Don't do it too quickly.* Only in this case, it was about savoring the moment before it faded away. Jane wanted to still feel the trickles of climax tingling in her body long after Rebecca kissed her. That way, when Caitlyn finally pulled away, Jane didn't feel so empty.

"Great. Now you two are doing that." Caitlyn's dramatic sighs were not unnoticed, but Jane was busy. With her mouth

occupied and her hands disappearing into the wilderness of Rebecca's hair, it was only natural for her to hear those words in the distance but not respond. *I have everything I've ever wanted.* Love, sex, and all the time in the world.

Caitlyn lay down behind her and drew a circle on Jane's bare back. Not even two seconds later, Jane rolled against her, bringing Rebecca with her.

"You know you still have some wifely duties to perform, right, Lin?" Caitlyn chastised as Jane faded from consciousness.

"I think she's falling asleep," Rebecca whispered. "Want me to do it?"

"What? Strap her up for me? Suppose she could sleep while I go for a ride next."

They were joking, but Jane didn't think that was a bad idea. "Give me five minutes, you insatiable slut. *God.*"

After one beat, Caitlyn fell into laughter and Rebecca expressed surprise. What they still didn't know about Jane was that the more she faded from reality, the more likely she was to throw American slang back in their faces. *Just because I speak with a British accent doesn't mean I actually am British.* She loved a good "slut" as much as she loved a good "slag."

Or the same words in any other language. Jane liked to keep her vocabulary colorful.

"Call me a slut again." Caitlyn purred against Jane's side when she finally sat up and grabbed the harness. "I'm really

feeling it tonight.”

Jane lazily looked her wife in the bright eyes. “We’re all a bunch of tawdry sluts, but you can be the queen, your majesty.”

Rebecca laughed the loudest; Caitlyn dared Jane to say that closer to her lips.

Jane could do her one better. As soon as she got this damn harness over her sweaty legs.



Both Caitlyn and Rebecca were out like the lights in the room, their bodies curled against one another beneath the wrinkled sheets. Jane slipped out and took it upon herself to clean up in the bathroom, the strap-on left to dry on the counter. The bath towel was soft enough to lure her into the shower, but Jane refrained for now. Instead, she donned the baggy T-shirt she had packed in her overnight bag and took her phone into the living room.

*“Mom told me what happened!”* said an hour-old text from Lilian. Jane sat on the back of the couch in front of the window overlooking the city. *“Did you really marry Caitlyn instead of Rebecca? Like in a crazy romance movie?”*

*“Sure seems that way,”* Jane texted back.

*“I LOVE IT.”*

Jane shook her head and left it at that. There were other people she came out here to text.

*“You won’t believe what happened at my wedding today,”* she wrote to Damon, who was probably in bed by now. *“Unless your friend the judge told you already.”*

She wrote him a lengthy text about what happened, in case he didn’t know. Damon did not respond to Jane’s surprise. The night was late enough that a busy husband and father were either conked out until the morning or taking care of more important matters. Jane closed out the paragraphs-long text with, *“Anyway, had to clear my head about that. Hope Alice and the kid are fine. Give that lump Damon Jr. my best.”*

When she was free from her device, Jane gazed out the window. Sometimes, it was nice to be left alone with nothing but empty midnight thoughts.

But she lived with two women. She was never really alone.

“You okay?”

Rebecca leaned over the back of the couch, hands precariously close to Jane’s thigh. They did not touch, however. *I wouldn’t mind.* Rebecca wore the fluffy hotel bathrobe. There were worse things to have touched Jane’s skin in her life.

“I’m fantastic, love.” Jane croaked out the words. “Jesus. What’s wrong with my voice?”

Rebecca’s smile was enough to illuminate the room. “Too much excitement earlier.”

“Do you think the neighbors heard me screaming?”



“I hope so. It’s always a treat when one of us makes *you* scream.”

“Hmph. Shouldn’t you be asleep? Nobody was put through the wringer more than you.”

“I’m used to it.”

“Listen to you. ‘I’m used to it,’ like we’re having regular ‘pound Becca until she’s immobile’ parties.”

“No, but I wouldn’t mind. Keeps life interesting.”

“What would you tell the damn doctor? They’d start asking after the third time you come in because you can’t walk anymore.”

“I’d remind my doctor that I live with two women who can’t keep their hands off me.”

“Now you’re writing fiction. You’re lucky if your Jane can go once a week anymore.”

Rebecca turned around, fluffy bathrobe sleeve falling off her shoulder. “I’m sorry about earlier. You know. When I froze up.”

Jane shook her head. “You were always in that position. It’s my fault for putting you in it. I should have gotten my legal rubbish together sooner than I did.”

A heavy look hung between them. “I love you. You know that, right?”

Jane wrapped her arm around Rebecca’s and brought her closer. “Love from you is a divine thing, Becca. I merely hope

that I'm worthy of so much love."

She blushed. "Meanwhile, I hope we didn't put Caitlyn out. She puts up a good front, you know. Who knows how this will all pan out. If it's too much for her... I'd feel terrible."

"All blame rests at my feet, love." Jane loosened her grip on Rebecca. "You let me worry about Cait. She and I speak a special language."

"Oh, trust me. I know."

"It's your biggest insecurity in this relationship."

"Caitlyn's is that she's not tough enough for you or soft enough for me."

"What's your big insecurity?"

Jane was slightly caught off guard by that question. "That I can't keep us all together."

Rebecca patted Jane's shin. "You've done a splendid job so far."

"Why, thank you. You've done an excellent job integrating yourself into our family. Three years have flown by with you, Becca. Yet it feels like ten."

"That's how long it's been with you and Caitlyn."

"Longer, you know? That's the weird thing. You've only been with us for a fraction of our relationship, but it feels like you've always been here. I barely recall..." Jane stopped. She shouldn't bring up Olivia. It was never in good taste to discuss

the ex. *The one now dating my sister.* What a world. “Life is strange.”

Rebecca sighed. “Come back to bed?”

“If you’re going to be cute about it...”

Rebecca waited for Jane to get off the couch before wandering back to the bedroom, where Caitlyn remained asleep beneath the sheet. She clung to the far side of the bed but was in no danger of falling off. Jane waited for Rebecca to climb in, but the moment never came.

“You first,” Rebecca whispered.

“You sure?”

“You’ve been through a lot leading up to today. You should be in the middle.”

Jane left a kiss on Rebecca’s cheek before crawling onto the bed. “You are too sweet.” She was right, though. Jane *had* been through a lot, and it now caught up to her as she pushed beneath the covers and came nose-to-nose with Caitlyn, who barely stirred. When Rebecca climbed in behind Jane and spooned her, a weight finally lifted from the depths of Jane’s body.

*We should sleep together like this more often.* Jane and Caitlyn were married again. Did this mean they should share a bedroom? Maybe buy a new condo where Rebecca had a bedroom adjoined to theirs? Perhaps the days of separation in their own household were over. Jane had never been more

secure in her relationship. Couldn't the same be said for the women she loved?

Jane eased onto her back, head tucked between two pillows. Rebecca curled up next to her, arm draped across Jane's midsection and nose nuzzled against her shoulder. Caitlyn kicked her leg off the edge of the bed and muttered something in her sleep. Jane's hand wandered across Caitlyn's leg. Eventually, the muttering stopped.

*Moments like these don't last forever.* Yet as long as Jane stayed awake, she could pretend. The night wouldn't end without her permission.

Sleep was that permission. A passive, fitful sleep that claimed Jane before she knew it.

*In the morning...* She never finished that thought. She was too content to think about anything.

## *Epilogue*

### **REBECCA**

**T**he humidity always killed her hair whenever she braved going outside in Hong Kong. On previous visits, Rebecca had tried both straightening her hair before arriving and letting it do whatever it pleased – neither result was preferred. Straightening her hair was a fool’s game as soon as she touched the moisture in the heavy air. Not bothering at all? She had never been somewhere where so many people stared at her because of what her hair did.

In recent visits, she had taken to straightening her hair a week before departing and then wearing it in a tight ponytail or bun that pulled at her scalp but didn’t make her feel so insecure. Of course, it didn’t matter how many times her partners told her that she was pretty, gorgeous, or that everyone fancied her. “*They’re jealous,*” Jane often said when Rebecca complained about the stares from the locals. “*It’s not so bad,*” Caitlyn said when Rebecca’s straightening was for

naught. Neither of them really understood, of course. Caitlyn's hair was naturally straight, and Jane grew up in this humid climate!

They suffered in their own ways, though.

"I'll be there soon," Caitlyn said over the phone. Rebecca had a reprieve in the back of her taxi, which blasted with air conditioning and eased the burden on her brow. "I'm having to change clothes. This climate is killing my thighs. I think I have a rash under my boob, too."

Only Caitlyn could talk about a rash under her "boob" and make it sound kinda sexy. "I can check for you later, you know," Rebecca offered. "Anyway, check my carry-on. I've got some cream in there. Flying for a long time always gives me a rash on my... well, you know." She didn't want to say it in front of the taxi driver, who was already a nosy-enough uncle. *He's asked me if I'm Irish three times.* He refused to accept that Rebecca was American.

"Be grateful for your frame in this weather, Becca," Caitlyn sighed. "There's a downside to being this bodacious. It's called a rash for every fat fold."

Rebecca wrinkled her nose. "Did you see how much sunscreen I slathered on me? You wear it to protect you from cancer, and I'm praying to God I don't turn into toast."

"I'll see you in a bit, Becca. Bye."

Rebecca shoved her phone into her bag. She was promptly reminded to reapply her special sunscreen for her face before

getting out of the taxi at the five-star hotel on the other side of town. A mighty yawn from jetlag almost knocked her out.

The taxi driver opened her door for her. Rebecca thanked him but ignored his strange attempt at a Gaelic greeting. *I've gotta get inside, anyway.* June in Hong Kong wasn't as hot as the rest of the summer, but the humidity made up for it. By the time she entered the hotel lobby, she had armpit stains in her short-sleeved blouse. Rebecca stopped by the bathroom to freshen up before heading to the restaurant on the second floor.

"*Ho!* There she is!" Lilian leaped up from a large table in the back. The shouts and complaints of children echoed in their private corner of the hip brunch spot, and it took Rebecca a moment to realize they belonged to the women at the table. *Another thing nobody told me.* She smiled, though, because Lilian was so happy to see her. "Come over here, Rebecca! I need to introduce you to my daughter! See, Cecelia? I told you she was as beautiful and exotic as Caitlyn."

A young teenaged girl looked up from her phone long enough to take in Rebecca's height, freckles, and untamed red hair futilely pulled back into a ponytail. "Wow," she said. "What's that like?"

Rebecca stepped back. "What's what like?"

"Looking like that?"

"Cecelia!" Lilian hissed. "Be nice. Rebecca is your Auntie Jane's good friend."

"I know what that means, Ma."

Lilian was redder than the tablecloth beneath her arms. “Sit down, Rebecca!” She overcompensated by being as loud as possible. “We have the first course! You’ll love the croissants here. The fruit is so fresh! Straight from Singapore and Malaysia. Come on! Eat!”

Another girl climbed out from beneath the table, pretending to fire a laser gun at the young boy racing between the adults and the window. His tiny bowtie fell off his shirt and was instantly crumpled beneath the girl’s Mary Janes. When Olivia walked over from the windows, a toddler clinging to her chest, Rebecca was pressed to ask his name.

“Caleb,” she said, before offering to let Rebecca hold him – she declined. “He’s named after someone I admire greatly.”

“She’s talking about Caitlyn,” Cecelia muttered while texting on her phone.

“Cece!” Lilian yanked the phone out of her daughter’s hands. From the way the girl merely accepted her mother’s prodding, Rebecca had a feeling this was an everyday occurrence. “I hope you’re not telling your friends these things. It’s very rude to say what’s on your mind so candidly. You could get people in trouble.”

Cecelia blew her bangs out of her face and looked away.

“Teenagers!” Lilian smacked the empty chair next to her. “Where *is* Caitlyn, anyway?”

“She’s running behind. Had to change her clothes for the occasion.” Rebecca draped her bag strap over the back of her



chair. “Where’s Jane? I thought she’d be here by now.”

“Oh, she and Ma were at the lawyer’s all morning. No idea what that’s about, and it’s probably boring, anyway.” Lilian nudged her daughter. “Have I told you that she’s thinking about becoming a lawyer? Can you imagine it? She wants to practice law in *America*.”

“I never said that,” Cecelia said with the petulance of a girl who had been found out.

Rebecca knew better than to goad the poor girl. “You must be doing well at school to think about doing that.”

“Her grades could be better,” Lilian said.

That made Cecelia puff out her chest for the first time since Rebecca arrived. “I do good!”

“Well. You do *well*. Really, Cece, if you want to be an American lawyer, you need to practice your English.”

“I think your English is great.” Rebecca ignored the rabble blowing up behind her, which included Lilian leaping out of her seat and rushing around the table. “I still can’t speak a foreign language as fluently as you.”

“You speak English, so you don’t have to.”

“What’s that mean?” Rebecca grinned. “You speak two dialects of Chinese! How crazy is that? You can do a lot of stuff with that many languages under your belt.”

Cecelia turned her phone over and folded her hands above it. She looked like Willow when she did that. “I actually speak

three.”

“Wow? Really?”

“Cantonese,” Cecelia held up a finger, “Mandarin, and Teochew. My dad’s mom speaks Teochew and she’s teaching me.”

Rebecca had no idea what Teochew was, but she didn’t want to look ignorant in front of a middle schooler. “Cool. You’ve got me beat three times over, then.”

She had to face the commotion behind her. Sure enough, as Rebecca suspected, Caitlyn had arrived, and nobody let her walk three paces without being bothered.



## CAITLYN

Caitlyn had told the truth when she announced she needed to change her clothes to prevent chafing in the Hong Kong heat and humidity. She also needed to raid Rebecca’s bag and find the rash cream if she were to present herself in front of her reacquainted family. *First trip to Hong Kong since remarrying Lin... it’s going to be an ordeal.* There was another reason she had to stay behind at White Fir, though, where she shared a two-bedroom guest suite with her wife and other partner. Namely, she was stuck on the phone with Jane, who was hung up in a legal office dealing with changes to things

here in Hong Kong now that she was becoming a permanent resident of the United States.

That was the main reason for this trip, after all. When Jane announced she had to go to Hong Kong to deal with legal and family matters, Caitlyn and Rebecca decided to go with her. For Rebecca, it was a vacation. For Caitlyn, it was a good excuse to keep in touch with old friends and business associates who had fallen by the wayside those past two years.

Yet Caitlyn always struggled to keep up with what bothered Jane whenever they were in her home. As soon as they stepped off the plane at the Hong Kong airport, Jane became one of the most reserved people Caitlyn knew. This trip had been no different, especially since she had not only gotten married again but intended to formally emigrate to America and “leave” her natal family behind.

They all knew it was coming. They knew it would probably happen. Yet once things were in motion, families had opinions that only popped up when documents were signed.

*No, not my mother-in-law.* Willow was disconcertingly calm about everything. It was Jane’s father and older brother who suddenly pretended to have any moral high ground or emotional care toward Jane’s well-being. Which meant they were easy to ignore... to a point. *They still hold the most power in this family, after all.*

Soon, Jane would be officially free from any of it. Her green card was expedited, which was the only thing her money had bought her through this whole thing. No matter how many

times she told people she didn't intend to go for citizenship (and thus renounce her national ties to Hong Kong) they still acted like she abandoned everything they had ever done for her.

Now that Caitlyn was tied to her again? She had to deal with it, too.

Luckily for her, Lilian was as obsessed as ever – and Caitlyn knew that Olivia was always in her corner, for whatever that meant.

“All the kids are here!” Caitlyn was already exhausted when she saw one surly teenager at the table and three other young children running around the restaurant. “Look at that. I don't think I've ever seen them all at once before.” She had met each of them individually, but not only was she still not as acquainted with Olivia's son, but she wasn't used to so many kids in one place *anywhere*. Caitlyn didn't have her own children, nor was she an educator or someone who worked with them. Already, their happy voices bore a pit of pain in her head.

But she smiled because everyone was pleased to see her.

“We've taken the liberty of ordering some salads and soups for everyone,” Lilian said, referring to her and Olivia. “I think Ma and Jane should be here soon. Ah! There's Ma!”

Willow lurked at the edge of the scene, her blouse and taut skirt as prim as her permed hair. She sighed to see such a chaotic sight, yet any problems Willow had with her

daughters' lifestyles were now kept crushed down in her gut.  
*Hope she takes an antacid.*

“So lovely to see the children so lively.” Willow did not look at Cecelia when she said. “Everything fine with you today, Caitlyn? I hope the landscaping work in my garden did not disturb your beauty rest this morning.”

“Everything’s great.”

A penciled eyebrow lifted up Willow’s forehead. “I suppose it’s not so bad.”

“Hey, Caitlyn!” Lilian rushed up to her before the first of two waiters attempted to serve soup and salad to the growing group. “Won’t you take a family photo of us? Olivia and I have wanted one for some time now. When Jane gets here, we’ll all get one together.”

Caitlyn accepted her sister-in-law’s phone. “Sure. Why don’t you all line up by the windows? The light’s great there.”

It took some finagling – and the bribing of Cecelia, probably – but eventually the whole Wong family was gathered by the windows. Olivia and Lilian stood side by side, holding their young sons while the two girls stood before them. Willow surprised everyone when she agreed to stand next to Lilian for the next set of photos.

*Someone’s had a heart-to-heart talk with God, it seems.* Either that or a truce had been reached between Willow and her daughters – because this was quite the different woman

from the one Caitlyn knew the first time she was married to Jane.

Where the hell was Jane, anyway?

“Thank God, I missed the event.”

Caitlyn handed Lilian back her phone and turned around. Jane had managed to hide behind a group of servers preparing the course for another large family having brunch in this trendy spot. Based on her visage, Jane was not in the mood for her family’s usual antics. *I don’t know what happened at her lawyer’s office, but I’m sure I’ll hear all about it later.* Maybe. If Caitlyn seduced the clothes off her wife and convinced her to take a hot bath shortly before the midnight hour. That was the only way to get her to talk when they were in Hong Kong.

“Jane! Come join us for another photo! Rebecc-ah, you too!”

Jane dumped her sweater on the back of an empty chair. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Do you need an excuse to go to the bathroom so we can talk?”

“Nothing’s happened,” Jane said as she and her wife ambled toward the window, where Jane stood next to her mother and Rebecca on the other side of Caitlyn. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

Caitlyn flashed a smile at the camera before turning a more serious look toward Jane. “You’re not making me feel better.”

“It’s a lovely day with family, Cait.” Great. There was Jane’s fake smile. “Enjoy.”

“You’re not getting out of this.”

“Not trying to get out of anything.” Jane wrapped her arm around Caitlyn’s midsection and took Rebecca’s hand. “Trying to get through this ludicrous lunch.”

Caitlyn waited until they were all seated at the table before attempting to talk to Jane again. “How did it go at the lawyer’s?”

Jane’s shoulders sagged with a sigh. “Everything’s great, Cait.”

“Yes, I can tell.”

“What do you mean? I’m getting my green card. My mother is behaving. My sister and her lover haven’t pissed everyone off by flaunting their relationship to high heaven. I’m married to the best person for the job, and I’ve got Rebecca here for when I’ve pissed you off.”

Rebecca chimed in. “I’m feeling the love here.”

Jane leaned back in her seat, hands on her face. “Everything’s great!”

She said it so loudly that everyone, including the children, quieted at the table. A second later, they resumed their conversations.

Caitlyn took one of Jane’s hands off her face. “Spill, Lin.”

Jane glanced at Cecelia. That’s when Caitlyn should have known.



## JANE

To be fair to Jane, she fully intended to discuss this with Caitlyn (and Rebecca) later, when they were in the quiet comfort of White Fir, an estate Jane never thought she'd stay in with *both* of her partners. Not until her parents were dead, anyway.

Things had a habit of changing, though. That was especially true the older she got.

*If my family has their way, things might be getting more interesting back in America.*

The visit to the lawyer wasn't Jane's problem. That had gone as smoothly as she expected, not that she anticipated any problems. No, what had crawled up Jane's arse and died was the conversation she had with her mother before that.

She knew something was afoot when Willow suggested they leave early to have coffee at one of her favorite spots. Just her and her youngest. Willow was either about to announce she was dying of cancer...

Or she wanted something from Jane. Probably in exchange for familial peace.

Jane had to wait until the end of brunch to bring it up, though. When Rebecca and Caitlyn weren't looking, she nodded to her mother, who told Cecelia they had something to



discuss in the other room. Jane waited two minutes before following them – and Caitlyn definitely noticed all of this. *Stay quiet for a few more hours, Cait. Just a few!*

When she entered the private room with a tiny table, Willow and Cecelia were already seated. Willow rose from her chair and said, “I’ll let you two talk,” before departing.

Jane waited for the air to cool before clearing her throat and sitting across from her young niece. *I swear, she was a tiny girl not even a year ago.* She knew children grew quickly, but Jane’s problem was that she never took an interest in her nieces and nephews. Why would she, when she never saw them enough to build a relationship?

Oh, and she wasn’t keen on children. There was a reason she never wanted them.

*Thirteen, though...* That was almost grown if Jane blinked enough. Cecelia was now old enough that the first signs of what she’d look like as an adult showed on her face. She was a Wong through and through, too, although she boasted the legal surname Lam. Jane swore she looked like Lilian from thirty years ago.

Except Lilian had been a positive, excitable teenager. Cecelia looked like she was one tube of black lipstick away from entering a hardcore goth phase.

“So...” Jane crossed her legs and held on to her knee. She specifically spoke in Cantonese because she had a hunch about her young niece. “Your grandmother tells me you want to study abroad for high school.”

Cecelia barely spoke loudly enough to be heard. “I don’t know why people are making such a big deal about it. It was something I mentioned when thinking about what I wanted to be when I grow up. Which is *not a* lawyer, by the way. That’s something my mom made up.”

“Yes, well, your mother has a habit of hearing one thing and running away with the details. Still, it’s not a terrible thing to do. All three of us went to boarding school abroad. Some of us stayed there all the way through college.” And had a great time, if Jane were honest with herself. *Where do you think I met most of my young girlfriends when I was that age?* It was like her mother knew exactly what she was doing when she booted Jane to Jolly Ol’ England for boarding school.

She didn’t have that kind of hunch about Cecelia, though. Then again, it was probably too early to tell with this girl.

“I hear that a school on your shortlist is Winchester Academy.” Jane switched to English. Her accent instantly made her niece perk up. *There it is.* Cecelia had a thing for her aunt’s accent. To be fair, so did Jane. *I have a nice accent if I do say so myself.* It had gotten her more than one woman in America. Like Caitlyn. And Rebecca. “That’s not a boarding school.”

“No...” Cecelia looked away. When she spoke again, she had also switched to English. It wasn’t too bad. “They’ve got a good American soccer program, though. I like soccer.”

“Is that the only reason you want to go there?”

Cecelia kept her eyes downcast and her cheeks red. “I want to learn American English like Mom. Both grandmas don’t like the schools in England, either.”

“Right. Because they spat me out.” Jane chuckled. “Look, I know what you, your mother, and your grandmother are asking. You want to attend high school at Winchester Academy, and that means living with me. Or at least living under my watch, because you’ll be a minor.”

Cecelia grunted, her embarrassment so great that Jane felt sorry for her.

“Don’t be shy, kid. I’m sure we can figure something out to keep you out from underfoot. Besides, you’ll be a high schooler. You’ll want some independence.”

“So... you think it’s okay?”

“I will have to talk it over with my partners,” Jane bluntly said. Cecelia did not flinch. *She definitely knows what’s going on in my house...* Who told her? Lilian? Or did this girl figure it out for herself? “Besides, that’s a couple years away. You might change your mind, or something else could happen. I suppose that’s why everyone is bringing it up now. They want to start making plans.” Jane knew that feeling well. Her move to England had been prepared three years in advance, all the way down to visiting the campus when she was only a kid.

“Thank you.” Cecelia pushed her long hair out of her face. “You’re pretty cool.”

“Oh, stop. You like me because I haven’t had the chance to make your life hell. Wait until you’re my ward. I know the tricks you kids do to get in trouble. I wrote the book.”

Cecelia thanked her aunt again and ran out of the room to thank her grandmother as well. Jane remained in the private room, indulging in the silence and wondering how the hell she was going to discuss this with her partners, especially Caitlyn.

She wasn’t surprised when the woman in question appeared in the doorway.

“Everyone’s leaving, Lin,” she said, sitting in the other chair. “You’re in here moping.”

“I’m not moping. I’m contemplating.”

“Uh-huh. About your niece who might be moving to America in a few years?”

“Who’s moving to America?”

Rebecca had found Jane, too. Unlike Caitlyn, however, Rebecca did not pull up a chair. Instead, she closed the door and stood by the table. It wasn’t until Jane pushed back her chair and motioned to her lap that Rebecca finally properly joined them. *She’s as light as a feather.* It was the hair that got in Jane’s face and almost made her sneeze.

Worth it, though.

“I don’t see a kid staying with us for more than a week, let alone long enough to graduate high school. Besides, I like walking around naked in my home.”

“Bless you for it, too.” Jane craned her head around Rebecca and grinned at Caitlyn. “Anyway, that’s what we have to talk about. The odds of it happening are slim to me running off with Boris Johnson.”

“I think the odds are higher than that. That girl wants to get away from Lilian.”

“You think so?”

“Lin, your niece has to put up with her mom being lovey-dovey with another woman, but nobody’s allowed to talk about it. Throw in two small siblings, overbearing grandmothers, and the chance to see another country, and of course she wants to do it. Besides, you’re the cool aunt, you know that, right?”

“The hell I am.”

Rebecca eased her weight against Jane’s shoulder. “I think you’re cool.”

“Of course you do. You haven’t known me as long as Cait has.”

“How about this?” Caitlyn garnered both of their attentions with a flick of her wrist. “We blow this pop stand and escape to that spa down the street from here. We can discuss it more. Or we can get kicked out of the changing room because we’re too flirty.”

“I don’t know what a ‘pop stand’ is, but that’s the best idea anyone’s had all day.” Jane smacked her hand against

Rebecca's leg. "What do you say, Becca? Feel like being treated to the spa?"

"I'm always up for a spa. Especially if you're there, too."

"See? We're already too flirty."

Caitlyn was the first to stand up. "Change is inevitable, but some things never change."

"Would you want me to change?"

With Rebecca still on Jane's lap, Caitlyn bent down and kissed her wife like they were alone. *More like if all three of us were alone together...*

A wink announced Caitlyn's departure from the room. "Whenever you two are ready, I'll teach you what a pop stand is."

"Does it mean music?" Jane asked Rebecca, who only now got up from her partner's lap.

"Popsicle."

"What? Why the bloody hell are we at a popsicle stand?"

"You know how slang works." Rebecca's commitment ring glistened in the sunlight as she held open the door for Jane. "You're always trying it out on me in bed."

"What do you mean *trying it out*?" That was it. Jane had to get this sorted. "I don't *try* anything. I simply do!"

"Uh-huh."

Jane almost forgot her sweater, which was still on the back of the chair in the main room. Since she was the only one who

got cold enough in Hong Kong to wear a sweater, she would have hated to lose it.

Like she would have hated to lose sight of the two women holding hands as they stepped out onto the sweltering sidewalk and hailed a taxi. They were pretty as a picture, and Jane couldn't wait to frame them in her bed. Later. The spa might frown on her doing that there.

*Or we could see how quickly we get kicked out...*

Change was in the air, after all!

## **The End**

*If you have enjoyed this story, please feel free to leave a review so other readers can find it. Hildred has a mailing list so you can stay on top of future lesfic cowriting projects, as well as solo works featuring billionaires and lesbians...  
sometimes at the same time!*

## *Free Exclusive Story!*

**Sign up for my mailing list and get a FREE and exclusive short story!**



**NEVER BEFORE is the tale of two women switching roles for the first time in their lives.**

*“I’ve never done this before.”*

During one night in Vegas, Sabrina Cary sets out to make a lucky woman’s fantasy come true.



For years, Sabrina has been the submissive in her relationships. Tonight? She's trying her shoe on her other foot. From tonight on, she's the Domme who makes other women feel like a million dollars.

She just needs someone to practice on. Someone who doesn't know her submissive past and will put their faith in her.

***“I don't usually do this.”***

Heather Swann likewise has a similar backstory. Always the Domme who takes care of others, she's recently realized that nobody's taken care of her. When she sees Sabrina's offer to spoil a special someone, Heather takes it.

This is her chance to be special for a change.

What happens when they meet? What happens when their masks falter? It's a tale only Vegas could tell.

*This is a complete story about an unlikely couple on an unlikely night. Sabrina and Heather are a part of the Cynthia & Hildred expanded billionaire romance universe.*

Get it now!

# *Join Us on Facebook*



Hildred (and her alter ego Cynthia) have a private Facebook just for our readers! First looks, fun (and safe for work) pictures of lovely ladies, book talk, and everything about our world of F/F! Come Join Us!

*Also Available*

## Loved this? Check out other works from Cynthia Dane & Hildred Billings!

Hildred has been writing with her billionaire romance alter-ego Cynthia Dane for years. Which means MANY tightly branded books for you! Explore the world of Fantasy Book Girlfriends, from crazy Cinderella stories to suspenseful takes on old, classic tropes. Our books can be read in any order, but if you're struggling with where to begin, try the recommended reading list here! Also check out a selection of related books below :)



# **BOUND**

When I accepted one of the most highly coveted internships in America, I never expected to fall in love with my boss by the end of the first month.

I never expected that my boss, Eric Mann, used to go by another name a long, long time ago. And the woman the world forgot is screaming to come out and speak of the atrocities once wrought upon her life.

Do I follow my heart and help her expose her family's deepest, darkest secrets to the world? Or do I follow my head and get as far as possible from this debacle?

**GET IT HERE!**

## **UNTIL WE BREAK**

For the past few years, Stefani has been running her family's Oregon winery. The only thing missing from her countryside life is companionship. But with a great distaste for dating, Stefani approaches an international service to make her dreams come true.

Enter Yulia, the alluring Russian woman with a penchant for heavy flirtation. She occasionally puts her money where her mouth is, too, driving Stefani wild with fantasies that this marriage might be more.

Yet she can't shake the feeling that Yulia has an ulterior motive. Or maybe that's the Valettis' collective past coming back to bite them.

**GET IT HERE!**

# **INTO THE FIRE**

Former Marine Michelle “Mitch” Cruise has already lived through the most harrowing moments of her life. Between a kidnapping in Iraq and losing her family’s home to wildfires, she’s convinced that there is nothing left to harm her.

It makes her the perfect candidate for a golden opportunity. There is a woman – a rich woman – searching for a month-long girlfriend. Mitch isn’t naïve. She knows what this woman wants. So happens that Mitch is in the position to endure it.

She never, ever counts on falling in love with reclusive heiress Vanessa – to the point she’ll lay down her life for her mistress.

**GET IT HERE!**