



MY *Forbidden*
BILLIONAIRE

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Thank You

CHAPTER ONE

“Could I get the chicken fingers please?” Lainey’s boyfriend, Josh, requested. He closed his menu and handed it to the waitress, who smiled brightly and nodded. She placed the menu under her arm deftly, her writing pad poised in her other hand.

“And for you?” she asked, turning to face Lainey. Lainey, who had been drinking a mimosa, tried to swallow her sip quickly. She coughed a bit as some aspirated in her throat and pointed to her selection.

“Bagels and lox, please,” she said, her lips pressed together in a flat smile, and passed her menu over as well.

“Great choice! One of my favorites,” the waitress chirped.

“Right? Can’t go wrong with smoked salmon.”

“No, you cannot. All right, you guys, I’ll go ahead and get these orders in, and I’ll check on you in a bit to see if you need any refills.” She twisted on her heel and awkwardly shuffled away, stuffing her pad into her apron pocket.

“Did you really just order chicken fingers at this place?”
Lainey asked Josh, laughing.

He sipped his soda from a straw, his eyes raising to meet hers from under his eyebrows. “Yeah, and?” He had that defiant look in his eyes, the one he got when he felt attacked. Lainey usually tried to refrain from asking questions that could be interpreted as on the offensive, but sometimes, like right now, he seemed to be on a permanent ledge, making it difficult.

“Josh, that was on the kid’s menu,” she chided, her voice laced with more than a hint of annoyance in return. She hated when he got like this and pulled her into a fight that she hadn’t tried to ignite.

“Okay? It’s not like the kid’s menu is literally for only kids.”

“Is it not? Are the words ‘kid’s menu’ for decoration?”

“They must be because they let me order off it.”

“Well, sure, because they’re not going to argue with a grown man over chicken fingers.”

Josh set his jaw, and she saw his tongue lick along the top of his gumline under his lip. “I can eat what I want.” A dribble of soda fell onto his shirt, and he swiped at it with his hand, succeeding only in smearing it into a wider dot.

“I mean, sure you can, as in it’s not illegal, but it’s embarrassing. You’re not a kid, and this is a classy place.”
Lainey dabbed a napkin into her water and handed it to him,

but Josh ignored it, cocking his head and staring at her with those beautiful blue eyes that usually made her forgive anything he did. So many things—leaving wet towels on the floor, forgetting to turn the lights off when he left the room, using a politically incorrect term in polite company—were forgiven in the name of blue eyes.

“Classy?” Josh scoffed. “Just because a place is expensive doesn’t make it classy.”

“Fine, nice then. It’s a nice place.” Lainey felt herself turning her knees away from him. She was acutely aware of her body language, the betrayal she felt that she couldn’t control it. She desperately wanted to reel this conversation back into something that resembled a celebration again. She forced herself to turn her feet toward him. She reached for his hand, and when he pulled it away, she sucked on her cheeks. Through gritted teeth, she said, “It’s a nice place, and I just want to have a nice time.”

“That’s just it, though, Lainey. It’s not. You came here for the bottomless mimosas.” He laughed bitterly. “Everyone did. What’s classy or nice about day drinking?” The volume of his voice was rising. “Just because they gave it a fancy name and called it brunch, that makes it, like, so much more acceptable than eating chicken fingers?” He put his head in his hands, looking down at the table while he held the brim of his cap over his eyes.

“I think it’s more that mimosas are for adults, and you’re a grown man eating off the kid’s menu,” she snapped back,

giving in. She hated herself when she did this. She knew this was what he wanted. If she gave in and had an emotional reaction to his attitude, he felt a sense of accomplishment, she knew. But he was winning, so she added with a hiss, “Because you’re afraid of change.”

He had been poised to strike, ready for that statement. “I am not afraid of change just because I stick to things I like, and there is no age limit on chicken. It’s just marketing to get you to order more expensive shit because of peer pressure or embarrassment or something.”

“Well, it totally worked because I’m. Embarrassed.” Lainey’s head swiveled in a way she knew was condescending as she clipped the last two words.

Josh blinked at her exaggeratedly. “Okay,” he said slowly, emphasizing each syllable, “but Lainey, and I want you to seriously think about this, what gives you the right to be embarrassed of me?”

“The right? It’s just a feeling. I have the right to feelings.”

“No.” His volume continued climbing upward. Lainey looked around to see if anyone had noticed and found that they had. Furtive glances were being thrown her way with forks poised above meals. “You have the right to be embarrassed of something you do or say. You don’t get to be embarrassed of me. Because you’re not better than me, Lainey. You get that, right? What if I said I was embarrassed that you decided to get drunk at two p.m.?”

“You basically did.”

“No, I said it’s not, like, fucking classy to get drunk at two p.m., but I didn’t say it embarrassed me. Because I don’t wake up thinking about how to be classy, and I don’t load all my self-worth onto what a bunch of strangers at a restaurant think of me. We’re on Broadway Avenue, you get that, right? Like, I’m sure if we turned a corner, there’s someone vomiting in an alley right now.”

“Okay, so that means we can’t just have one nice meal? Pretend we’re classy?”

“I’m just trying to eat ‘brunch,’ not impress you or anyone else here.”

“Great. Well, as long as you know no one’s impressed.”

“You know, Lainey, I get that you graduated from Vanderbilt,” Josh spit out Vanderbilt as though it were a curse on her family, “and you’re gonna be a doctor so you think everyone should kiss your ass all day long, but you aren’t that great.” Lainey was beginning to retreat inside herself. She had blocked out his words and was just staring blankly at the table to avoid looking at him. “Actually, you’re kind of a stuck-up cunt.”

Lainey gasped at the word. It was like a punch to the gut, being called something like that. He mocked her with a gasp back. She felt a wall drop between them. She could barely see him over it.

“So then why are you with me?”

“Oh, I thought that part was pretty obvious, Doctor. I’m not.” He stood up abruptly, his metal chair dropping to the ground behind him and clanging against the concrete of the patio.

“Josh, come on, we just ordered,” she called after him, standing up too. One of her heeled sandals came off as she snatched her purse and started to run after him. She started to turn back and retrieve it, then left it in favor of following him out the gate.

“Maybe,” he turned around six feet in front of her, “you could find, like, a preschool or something to donate my chicken fingers to.”

“I’m sorry, okay? It was a stupid argument to start. Please come back!” Lainey felt like she was dying. She was not into anything public, displays of affection or speaking. Her face felt red hot as she stood on the sidewalk, wearing one shoe and screaming after her boyfriend. Or ex-boyfriend.

“Seriously, though, don’t eat one, or you might find yourself finger painting and wearing diapers again!” he yelled, walking away at a regular pace, knowing she wouldn’t follow him. She rolled her neck back and stared at the sky for a moment, soaking in shame. Also, they’d taken the same car, so she had to figure that out. Also, now she had to pay for the tab. And she hadn’t brought any money because this was supposed to be her “Congratulations on getting your bachelor’s degree” late brunch meal. She was literally still wearing the honors stole.

She was snapped out of her thoughtful pity when everyone on the patio started clapping. “Encore!” a man called to her, and titters rippled from around him. Unable to bring herself to look, she covered her mouth with one hand, let out a shaky breath, and reached in her pocket to order a ride from a Lyft, walking away from the restaurant, her heeled shoe and her shoeless foot padding against the cement one after the other in a lopsided rhythm that matched the beating of her heart.

CHAPTER TWO

Lainey busted in the door of the house she shared with her roommate, Jill. Jill was baking in the kitchen haphazardly, the way she always did, with flour floating to the floor and various spoons clanking against surfaces.

“Shit, I did not expect you back so soon. These were supposed to be finished when you got done with brunch. Okay, well, still, get ready for these brownies, Lainey Girl, ’cause they are going to be fudgy this time, I can feel it. I’m adding orange too, and I’m trying to decide if caramel would ruin the flavor profile or not. What do you think?”

“Probably,” Lainey sighed, slamming the door behind her. Jill looked over at her and her eyes widened, leaving dots of mascara on her eyelids. Lainey kept telling her not to put Vaseline on after her makeup, but Jill swore skincare was more important. Eventually, she’d say, the dots of mascara would become her thing, and maybe she’d even start a trend.

“What happened to you? Where is your other shoe? Were you robbed?”

“Of my youth, yes,” Lainey proclaimed dramatically, kicking her remaining shoe off and flouncing on the couch with a heavy sigh. “Josh broke up with me.”

“Oh.” Jill wiped her hands off on the dress she had worn to Lainey’s graduation, a yellow sundress made of eyelet. She crossed the living room from the kitchen and sat next to her, resting a now semi-clean hand on Lainey’s crown. “Well.” She cleared her throat. “How do you feel about it?”

“I don’t know. I think I’m still in shock. It was awful. He called me a cunt, and he left me there with the tab and no way home. I had to dine and dash, basically—not basically; I did—and call a Lyft.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” Jill stroked her hair, rubbing the ends between her fingers in a motion that Lainey always found so endearing and nurturing.

“I don’t know. I guess because then I would have had to talk about it right then,” she replied pitifully, drawing her knees up to her face and hiding in them.

“Ah. Okay, well, hey, you know what? Josh is a loser.” She pulled Lainey’s hair away from her eyes, holding it back like she was peeking between blinds.

“Is he? Convince me.”

“You don’t need convincing. You know he is.”

“Jill, I’ve been with him since I was fourteen. He’s all I know.”

“Yeah, and since fourteen, you’ve been growing up, and he hasn’t. He’s immature. He comes over here and eats all our food and sleeps in until two and makes messes he doesn’t clean up. You know, I once found him eating out of our pans with a fork. That’ll ruin the nonstick coating.”

At that, Lainey cracked a smile, the top of her cupid’s bow widening. Jill bent her head to force herself in Lainey’s eyeline. The sparkle in and the crinkles around them felt safe. If Jill thought this was a good thing, maybe it was a good thing.

“You really think it’ll be all right?”

“Aw, Lainey Girl.” Jill wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her in tightly, squeezing her. “I know it will because I hated that guy.”

Lainey snickered a little and realized that tears were bubbling up at her waterline. “What do I do now?”

“You should get yourself a man. You need a man. Someone who drinks scotch and has a planner. Someone who won’t wear a baseball cap to your graduation. We could go to the country club and whistle at the men golfing if you’d like.”

“My dad golfs.”

“All right, well, we won’t whistle at your dad.” Lainey threw Jill a pointed look over her knees. Jill continued, “Or just I’ll whistle at your dad.”

“Stop, please, I can’t laugh right now. I have no idea what I do from here.”

“I just told you, remember? The whistling? Do you not like that plan? I thought it was good.”

“With my life. I had a plan. Go to medical school to be a doctor, turn Josh into a trophy husband, have two and a half kids, retire when I’m fifty, and spend the rest of my life drinking sweet tea on the porch. It was the perfect plan. Now I don’t even know if I want to go to medical school.” Prior to saying the words, Lainey hadn’t even realized she’d been feeling that, but having said them, she knew it was true.

“You don’t have to go.”

“I just want to help people.”

“There are other ways to help people.”

“Like what?” Lainey released her knees and dropped her feet to the ground. She turned to face Jill and clasped both her shoulders, shaking her a little. “Tell me what I want to do with my life. Maybe I should be a vet. Vets help people, and it’d require way less school.”

“You’re not even a vegetarian. You don’t even have pets. Have you ever had a pet?”

“No,” Lainey conceded, dropping her hands from Jill’s shoulders and into her own lap.

“So, probably not that then. You’ll figure it out. Everyone does.”

“Do they?” Lainey asked Jill quietly, to no answer. Jill was a lot like her mother in that she didn’t fill silence with pointless words. If she didn’t have an answer, she wouldn’t

manufacture one. Lainey, on the other hand, would jabber on until she'd backed herself into a corner. Her dad always told her she'd make a good doctor, that good doctors keep making guesses until they arrived at a solution. Sometimes that felt true, and other times she thought Jill's approach would make a better doctor, someone who just sat with you in the sadness if they couldn't do anything for you. She sighed deeply and rested against her roommate, inhaling the smell of orange zest that lived on her from her unfettered baking. They sat together for a moment in silence, and Lainey thought about how strange it was to be silent with someone and know that they had an internal dialogue unique from hers. She wondered what Jill thought about in those silent moments. As far as she could tell, Jill was one of the most content people she'd ever known. She had hobbies, and she was always busy. She dated around, but she never seemed to have a steady boyfriend or girlfriend. She went to work eight to five every Monday through Friday, and when she came home, she never talked about it. When she clocked out, the day was just over. No studying for finals, no life or death on the table. So then what, Lainey wondered, did Jill worry about when the air was still and no one was talking?

“I need to finish making the brownies.” So that was what.

“Okay. Thanks for making them. I need to get ready for dinner with my parents anyway.”

Jill gently pushed Lainey away from her and extracted her limbs from her to stand up. “Good. It's good to be around family when you feel like this.”

Lainey wasn't so sure of that. She loved her family, but she knew her father wasn't going to take her post-graduation instability well. To top it off, she knew they'd invited Bradley Arnault, a best friend to both of them that they met their freshman year of college. Even though she'd known him her whole life, there still wasn't closeness between them beyond knowing what kind of tea he liked—green with peppermint—and what kind of alcohol he drank—scotch. It would be just another person to perform for while she wrestled her unsteadiness. Lainey sat quietly on the couch, listening to the tinkling of a utensil against ceramic and staring at the manicure she had gotten for the photos at graduation. She knew they would take a photo when she shook the dean's hand, and she'd wanted it to look like a worthy hand. Josh had told her when she came home from the nail salon that he wasn't going to propose to her, so she shouldn't have bothered. It had made her angry at the time, but then she had realized it had made complete sense for him to say something like that because in the eight years they'd been together, Lainey had managed to give him the idea that she lived with him in mind. He was right, but only because she was living with everyone in mind.

“Hey,” Jill said quietly, pulling Lainey out of thought. She looked up to see her standing in the middle of the kitchen, cradling the bowl in the crick of her elbow like a newborn.

“Yes?”

“You really thought you could make Josh into a trophy husband?” Jill laughed good naturedly as she whisked. Lainey

rolled her eyes and curled up into a ball on the couch. But she knew she had a good point.

More like a participation ribbon husband, she thought, even as she heard her own thoughts echoed from Jill's mouth: "What kind of trophy—most improved?"

CHAPTER THREE

Lainey sat at dinner with her parents and Mr. Arnault. He was an impressive man, a biomedical engineer who'd managed to become a billionaire with innovative technology that allowed consumers to monitor the activity of their heart 24/7 with a small heart monitor and an app. It seemed like such an inconsequential thing, but the revolution of it was that usually patients that needed their heart monitored got a \$300 EKG put on them for a week that they couldn't remove themselves even to shower with, and if after the end of the week, they hadn't had any unusual heart activity, that was pretty much the end of that. His idea of ongoing data retrieval as it came to health had set him up for life, and he was basically free to do as he pleased.

Next to him and her parents, who were equally impressive in their own right, Lainey felt like a participation ribbon daughter herself. She struggled with habitual insecurity, always second guessing whether or not she had done things that made her worthy of calling herself a Crane. Though she knew her parents would be ecstatic that she and Josh were no longer together, she still felt a mewling inside her heart, a

damaged child crying under a blanket inside her ribcage where no one could hear. She watched in silence as her mom and dad joked around with Mr. Arnault. The crunching of her roasted carrots filled her ears like a soundtrack to their laughter. Whenever he came over, the two of them drank more than they usually did. She didn't know if it stemmed from a desire to impress him or if they were just enjoying themselves. They were not usually hyper concerned with image, but sometimes she liked to imagine that they, too, had tiny children living in their ribs that only stopped crying if someone was proud of them. It made her feel closer to them, less alien.

“So, Lainey, what do you think you plan to do with that Vanderbilt degree? Congratulations again.” Mr. Arnault's voice graveled with an authority that begged to be answered. Lainey swallowed too big a piece of carrot in order to respond more quickly, and it wedged in her throat. Holding up a finger, she wheezed until it dislodged and went down uncomfortably. “Are you all right?” he asked. She grimaced and took a sip of water, breathing deeply and reminding herself to just be a normal person. Which she had a feeling normal people did not have to remind themselves of.

“Yes, excuse me. You know, I'm not sure.”

“You're not sure?” her father repeated from across the table. Lainey twisted her neck, touching her ear to her shoulder.

“No,” she replied, though it was a tinny “no” that lacked even a shred of confidence. Suddenly, she felt itchy all over. She resisted the urge to scratch right there at the dinner table,

opting instead to fidget inside her own skin, wiggling her shoulders and her knees and her head, moving her hair in front of her ears then back behind her ears.

“You don’t want to be a doctor anymore? Like your old man?” Her dad was trying to keep it light, but she could tell that that possibility gnawed at him. Mr. Arnault clapped her dad on the shoulder with his big paw and flashed her a grin that showed off his impossibly straight, white teeth. When he smiled, his jawline was somehow even harder, a lovely chisled face offset by two dimples.

“Good choice, Lainey. Being a doctor is overrated. Your dad’s putting on a brave face now, but it’s a lot of school and a lot of debt.” His words were comforting, and she met his eyes with hers, noticing for the first time that they were a disarming shade of mossy green, like the Verzasca River in Switzerland. She’d gone on vacation there once and had visited the valley with her family. She had climbed the angular rocks, cutting the bottoms of her feet on the pointed edges. They’d been so sharp that she hadn’t noticed until she clambered to the beach later to eat crackers and fruit and her mom had seen her blood in the sand.

“Now, Brad, that may all be true, but it is far from overrated. I’ve built a nice life for my family and a legacy I’ll be remembered by. Besides, Lainey Bug, you come from a lineage of doctors,” her father pleaded, though his voice didn’t betray that he was begging. It sounded cool and relaxed. She was familiar with the tone. He was the sort that knew that hysterics didn’t get anything out of anyone. Better to disarm

them with a collected persona. He popped a bite of steak into his mouth and chewed carefully, looking at her as though she were an insect he'd found, something he'd have to search the name of later.

“Aw, come on, Todd, lineage? You're pulling tradition out as a reason to do anything? Evolved people don't do things because their parents did, Todd. Seems like your daughter's too smart to be a doctor if she knows that already, even before her old man figured it out.” He laughed a little, and she noticed the smile lines pouring out of his eyes like tributaries. They were the only way she could really tell he was her father's age. That, and the specks of gray that were smattered throughout his hair. She assumed his facial hair was salted as well, but he only had stubble. She was regarding him quietly, not saying anything, just letting the men do what men will do: tire themselves out arguing then pretend they never really had a stake in the argument.

“But my daughter doesn't know how rewarding being a doctor can be,” her father responded smugly. “You spend your life helping others. What else could be more rewarding?”

“Geez, Todd, why don't you just volunteer at the food bank then if you do it because it's rewarding? Here's my guess: You like the money and the honorific too,” Mr. Arnault responded slyly.

“I know how lonely it can be for your family,” Lainey muttered, feeling emboldened by Mr. Arnault's words. “You have such long hours, and you're always on call.”

“That may be true, but I’ve also been able to take vacations, to spend weeks at a time with you when other parents couldn’t.” Her dad’s tone wasn’t so genial anymore, and he had set down his utensils, the pretense of eating gone.

“Let the billionaire speak, Dr. Crane.” Bradley was laughing. He was enjoying this, Lainey could tell. He hadn’t seemed to pick up on the shift in tone. If he had, it didn’t matter to him.

“Sure, Mr. Arnault,” her father replied, delivering “mister” like a dagger, though a dagger that Bradley hadn’t seemed to have noticed.

“Lainey, it’s true that being a doctor is an honorable profession and one you won’t likely regret.”

“Thank you, old friend. I knew you’d come to your—”

Bradley held up his hand to her father, his eyes still trained on hers. She was lost on vacation in his eyes. A sneaky thought surfaced that as long as he would look at her, that’s how long she would be swimming in Switzerland.

“However, you could start biomedical engineering right now. You were on the premed path, so you know as much as I knew when I started. You could even go to medical school and waste an extra four years if you’re absolutely determined to and be one of the best in your field. Learn about what vacuums there are in the industry, spend a few years making something revolutionary, and watch the oyster of the world spit out pearl after pearl for you. You’re richer, you have more time, you’ve

spent less on education, you're still helping others, and you're richer."

"You said you're richer twice," her father pointed out.

Brad broke eye contact with her and looked over at her father, who was squinting at him. "It bears repeating," he said calmly and went back to cutting his own steak, evidently finished with his argument.

"Spectacular, Brad. Seriously, thank you, old friend," her dad repeated sarcastically.

"Lainey, you do what you want to do. Men who talk are men who can err," her mom said, finally speaking up and laying a hand on hers. She was like that, quiet past her turn, always delivering the last line. If she were a line in a play, she was undoubtedly, "And they lived happily ever after." Lainey smiled warmly at her, the woman who had stayed up with her helping her with homework, who had taken photos when she went to prom, who had filled the stockings at Christmas every year, who never minded a forgotten bake sale or project. When her mom looked away, Lainey glanced at Mr. Arnault to find him, too, looking at her. A smile slithered across his face contagiously, causing her to bite her lip to prevent herself from laughing. He put a finger to his lips as though to shush her, and then the moment was over, and he was back to talking to her parents, and she was back to eating quietly, a background fixture at her own parents' dinner table, like an extra chair they'd forgotten to put away before company came.

CHAPTER FOUR

A week later, in Jill's room, Lainey sat on the floor in a butterfly stretch, holding one of Jill's brownies in one hand and scrolling through potential jobs on her laptop with the other. Her chewing served as a contemplative meditation, a mechanical practice that allowed her to focus. Jill sat on the floor next to her, towels sitting under a canvas that she was painting a bright yellow. Lainey was finding the job market to be thin and somewhat uninspiring. Some of the positions sounded made up, and she found herself thinking about how these people were offering employment so that she could make them money so they could buy things from other employed people. It was a sick cycle. She wished for a moment that she lived on the top of a mountain, away from it all, that she was an old woman with a curled back that people visited every ten years to ask for help with their crops. She could feel the crisp air against her skin and the soft hands of the beggars when they took her wrinkled one, leathered from all the sun. On the other hand, she wanted to be rich.

“There's nothing,” Lainey sighed, looking over at Jill who did not look up from what she was doing.

“There’s not nothing.”

“There’s nothing I’d want to do forever.”

“You’re putting too much pressure on it. You don’t need to find something to do forever. You just need to find your first job with your fancy new degree, and then you’ll find a different, better job and then another, better job, and so on.” A curly, red tendril of Jill’s hair trailed through the wet paint. She stopped for a moment to observe it, shrugged, squeezed it out with two fingers, then tucked her hair into her shirt.

Lainey allowed the words to pass right through both of her ears. She didn’t want a life like Jill’s. She loved Jill, but Jill would need a roommate forever with the way she approached employment. Lainey wanted a career, a sustainable one that would support a family and vacations and dreams. She opened her legs into a V around her laptop, stretching her hamstrings out. Her cell phone rang, and she answered without looking.

“Hello?”

“Lainey?” came the voice on the other end, smooth with an edge, like scotch on the rocks.

“Yes, who’s this?”

“Bradley Arnault. I’m a friend of your father’s?”

Lainey didn’t know why adults did this. Well, older adults. She was an adult too, she reminded herself. Still, she was not at the age where she reminded people who she was after just seeing them the week before. She was also not at the age

where his voice should make her blood rush to her face. For some reason, she stood up and began to pace her yoga mat.

“Who is it?” Jill mouthed.

Lainey shook her head, then mouthed back, “My dad’s friend,” although she apparently did not mouth it well enough as Jill gave her a quizzical look in return.

“Hi, Mr. Arnault. What can I do for you? Is my dad okay?” she asked, swaying from side to side. Jill’s head snapped up to look at her with wide eyes.

“Yes, he’s fine. Sorry if I alarmed you by calling. I wanted to offer you something.” Lainey gave a thumbs up to Jill, who returned to her painting. The word “offer” from his mouth, the way the *o* dripped off his tongue, made her squirm and drip herself. Self-consciously, she crossed her legs even as she stood and shot a furtive look at Jill, who didn’t seem to have noticed, happily painting the whites of eyes on every inch of her canvas.

“Offer me something?” She picked at a loose string on Jill’s bedspread, fraying it.

“I wondered if you’d like to come intern for me.”

“Oh, I see.”

“It wouldn’t be a paid position, but I think I have a different way to make it worth your while.” A different way. The thrumming of her heart was arresting; it had rendered her immobile. “Would it possibly be an attractive position if I offered to put you through medical school? Or through getting

your masters—whichever way you'd like to take your education.”

Well, that certainly was a different way, though not the way she thought he was going to say.

She shook her head, willing the blood in her face to disperse back to where it belonged. Why had she thought he was going to say something else? What was wrong with her? She had always planned on going back to school. As long as she could talk, the idea was that she'd be a doctor like her dear old dad. It was only recently that she had developed this identity crisis. It was Josh's cutting words that had made her reconsider, the way he'd said “doctor” so venomously, the way she wasn't sure she could do it alone. Josh, for all his faults, had helped her study and had always reassured her that she was going to pass her classes and probably with an A. Even when he'd seemed annoyed that she was spiraling again, he'd never denied her intelligence. But her mother's words hovered—was she really going to let a man make up her mind for her? But then, wasn't being a doctor because her father had always said she would be one doing the same thing? Her mind was only echoing what had been on repeat for a week now. Every day—every second she was awake, in fact—only seemed to serve the anxiety of forever. She would eat and think about what she wanted to do with her life. She would breathe and think about what she wanted to do with her life. She was tiring herself out. Graphs and charts and lists weren't even helping, and that was not usually the case for Lainey.

“Lainey?”

She realized she hadn't said anything in at least a minute. "Yes, I'm here, sorry. I'm just thinking," she answered honestly.

"I'm sensing you have some reservations."

"Sorry. It does sound like an attractive offer," she replied quietly.

"How about this, then? Let's meet for lunch. Are you doing anything in an hour?"

"No ... I'm not. I can meet you."

"Great. Let's meet at Etch. I'll pick you up, how about that?"

"I prefer to drive myself."

He chuckled. "Of course. Smart. I could be dangerous. All right, let's meet at Etch in an hour then. Do you know where it is?"

Now it was her turn to laugh. Etch was one of the hottest restaurants in the dining scene in Nashville. She routinely saw it listed on tourist and foodie articles. She'd passed the gorgeous building with its floor-to-ceiling windows spanning across the walls and accent markers in cherry wood many times on her way to school.

"Sure, I know where it is. Thank you."

"I should be thanking you for not scrolling through other jobs while we talk. See you in an hour."

A surprised laugh escaped her as she closed her laptop. It was as if he had seen what she was doing and knew just when to call. "See you then."

As soon as she hung up, she bolted to her room to look for a change of clothes, something that said sophisticated but also maybe like she didn't even know how sophisticated the restaurant was, that she actually was just wearing something sophisticated when he called and what a happy accident that was.

She settled on a little black wraparound dress with a discreet cut out right at the midriff and ruffles at the bottom. To really sell that this was just her errands look, she buckled on some strappy flats and braided her hair down her back, letting out two strands at the front to frame her face. As she applied cherry red lip stain, she caught Jill's eye from the other room. Jill was watching her frantically dress with a smirk across her face.

"Whatcha doing?" she called from down the hall.

"I'll explain later," Lainey called back as she grabbed her purse and headed out the door. Mainly because she had no idea what she was doing.

CHAPTER FIVE

She arrived at the restaurant to a hostess asking if she had a reservation. She paused to consider, unsure if she did, and looked around for Mr. Arnault. She eyed the tall ceilings and the light fixtures that dripped from them like stalactite, the men in suits and the women in dresses sipping from martinis in the afternoon with seemingly no cares despite it being a Wednesday. Mr. Arnault was seated at a cozy table at the far side of the restaurant, holding a scotch and raising a hand to signal his position. She smiled from behind a bitten lip and pointed at him. The hostess smiled broadly back and waved her hand in a flourish, permitting her to go sit. As she did, Mr. Arnault stood and kissed her cheek.

“Good to see you, Lainey. We got here just in time for lunch. Take a look at the menu before we jump in. On me, of course.”

She thought briefly that it was interesting how he’d phrased that, as though they happened to have arrived at the right time as opposed to acknowledging he’d reserved a table for them at one p.m. She wondered how he had managed to pull that off.

Had this plan of his been in the works for longer than she knew? Or did he just get lucky? She supposed a billion dollars at one's disposal could sway some situations in their favor.

“Oh, thank you. That's kind of you.”

“I invited you. It's only right,” he assured her, swirling the ice in his glass, tinkling it against the sides. She knew, of course, that he'd offered and therefore he was going to pay, but it was still comforting to hear. It conveyed a certain amount of thoughtfulness, saying it out loud. She could feel his eyes on her as she perused the options with delight. “Is anything jumping out at you?”

“Everything is jumping out at me,” she answered honestly, her mouth watering at the fried cornmeal catfish with sweet potato beignets.

“The catfish is really good,” he whispered, leaning forward conspiratorially. Just like when he had called at the exact right time earlier, she felt completely read by him, like a worn map he'd pulled from his glovebox, something familiar to him, a well-traveled path. *It's just catfish*, she told herself, even as his subtle aftershave wafted her way. When he pulled back, a strand of hair brushed his cheek until he was upright in his own space again. She closed her menu.

“The catfish then.”

“Excellent.”

Like magic, a waiter appeared, his hands behind his back and his face solemn, as if taking their order was the highest

honor, something akin to holding the robes of a magistrate. After they'd ordered and handed off their menus, they both looked at each other silently, waiting for the other to speak. It became apparent that he could hold off longer than she could, his index finger stroking the mouth of his glass as he watched her easily. She wasn't sure, but it seemed to her that he was watching her lips. Unconsciously, she licked them, and when she caught his eyes flit up to hers, she was sure.

"Listen, what you offered me, it does sound very attractive. I've just never heard of an internship that pays to put someone through college. So, I'm wondering if it's a normal offer."

"What do you mean by normal?"

"Well, I guess I'm asking if ... is it favoritism? Or nepotism?"

"It can't be nepotism," he laughed a little, that finger still trailing the lip of his glass like braille.

"But why me?"

"Why you? You just graduated from Vanderbilt with honors. Jobs are about to poach you, Lainey, and I want you first."

She shivered a little at "I want you." "Hm."

"I think I hear you asking if this offer is an industry standard. I also hear you asking if I would extend this to someone whose father I didn't know personally. It is not, and I would not, but it is standard practice to put an employee through school, and I don't have many opportunities to meet people like you, people fresh out of school and hungry to do

something revolutionary. I'm just getting a leg up on my competition. My hope is that when you're done with school, you'll like the job so much you won't want to leave, and you'll apply your education to my work. I could always use more eyes, more brilliant minds."

"You mean you're offering me Stockholm syndrome in four years," she joked. He chuckled, and she felt pleased that she had made him laugh. She thought again of the little girl that lived in her ribcage. She'd always thought that little girl only stopped crying when people were proud of her but making Mr. Arnault laugh seemed to have perked her up as well.

"That's exactly what I'm offering. What do you say?"

"I say yes. That sounds wonderful."

Mr. Arnault reached for her hand, and Lainey took it, her eyes trained on their hands clasped together as they shook on the agreement. It felt similar to the moment she'd been handed her degree. She just hoped it wasn't similar to the moment afterward when she'd back down in her chair, opened it, and realized it was an empty prop, just a book where the degree would go later. Her answer had been so sure. It was so unlike her to not need to write the pros and cons down. It was an attractive offer, and she could feel it. What she was feeling between her legs was irrelevant.

"Would you like to come by on Monday at seven a.m.? I can text you the address."

"I could do that. Thank you, Mr. Arnault, for your generosity."

“I told you, Lainey. I’m not being generous. I’m being sensible. You’re an attractive prospect, and four years is nothing in the long game.

“Well, then, you’re welcome, Mr. Arnault.”

He chuckled again at her brazen response, a quip that Lainey wouldn’t believe she’d come up with if she hadn’t said it herself. It was actually more like she’d heard herself say it, as though someone had pulled the words out of her throat by a string. He opened his mouth to respond as their waiter returned and set their plates down in front of them, Lainey’s first.

“Ah, just in time.” Mr. Arnault rubbed his hands together, raising his eyebrows at her.

“It looks amazing,” Lainey breathed, completely in awe of the crust on the catfish and the crisp of the beignet offset by the powdered sugar.

“As amazing as you look?” he asked, and her head snapped up. His lips were parted just slightly, and he was gazing at her with an intensity that could only be described as hunger. When she didn’t respond, he prodded, “Good enough to eat?” At her silence, he cocked his head at her and continued to look so far into her eyes she was certain he could see her soul. If he could, he would know that it had just ignited at his words, that she was aflame inside.

“Thank you,” was the lame response she could muster, and the corners of his lips curled up when he heard it. He glanced down at his plate, holding his laughter back. “Is this funny to

you?” she asked in confused annoyance, her tone a little too biting.

“Not at all, Lainey.” He reached forward and ran the lock of hair she’d left loose between two fingers, almost as if he were measuring it. “Is it funny to you?” His hand dropped to her neck, cupping it, his broad thumb adding pressure to the muscle above her clavicle.

“No.” She sighed at his touch.

“Go ahead. Try it,” he told her, nodding at her plate. He let go of her throat in favor of his drink. In all the years she’d known Mr. Arnault, he never gulped, and he didn’t gulp now. He sipped his scotch, slowly savoring it, closing his eyes as he swallowed and smiling up at whatever it was that had graced him the opportunity to taste. She imagined him doing the same to her, relishing her skin inch by inch, his tongue never wandering but carefully voyaging across her body. “Is it good?”

“It is.”

“I thought it might be.”

CHAPTER SIX

Lainey drove back home in complete silence, her thoughts piling one on top of the other, a Jenga tower of sexual and academic frustration. When she arrived home, she took the to-go box out of the front seat and felt the heat radiating through the bottom of the container. She bit her lip at the memory that sprung behind her eyes and walked in the kitchen, throwing it in the fridge. She found, thankfully, that Jill was gone, probably doing yoga in the park with people she met on Meetup or something of equal value that Lainey could never picture herself doing.

She walked in silence through the house and decided to bathe, something she'd wanted to do before she went to meet Mr. Arnault anyway. She untied the strings on her dress and let it drop onto the tile floor, pulled the hair tie off from around her braid to allow her hair to fall down her back. She ran the bathwater until it was steaming and lay in it, stretching her legs in front of her, arching her toes dramatically. Why had she rushed to meet him? What was it about him that excited her, that made her impulsive? That, worse yet, made her obedient? She shuddered at the thought of his thumb pressing into her

throat and the way her body had reacted. Her body was reacting again, and she moved her hands to her breasts, holding them as they floated, imagining Mr. Arnault's strong fingers cupping them instead. She thought of his thumbs travelling to her nipples. A man his age would know what he was doing, wouldn't waste time flicking them but would instead be capable and precise in his movements, squeezing lightly, rotating his fingers around them.

She thought of showing up at work on Monday and pictured herself sitting at a heavy oak desk across from him, intent on her work until she felt a pen dragging its way up her thigh, then a warm hand separating her legs, his fingers slipping under the elastic of her underwear. Lainey gasped inwardly at the image, one that was so strong she could feel it. She was pulsing, and the warm water around her was melting her into the vision. Her hands slipped under the water and down between her legs, which she'd been crossing all day, trying to suppress the feelings she was having for Mr. Arnault. The feelings were alien to her. She'd never had eyes for anyone but Josh—she'd never let herself. She'd always been the perfect girlfriend, loyal and chaste. But with Mr. Arnault, she found herself wanting to lean into whatever persona he wanted her to adopt. It was in direct opposition to the life she'd always lead, one where the path was clear. Although, in her imagination, the path was clear too—it was just a path beneath her skirt, a tunnel for him to drive his finger into with a light above leading the way. She could feel herself full of two of his fingers, squeezing tightly around them as his thumb stroked

her clit in eager circles, her juices flowing freely until he suddenly pulled his hand away from her and pulled her underwear back into its proper place, patting the fabric. Lainey rubbed her clit feverishly under the water and arched her back as she imagined herself rocking back and forth on the chair to his smirking supervision. She held her breath between yearning gasps at the thought of him watching her grovel before running his wet fingers over her lips until she parted them and accepted his fingers into her mouth, her tongue tasting the flavor of her desire. She came with a violent throbbing. It sent shockwaves through her body, and her writhing displaced water over the brim of the bathtub. She held her heart and waited for its beating to return to normal as she stared right through the water on the floor, her eyes there but her mind somewhere else, kissing Mr. Arnault a thank you.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Monday morning, Lainey tried to quell her nausea, the saliva that was brimming on the back of her tongue. She moved the gear to the “park” position and touched the ignition button. The car quietly turned off, the screen blackening. She kicked at the door with her feet to hold it open as she let herself out then slammed the door closed with her hip. She was a few minutes late as the road she went down had been closed. She’d had to figure out how to get there without GPS and had failed miserably, turning down several cul-de-sacs before finally finding a road that deposited her back on the road a little farther down.

She expected Mr. Arnault to welcome her, but instead she was briskly greeted by a woman who gripped her by the elbow and whisked her to an empty room to complete onboarding paperwork. She sat quietly, filling out all the information that had defined her for her entire life without actually capturing anything about her. Who was Lainey? A name, an address, an emergency contact, three references, an education, a birthday, and a social security number. She was a culmination of numbers and letters. Her experiences didn’t matter, and thank

God for that anyway, because she'd always won Never Have I Ever, always been left with more fingers than her peers. She read through the HIPAA laws, through the employee handbook—apparently, she was entitled to three fifteen-minute breaks and one thirty-minute break—and then she signed a non-disclosure agreement, which gave her a thrill. She'd never had a secret before, not that she could remember.

The woman, whose name was Monica and who was evidently the office manager, showed her around the building with that serious face that women who had had to claw their way into positions always wore. She showed her the bathrooms, the conference room, the kitchen, the lounge, the research room, the various offices of employees, pointing out Mr. Arnault's without stopping, and then took her back into the waiting room to show her how to use the fax machine, computers, and phones. Though the phone looked complicated at first glance, she just imagined the buttons as tabs that she could switch between with the one hold button being the holy grail she needed to remember. Then Monica got her up to speed with the various apps for organization and communication the company used and had her sign up for them all, and they were many. Monday, Slack, Trello, a personalized work email address, Zoom, Google calendar—the list was daunting. When she'd been in school, she'd just used a white board and the school's email.

“It almost seems like too much communication,” Lainey marveled, wondering how their conversations didn't get lost in the various threads.

“Too much communication isn’t possible,” Monica quipped back, her eyebrows touching the bridge of her nose in genuine angst.

“Too many branches of communication, then. It’s fragmented.”

“How about you work here for at least a day before you give me ideas on how to manage,” Monica shot back, her eyes sparkling with annoyance.

“Sorry, of course.”

Monica smiled a smile that didn’t touch her eyes and pulled her phone out of her back pocket as it buzzed.

“Our boss just communicated with me via one of our fragmented branches of communication that he’d like you to see him in his office. You remember which one it is?”

“Yes. Sorry again,” Lainey mumbled, walking away and feeling that icy hot zap of concern shoot through her body as she realized that she had already fumbled in her relationship with Monica. She opened the wrong door and looked behind her shoulder to make sure Monica hadn’t noticed. She had. She sucked on her teeth as Monica pointed wordlessly.

“Lainey, how is your first day going?” Mr. Arnault asked cheerfully as she entered his office.

“Great!” Lainey chirped, swallowing down the copper-flavored apprehension that coated her tongue. “Monica has been so welcoming.” Maybe, she hoped, that would get back to Monica, and all would be forgiven. Or maybe that would

get back to Monica, and she would assume Lainey had said it sarcastically.

“She’s been with me for a long time, so I’m glad to hear that. She’s really blossomed here, as I hope you will. Truth be told, she helped me blossom too. I was a little lost without some management. I need you to do me a favor.”

“Of course, Mr. Arnault! What can I do for you?” She tried to say it with a hint of something sultry in her voice. He handed her a credit card.

“I added a list of coffee orders to Monday and sent you a reminder on the Slack intern board. Run out and grab those for us, please.”

“Sure. Peppermint green tea for you?” she asked, pointing a finger gun at him. He paused for a moment, eyeing her hand, which she lowered.

“Yes ... but should you forget, it’s on Slack. And of course, get yourself whatever you like as well.” She stood there a moment, fingering the thick metal of the black card, staring into the back of Mr. Arnault’s head at the little swirl of the crown. “Lainey? Can you do that for me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Now?”

“Oh! Yes.” She left, confusion welling in her, and closed the door behind her. She noticed Monica’s smug face and grabbed her keys in silence.

“Coffee?” Monica called as she was walking out.

“Mhm,” Lainey responded tightly, staring straight ahead, letting the door close as hard as it would, which wasn’t that hard as it had hydraulics in the hinges.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The rest of the day was largely uninteresting. After an awkward two- to three-minute pause at the counter spent searching through Slack for the intern thread and holding up a line of people trying to get coffee before work, Lainey managed to order and bring back the coffees. The sight of a matcha latte perked Monica up quite a bit, which offered Lainey some relief about what she thought was a rapidly deteriorating relationship. She gave Mr. Arnault his peppermint green tea, and he took it while on the phone, nodding a thank you to her, or at her, without looking up from his computer. She then went on to do the extremely important task that Monica had given her of going through the company's email and unsubscribing from each individual junk email and then deleting them, a job that Monica had seemed positively gleeful about finally being able to pass onto someone unqualified enough. Lainey had expected to get through it rather quickly and move onto something with more meat, but she realized around hour two that she had managed to get through twenty-seven hundred, a fact she was proud of until she eyed the number of unopened emails, the bulk of

which were, in fact, junk emails: sixty thousand. Her eyes blurred and ached from the harsh screen light mixed with the monotonous nature of the action. Monica passed her some blue light glasses and patted her shoulder.

“How about you do something else for a bit? Break it up?”

“Yes, please.”

“Why don’t you go get everyone lunch?” Lainey smiled ruefully, feeling a bit like a delivery driver. When she returned, there were sixty-six thousand unopened emails.

Five hours later, Monica patted her shoulder.

“Time to go home. You did a good job today.”

“Will this be it, do you think?”

“You’re an intern. This will probably be it.” Seeing her crushed face, she added, “For a while, at least. It’s grunt work, but it gets your foot in the door.” She shrugged.

Lainey tried not to take the shrug personally, but it caused a twinge in her sternum. The idea that four years of AP classes and debate team followed by four years of a perfect GPA had led her to a position serving coffee and deleting emails was a hard pill to swallow, but it was practically a horse pill that that fact didn’t seem to bother anyone. Only she and she alone was taken aback by the reality of where all her hard work had gotten her. She was tired of things getting her “foot in the door.” Where was this door? It seemed to be at the end of a corridor, too long to be labeled a hallway, the kind you could hear your breathing echoing in.

On her way out, Mr. Arnault called out to Lainey from his office. “Miss Crane, come see me please.” She walked over and peeked inside to see him at a desk, surrounded by papers and looking lost in thought, if a bit troubled, a deep line forming on his forehead. He ran his hands through his hair.

“Hi, I’m glad to see you. I was hoping we’d get to talk more today, but I understand that you’re busy. How did I do?” she asked, half of her body leaning out of the room as she swung from the door frame.

“Come in, please, and shut the door.” She did as he requested and stood awkwardly, her hands clasping her elbows behind her back.

“Is everything all right?” Lainey asked nervously, her feet shifting uncomfortably. Mr. Arnault rested his face in his hands for a moment before dragging them down his nose and dropping them onto his desk.

“Well, no, Lainey. Tell me, are you grateful for this opportunity?” He looked at her with a hardened expression, and she found herself in awe of how comfortably he could sit in discomfort. He didn’t flinch or fidget when she didn’t respond for several minutes. He just allowed the beats of silence to pass, the march of time to march on. She didn’t know how he resisted the urge to fill the empty air.

“I am,” she finally managed to squeak out, confused at his apparent anger.

“So why, then, did you show up late and wearing ... that?” Lainey looked down at her shirt. It was a simple, houndstooth

number with a peplum bottom. She chose to answer the first question instead.

“Well, sir, I’m sorry I was late. It was only a few minutes, and of course I made sure to notify your front desk. The road here was blocked off, so I had to go around, and my GPS wouldn’t tell me an alternate route—”

“I don’t need an excuse, Miss Crane,” he said firmly, putting up a hand the way he had to her father at dinner. Lainey jerked her head back as though she’d been struck. She understood why he had called her “Miss Crane” in front of others, but why was he still doing it while they were alone together in his office? She felt her face heat up. “I need someone reliable. I thought that because your father has an excellent work ethic, you would know how to show a certain amount of professionalism in the workplace. From now on, I expect that. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir. I apologize, and I will improve.”

“That’s all. You may go. I expect to see you here tomorrow. At seven a.m., not 7:04, not even 7:01.” Lainey turned and opened the door, her shoulders distinctly drooped, and her mood significantly deflated. “Oh, and Lainey,” he piped up, and she turned around expectantly, hoping that he would offer her a crumb of encouragement after tearing her down. “You parked in the visitor’s parking lot. The employees park on the street.” Lainey nodded and left the building numbly, not daring to look Monica in the face after the verbal lashing that she’d just received. She sat in her car and finally allowed tears to

brim over her waterline and fall down onto her shirt that was, apparently, not professional enough anyway.

CHAPTER NINE

“Hey there, Graduate! How was your first day at the new big girl job?” Jill called from the couch, already in sweatpants and a long tee. One thing Lainey had always admired about Jill was that she knew the value of comfort. She never let her workday infiltrate her home life, to the point that even her work clothes were tainted and stripped the moment she arrived home. She was strumming a ukulele and smiling widely at Lainey, then noticed the streaked mascara pooled in a puddle at the crest of her cheeks. “No, that bad? Oh, come here.”

“I just need to be alone right now,” Lainey sniffled. She went into her room, a space where she felt safe from pretense. Her room had been the one place that no one needed her to be anything when she was a child. No one asked about report cards or debate team practices, and so she’d sit in it for hours just being herself, feeling the rug beneath her and reading. Sometimes, someone would knock on her bedroom door and she would feel this jolt of paralyzing anxiety. The reality that people perceived her and that that perception mattered to her was too much.

She went to her mirror and examined her outfit, still unsure of what Mr. Arnault hadn't liked about it. Slacks and a shirt and some close toed heels seemed, to her, taken right out of a *Sex in the City* episode. She'd thought it was perfect when she'd chosen it the night before, giddily hanging it on her headboard. Now, she felt too sexy in it, noticing the way the soft fabric of the slacks and the tie around the waist seemed to accentuate her body. She let her hair out of the severe bun she'd worn, which now felt like a poorly executed cosplay of an employee, and turned slightly, watching her hair drop in an elegant swish down her back and graze the top of her butt. She noticed the way her butt was lifted in the pants and sighed. She began pulling clothing out of her drawers and holding them against her body, flattening them against herself and trying to think of what Mr. Arnault would think of them, imagining herself in them researching obscure medical techniques in front of Mr. Arnault, dropping something and having to pick it up in front of Mr. Arnault, stumbling and being caught by Mr. Arnault's strong and capable hands Every outfit she pressed against herself lead back to daydreaming about him. That couldn't be a good sign. Maybe he was right. Haphazardly, she started going through her drawers, throwing clothes on the floor until she arrived at exactly two outfits that might be considered professional: a turtleneck with slacks and the dress she had worn to her grandmother's funeral. So, professional for an Amish person or a nun—either way, someone who had wandered into a workplace after a long religious retreat.

Flustered, she opened her door and called out to Jill, “Please come help me.”

Jill stood up, still playing her instrument, and walked over to Lainey, taking tiny leaps as though she were a performer. “What do you need?” she asked with a coy smile.

“Mr. Arnault told me today that my outfit was unprofessional. Is this really unprofessional? I don’t see it.” Lainey struck a little pose, her hand on her hip.

“Spin around,” Jill said seriously, looking Lainey up and down as she did. “It is, yes.”

“Why? Because of my butt? I can’t help that I have a butt.”

“No, I just had you spin for fun. Because of the straps.” “What’s wrong with the straps?” “They’re just a little less than two inches thick.”

“Ah,” Lainey responded dejectedly, dropping the turtleneck from her grip onto the floor. “I didn’t even think of that. My shoulders are unprofessional?”

“Yes.”

“That’s sexist.”

“Is it? Could you see his shoulders?”

“No, but I would support his right to show them to me. A workplace should focus on office morale, not the existence of or lack of shoulder skin showing.”

Jill pressed her lips together and nodded as if Lainey were explaining gravity to her. “Mmm, mhm, good point. So,

Lainey Girl, would you buy a car from a man wearing a tank top?”

“Maybe,” Lainey responded jokingly. Jill just stared at her pointedly.

“Okay, would you let a man with a tank top on ... what does Mr. Arnault do again?”

“He develops medical devices.”

“Would you let a man with a tank top on sell you a medical device he just developed?”

“I’d insist a man selling me a medical device he just developed wear a tank top.” Jill raised her eyebrows. “No, I know. I just didn’t think about it,” she finally admitted forlornly.

Jill motioned for her to follow as she led her into her room and started removing clothes from her closet and holding them up against Lainey. “Lainey, it’s going to be okay. You know what this is called?”

“What?”

“Growing pains.”

“I’m not twelve.”

“Biggest lie adults ever got away with is telling kids you stop growing. So, he told you your outfit was unprofessional. So what? I’m sure you were great the rest of the day. You gotta take the good with the bad.”

“Actually, he didn’t say a kind word to me all day. He was sort of rude. I was, like, four minutes late because of work on the road, and I parked in the guest parking lot. He sort of chewed me out.”

Jill looked up from examining a silky, burnt orange button up. “He was rude to you?”

“Kinda!” Lainey tucked one foot against her leg in a tree pose. “He brought me into his office and said all kinds of stuff about how he thought I’d know better than how I acted and dressed. It was humiliating.”

“Who is this guy?”

“Only, like, the leading biomedical engineer right now.”

“What does that even mean? Leading for what? For who? In America or ... ?”

“I don’t know. I just said it, and I didn’t expect you to ask any follow-up questions,” Lainey admitted. “He’s just very successful, okay? It’s very rare for someone to become an actual billionaire doing what he does.”

“Is it? Seems like something I’d expect people to get rich doing, America being a hellhole where healthcare is a capitalist venture and all.” Jill scoffed.

“Rich, sure, but it’s very rare for anyone to become a billionaire. Plus, it’s a niche market. Most people become billionaires by making something that a celebrity can advertise on Instagram. He can’t exactly do that with medical

equipment. And he's paying for me to go back to school, and I just want him to feel confident in his choice to do that."

"Wait, what? You didn't tell me that part."

"I told you about it when I came home from lunch, remember? You were working on that painting?"

"When I'm creating, I'm not present. You know that."

Lainey rolled her eyes. She knew Jill was kidding, but she also knew Jill was only half kidding.

"Can I see him?"

"See him? Sure." Lainey shrugged and pulled out her phone. She typed in his name and pulled up his website, which had his bio front and center with a professionally taken photo. She turned the phone to Jill whose mouth opened in shocked delight.

"Lainey, I asked to see a picture of your boss, not a CGI rendering of the man of my dreams," she squealed, snatching the phone and shoving the shirt into Lainey's chest. Lainey wrapped her arms around it and watched her while she stared at the phone. "This is him actually? He's gorgeous." Lainey felt a protective instinct at Jill's ogling. Not protective—jealous. The photo was black and white, so at least Jill couldn't tell he had eyes the color of seaweed shimmering on the ocean floor. He was obviously the focus of the photo, but he was also only one-fifth of the photo's composition. He was standing in an elevator as the doors were closed in such a way that they were framing him perfectly. One hand held a blazer

that was draped behind his shoulder by a crooked finger. The other was raised as he looked at his watch—a watch that Lainey didn't know the brand of but could tell cost something disgusting—and his eyes were squinted in an expression of contemplative hurry, like he had anywhere to be but taking a photo. It looked as if he were biting the inside of his thicker bottom lip, and that dependable smattering of stubble cross-hatched his jaw ... The photographer had nailed it. It looked like it came from *GQ* magazine. Maybe it had.

“I guess. I don't think about him that way obviously. He's, like, my dad's age. He's my dad's best friend. That's so gross that you would even say that.”

“Okay, well, if he ever hosts an office party that you don't want to attend alone, you remember your roommate Jill, who is really more of a friend to you than a roommate, okay?” Lainey decided to ignore her thirsty commentary.

“It's just that I sort of thought he'd be extra nice to me because he brought me into the position, you know? He asked me. I didn't ask him. He said I was doing him a favor, that I was the kind of candidate the job market would want to snatch up.”

Jill shook her head and handed Lainey back the phone. “Sorry, I was having ten simultaneous daydreams at once just now. What did you say? That you expected special treatment, so you showed up late in an unprofessional outfit and parked somewhere that no one else was parked even though it was obviously the most convenient parking spot? Do not mess this

up, Lainey. That is so not the attitude to approach this with. Be confident, of course, because yes, you're very hireable, and you should know that and act like it. But this job was the universe's gift to you for finally letting go of a bunch of baggage named Josh. He was being nice, Lainey. You're hireable, and so were the four hundred other people that graduated with honors beside you, so you do whatever that man tells you to. That sexy billionaire man. Got it?"

Lainey felt like she had just been hit by a car. She knew Jill hadn't meant to be mean because Jill never meant to be mean, but she had just unknowingly picked at the exact scab that Lainey was always picking at herself, the idea that even when she was extraordinary, she was ordinary.

"Yeah, got it."

"Good. Here. This part of my closet is work clothes. Take them and hang them in the hall closet so we can both pick from it. Wear what you want." Jill gestured for Lainey to hold her arms out and piled clothing on top of them until it was a mountain of silk and khaki and linen. As Lainey turned to inspect the pile in her bedroom, Jill repeated, "Don't mess this up, Lainey. You're good at not messing things up. Keep it up." Her tone was friendly, but those words were worming their way into the crevices of Lainey's body. *Keep it up*. She'd been hearing those words since kindergarten, and she had been, in fact, keeping it up since then. She was terrified of what would happen if she accidentally let go.

CHAPTER TEN

It was going to be a better day. Lainey knew that because, as she'd left the house alongside Jill, Jill had turned to her and said, "It's going to be a better day," and in an effort to protect her own sanity, she was choosing to believe her. That, and if it wasn't a better day, she was going to scream into her pillow until her head hurt when she got home. She'd left the house an hour early so that she could get everyone coffee before work. That way, she'd be early, Mr. Arnault would be impressed, and Monica would be happy right away as opposed to an hour into the day. It was almost a perfect plan except that she got to work about forty minutes early and was sitting in her car deciding between giving everyone cold coffee or looking dumb. She decided on looking dumb and walked to the building with two hands firmly clamped on the cup carrier. She would not allow the flashing images that were assaulting her brain of her slipping and spilling four venti drinks down the outfit she had borrowed to become a reality. That would remain in her mind, something to work out in a nightmare later.

When she pushed the heavy door open with her back, the building was entirely dark except for a ray of light escaping through the crack under Mr. Arnault's door.

"Hello?" she called out.

"Hello?" he called back. She knocked on the door. "Come in."

"I brought everyone drinks. Peppermint green tea," she said, setting his down on a coaster. He smiled warmly at her, his expression a bit amused.

"Bit early, are we?"

"I guess so," she responded sheepishly.

"You look nice," he told her seriously, his eyes glittering from underneath his heavy, dark eyebrows. "Thanks for the tea."

"You're welcome. I won't clock in," she teased.

"You can put Monica's latte in the microwave right before she gets here. She won't notice, I promise," he assured her.

"Okay, I will." She left his office, a little thrown off by how he had yet again read her mind. She left his office and sat awkwardly in silence in the break room, waiting to hear the cue of the door opening, so that she could surreptitiously heat Monica's latte. However, when the door did open and she stood to carry out her quest, people didn't drip into the office like usual. Rather, they seemed to be blown in by the wind, racing from room to room, all stopping to talk to Mr. Arnault.

“Lainey, what are you working on?” Monica asked her, hanging her coat up and cramming her head into Lainey’s workspace so that their ears were almost touching.

“I’m just unsubscribing from the junk emails like before,” she responded tentatively, sensing it was the wrong answer.

“No!” Monica yipped harshly before breathing in deeply. “Sorry, no, today I need you to do my job while I work on something for Mr. Arnault.”

“What is going on?”

“Someone is claiming they came up with his idea before he did. No way it’s true, but we need to find documentation that can prove it. So, what you’re going to do is check my tasks instead of yours—in my Slack thread, obviously—and just go through it. If you have any questions, skip it. Okay?”

Lainey did just that and found that Monica’s job was surprisingly easy for her. It was calming, in a way, for Lainey to know that Monica wasn’t a super genius she could never live up to. In fact, it was much easier than four years at Vanderbilt had been and almost boring for her. She was mainly emailing people about orders for things around the office they needed, researching online forums to see what sort of medical problems the chronically ill were having that weren’t being solved, managing Mr. Arnault’s calendar, and keeping track of the state of patents and copyrights. As she was getting into the stride of things, she heard the bell above the door ting, and she said without looking up, “Good afternoon! I’ll be right with you. Please have a seat.”

“Nah, I’m good standing,” responded the voice in a bored drawl she recognized instantly. Heat rushed to her face, her stomach hollowed, and she squeezed her eyes shut, wishing the moment away. She opened them slowly and looked up. “I’m still here,” Josh said.

“What are you doing here?” she whined, looking around.

“I wanted to see this new boyfriend that Jill was telling me all about.”

“Jill? Why were you talking to Jill?” Lainey was annoyed with herself for entertaining his asinine claims, but she was confused by his revelation.

“I ran into your buddy at the grocery store.” Josh seemed delighted to have gotten under her skin. The thrilled sparkle in his eyes sparked some dormant confidence in her.

“And at the grocery store, Jill told you I have a new boyfriend? Let me guess, Josh. You wouldn’t leave her alone about me, even though I’m a—what was it again, a cunt?—and you can’t take a hint or follow a social cue, so she just said something to get you to go away. Well, I don’t have one, so case closed. You can get back to your fingerpainting now.”

Josh was unmoved by Lainey’s speech. His smug expression seemed plastered onto his face, though that sparkle he’d had had flattened. “She told me you’ve got a cushy new job with some hunky rich dude that you’ve known since you were a kid. I put two and two together. I’m not as dumb as you think I am.”

“Well, actually, you are, and maybe even dumber than I thought because I didn’t think you’d show up to my work. Leave,” Lainey hissed between clenched teeth.

“I don’t think so, Lainey. I told you what I want. So, where is he?”

“There’s no new boyfriend! You misunderstood! Like always!” Her voice was getting hysterical, rising to an octave she didn’t know she was capable of hitting.

“That was quite a reaction.”

Lainey looked upward and was reminded of the day he broke up with her, the way she’d made the same gesture and begged silently for this to end. She stood up and walked around the desk and started pushing against Josh’s back.

“Okay, Josh, well, I don’t know what to tell you, but I’m not dating anyone. Even if I were, it would be none of your business. You need to go now.”

“Lainey, stop pushing me. Lainey. LAINEY!” He wrenched himself away from her, and she heard Mr. Arnault’s office door fling open.

“What is going on? Lainey, are you all right? Who is this?” Mr. Arnault squared his posture as he stood in the hallway. Josh looked sunken in on himself for a moment.

“I’m her boyfriend,” Josh said. “Who are you?”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Lainey said. “Josh, you really need to go. This is my job. You’re embarrassing me.”

“Oh, here you go again with being embarrassed of me, Lainey!”

“There’s nothing you should be embarrassed of, Lainey. John, you heard her. She wants you to leave. Do you need me to help you, or can you do it yourself?” Mr. Arnault took a step forward as he uncuffed his sleeves.

“Josh,” Josh spit out. “I can’t believe you’d go for this old dude, Lainey. What’s wrong with you?”

“Enough. If you can’t behave like an adult in a place of work, you really do need to leave.” Mr. Arnault gripped Josh by the arm and bent it behind his back in one swift movement, pulling a yelp out of him. “If you’d like to go with your arm intact, I suggest you walk out the door as soon as I let you go.”

“Okay, okay,” he squeaked. When Mr. Arnault let him go, he rushed to the door.

“I guess you really did want me to grow up, huh, Lainey?” he asked, his voice bathed in sarcasm.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Feeling indebted to Mr. Arnault, Lainey stayed behind while everyone else waved goodbye solemnly, upset that the day was ending on a downturn with no one having found the smoking gun to prove he had come up with his idea first. She knocked on his door tentatively.

“Come in,” came his booming voice. Lainey opened the door and peered in at him. He looked up and waved her in with a weak smile. “Oh, it’s you, Lainey. You haven’t gone home yet?” He glanced at his watch pointedly, and she shut the door behind her.

“No, I wanted to stay and help.”

“Oh, that’s kind of you, but you don’t need to stay. You’re young; don’t waste your precious time at work.”

Lainey sat down opposite him. “I want to stay. What can I do?”

He looked at her gently, the crinkles around his eyes melting into a face of appreciation. “Well, if we’re going to stay late,

we should order some food to get us through it, don't you think?"

"You're reading my mind."

"What would you like?"

"Thai?"

"Thai sounds perfect," he responded with such sincerity that it clawed at her heart.

"Okay! Tell me what you'd like, and I'll order it." She reached for her cell, and he rested his hand on hers.

"No, no, you're not an intern right now. You're helping me. You just relax. I'll order the food. What do you normally order?"

"Panang curry or pad thai."

"Let's get both." He smiled warmly at her, and her stomach flopped. She watched him as he ordered, winking at her when he ordered both the curry and the pad thai. She quickly broke her stare, opting instead to fidget with her nails. When he hung up, he rubbed his hands together. "Okay, let's get started."

They spent hours taking bites of food while staring at documentation. The problem was that Mr. Arnault insisted he had come up with his idea a year before he'd gotten the copyright. He'd even requested to have a prototype drawn up by a man he'd contacted through LinkedIn but whose profile was mysteriously gone, their messages proving the timeline disappearing with it. He'd tried to find the man on Facebook to ask him to write up something confirming their

correspondence but found that either he was gone from there as well or he'd never had an account. They scoured through text messages on old work cell phones he had in drawers, checked through sent emails, even checked his diaries to see if they could find a single point at which he had mentioned the tracker before the man claimed he'd come up with it.

“Maybe it doesn't really matter who gets the credit,” Mr. Arnault finally declared, running a hand through his salt and pepper hair. One long strand of hair dangled in front of his forehead just above his eyes. Lainey's fingers twitched, aching to wrap around it.

“Of course, it matters. How could it not matter?” Deftly, she moved around to the other side of the desk and slid into the seat next to him.

“Did I ever tell you why I came up with the LiveSteady?”

“No.” Lainey watched his hands clasp and unclasp, pick up his drink and put it down. He spooled noodles around chopsticks, then set the chopsticks down. She covered his hand with hers, then cupped it. “I'd love to hear why.”

“My father was getting older. I was getting older too. That's how it works, you know. You think you'll see your parents age, and then you'll age, but you age right alongside them. You'll see.” Lightly, he crashed a shoulder into hers, sending her bobbing to the right and back to him. “I was in med school, as you know, alongside your father, and it just ... it wasn't what I thought it would be. It wasn't anything like *House* or *Scrubs*. It wasn't obscure cases that needed solving.

It was heart attacks and strokes over and over. They tell you heart disease is the leading killer, and it's true." As if coming out of a trance, he hazarded a look up at her, squeezing her fingers back. His hands were warm and strong. "And then my dad had a heart attack, and I got sort of ... paranoid. Or I don't know if paranoid is even the word because I was completely justified. Preoccupied, I suppose. I felt like I was seeing it everywhere. In breakfast foods, cigarettes, overly caffeinated drinks. If I went more than two days without working out, I felt panicked. I wasn't enjoying life anymore. So, I came up with something that would give me my life back, something so that I could stop worrying about my heart and my dad's."

"Did it help?"

"You know, it did. So why should it matter if this guy gets the credit?" At "this guy," he flipped the corner of a pile of papers. "If he wants it so badly, maybe he should get it. I know what I did, and it wasn't about money."

"I know how it feels to wonder if all your hard work was even worth it," she mumbled. She was fighting back every impulse to hold him, fearing that if she moved even a muscle he may startle and let go of her.

"Do you?"

"Josh—he broke up with me on graduation, called me names, said I thought I was a bigshot because I was going to be a doctor basically." She laughed bitterly and continued, "All because I didn't want him to order off the children's menu."

“Children get jealous when they see other children with toys they want. You’re a woman now, Lainey. You need a man. He was right to let you go.” It was hard to hear that Josh had done anything right, especially coming from his leather voice and his rosy lips, but it felt true. She felt this sensation of peace for the first time since it had happened. “Anyway, we’re not going to figure this out in one night. Let’s go home and rest and we’ll both think much more clearly tomorrow.” Lainey nodded and reluctantly loosened her hold around his fingers as he did and stood up. They gathered their food, and she was reminded of that day at the restaurant. The memory was hazy now, something she’d have to move through fog to access. Mr. Arnault walked her to her car, and after she put her food in the seat, he said, “Goodnight, Lainey. Thank you for your help.” Then, a little quieter, “Thank you for staying.” Lainey reached out, unsure but longing, and placed both her palms against his cheeks. She could feel his stubble embedding into her skin.

“It wasn’t about money. And that’s why you’re going to get the credit.” He shrugged and turned away from her, but she pulled his face back towards her. “I’m going to fix this.”

“You?” he chuckled.

She let go of his cheeks. “Yes, me. You helped me today in a big way. I’ve never had anyone stand up for me like that.”

“Never? But you’re so—” His words broke off, and he gripped her hands with his and lowered them to her sides. “Lainey, I—”

“You ... protected me.”

“Of course, I did. You’re safe with me. You know that, right?”

“I do.”

“I never should have—”

“Please don’t do that.” Lainey couldn’t believe the bravery that was bubbling up in her. “I wanted you too, and you knew that. You know that.” She was leaning against the car now, her back cold against the metal, her eyes locked on his. Her breathing was shallow as she watched him, trying to gage how he felt.

“Yeah, I guess I do know that.” Finally, like an answer to a question she’d formed as a soul, he rested one thumb on her bottom lip and traced it down to her chin. His other fingers, long and strong, settled onto her jawline, the tips of his fingers pressed into the back of her head. His lips were on hers, melting together until she couldn’t tell where his ended and hers began.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Her legs were instantly weak, and she wrapped her arms around his neck as he lifted her up and around him. One of his wide, baseball-mitt hands was kneading her waist, and the other had seized the roots of her hair, pulling her head back to kiss her clavicle.

“Lock your door,” he grumbled, and she laughed awkwardly, rooting around in her purse and pushing the lock button. He unlocked the door to his office and kicked it open, still holding her, and brought her into his office, where he laid her down on her back across his desk. She felt bare, lying there and looking at him, waiting on his lead. He seemed to sense her uncertainty and relished it for a moment with a grin he let loose across his face. Bashfully, she covered her eyes, laughing wildly until she felt his hands cover her eyes with his instead. Then he was pulling hers off her face and pinning them over her, gripping her wrists with one hand as he used the other to trace her body. His finger trailed down her chest and made half circles along the top of her breasts. She trembled and pulsed under his touch, and he pulled her to a

standing position where he turned her around and bent her over his desk.

Only the tips of her toes touched the ground, her hands holding tightly onto the sides of the desk, slippery against the polished wood. She felt her skirt being lifted, her underwear being pushed to the side. The sudden rush of air sent a shiver over her exposed skin. She waited expectantly for him to enter her, but instead she felt the wetness of his tongue flat between her lips. A shudder and a gasp escaped her. When she started to writhe and reach for him, he pushed her back down onto the desk.

“If you want more, you’ll be still,” he said as he worked his tongue along the inside of her lips and up towards her clit. She whined in response, and he lapped at her pearl rhythmically, the surface area of his tongue small and his movements practical. Josh had never given her an orgasm from just oral, and she had always thought she just wasn’t capable of it. Any time she felt it building, she would lose focus, but with Mr. Arnault, she already felt something welling up just under her stomach. His hand drifted from her lower back to the inside of her, two strong fingers crooked between her walls, searching for her G-spot and finding it, flicking it at the same rhythm as his tongue. The extra stimulus was too much for Lainey, and she spasmed, letting out breathy moans onto the surface of the desk, her breath fogging the wood underneath her as she rode the waves of her orgasm, forcing herself to breathe through them.

“Good girl,” Mr. Arnault said from the floor, caressing her as she continued to jerk. “I can feel you squeezing around my fingers.” He pulled his fingers out slowly, teasing her by inserting them a little then removing them. With her underwear still pulled to the side, he pushed the head of his penis against her entrance. “Do you want more?” he asked.

“Yes, please,” Lainey begged. He reached into a drawer in his desk and pulled out a condom, and Lainey silently thanked him for using it without asking because she didn’t know if she could see through the haze of desire to make the right choice as far as protection was concerned. She desperately wanted to feel him inside her without the thin latex, but she said nothing. With one hand flat against the small of her back holding her hips in place, he widened her stance. She tiptoed a bit, and he chuckled at her struggle, running his fingers down her slit again to check that she was still wet. Then he was inside her with a plunge that rolled her eyes in the back of her head.

“I like that face,” he grumbled, and she looked up to see there was a small mirror hung on the wall behind his desk. Mortified, she groaned in humiliation and covered her eyes. “Lower your hands,” he demanded, stopping his slow strokes completely, emptying her. She peeked through her fingers at the mirror, and he smiled. “That’s it. Let me see.” And her hands were down, and she was in ecstasy as he slid out of her, all the way to the tip, before sliding back in. One hand was in her hair, pulling her against him, while the other was still steadying her lower back, arching her spine inward. Just when

she thought it was the best it could be, he slammed into her at a rate that lurched her stomach.

“Oh!” she cried out in surprise at his sudden speed.

“There you go. Let go, Lainey.”

“I can’t cum twice,” she said back, her voice far away from even her own ears, like she was calling across a tunnel.

“You can, Lainey. Don’t think. Just feel me. Do you feel how deep I am inside you?” About eight and a half inches from what she could tell, and he was thick.

“Yes,” she whispered. She couldn’t tell whose throbbing she was feeling, only that he was right, and that familiar swell was building up at the base of her stomach again.

“Yes what, Lainey? Who am I?”

“Yes, Mr. Arnault,” she choked, the embarrassment coating her tongue. She went limp, allowing him to hold her down and take control while she gave in to just sensation. Soon, the feeling in her stomach was ballooning throughout her body, and she realized she was screaming her satisfaction, her “yesses” glass until they were sand and sand until they were a shoreline. He was yelling with her, or maybe over her. All she could hear was “That’s it, that’s it” to the same pulse as her heart and his hips. Finally, they wilted together, sweaty and flat, two vessels drained of any life but intertwined still, the roots of two plants dying in the sun. They lolled their heads toward each other and kissed with the sweet understanding of finality.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lainey moved through Wednesday like a dream. Everyone around her was still moving at a dizzying pace as they tried to solve Mr. Arnault's—Bradley's—problem, but Lainey was living in a world that was so much slower than they were. She danced to the shredder and swayed to the phones. Food tasted better, all music was a symphony, and she couldn't even look at his office without imagining his tongue and all that she now knew it was capable of.

Which is why she didn't take even a moment to consider when her mother called her and invited her to dinner that night. Usually, she liked to have a couple of days' notice. It wasn't that she really was ever busy with anything so much as it was that she had to ready herself to be around anyone but Jill. It took at least two business days to prepare herself to hedge her words and sit up straight.

She was smiling like a dope when she arrived at her parents' house.

“You look happy,” her mother said into her shoulder as they hugged.

“I always look happy,” Lainey defended herself. Her mother regarded her with strange affection, like a housecat that might pounce. “I do,” she insisted. Her happiness was arrested when she got to the dinner table and saw Bradley seated there, his jaw clenched and his neck veins bulging through his skin..

“Well, hello there!” he bellowed, his greeting too loud in the smallish room. It fell flat.

“Hi, nice to see you,” she replied, sitting at her usual spot at the end of the table, which trapped her between him and her mother.

“Lainey Bug, Bradley here told me about your internship, so we thought we’d have you two over for dinner again, see how it was going. Why didn’t you tell me about it?” her dad asked.

“It’s still new.” She shrugged lamely.

“Todd,” her mom spoke up, “I told you we should have told her Bradley was coming. He’s her boss now—she might want a break from him. I certainly would,” she teased. Bradley smiled at her, catching her tone, his chin rested on two folded hands.

“No, no, I would never tire of Bradley,” Lainey piped up, trying to squeeze out a laugh and throwing a glance at her boss. His eyes were fixed ahead at her mother, as if looking at her would betray their secret. Meanwhile, her eyes were wandering over his hands, his long fingers, his strong wrists, the coarse hair that covered them. She remembered his hands pinning her lower back down, and a jolt went through her stomach that she covered with a swallow.

“You’re on a first name basis now?” her dad asked, and she looked up to see him exchange a glance with her mom. She was silent, sensing that she would make a mistake if she spoke again, but he was silent also, waiting.

“It was just a joke,” she mumbled finally in response.

“I hope you’re not joking that way at the office, Lainey.”

“No, sir, I’m not.”

“Okay, so tell us all about it,” her dad prodded. “What are you working on now?”

“Nothing really, Dad, I’m just an intern,” she muttered and shoved salad into her mouth.

“Ah, yes, but Lainey’s been very instrumental in facilitating me with a recent, ah, legal situation,” Bradley spoke up defensively where Lainey was willing to say little. “She’s stepped up to fill the office manager’s role while she’s preoccupied with more pressing matters. She’s really taken a shine to her new position.”

She choked at his word choice. Her mom smacked her on the back between her shoulder blades. “Are you okay, lovey?” She sounded concerned.

“I’m fine. Sorry, just choked on a walnut.”

“I knew I should have gone with almond slivers or cut them smaller. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault I can’t eat right. I’m going to go refill my water. Sorry. It’s a good salad. Sorry.” She was talking too

much, and she knew it. She needed to get ahold of her situation, start acting like a normal person at dinner with her parents and her boss, who she'd also known her whole life. For all they knew, this shouldn't be weird. She needed to stop making it weird. She braced herself against the butcher block counter in the kitchen, rubbing the wood grain in circles to ground herself. She could go back in there and pretend that Bradley hadn't bent her over a desk with a wood grain just like this. Couldn't she? She groaned with the knowledge that she wasn't that savvy.

“Hey, are you all right?”

She groaned again at her boss's voice in her ear, her back instinctively arching as she pressed into the counter. No, she was definitely not going to be able to pretend his presence didn't melt her into a puddle of her former self.

“I'm fine. I just did not expect to see you here,” Lainey said tightly as she turned to face him.

“I was a little surprised myself to see you.”

“This is *my* parents' house,” she said plainly, shaking her head.

“And this is *my* best friends' house,” he teased, his hands snaking around the back of her waist. Her hands settled on his forearms, feeling the way his skin was tight against his subtly muscular physique. He was so close. She could just stand on her toes and kiss the hollow at his throat if she wanted to, her parents unknowing in the other room. Before she could follow through, he leaned down and placed his pillowy lips on hers.

His tongue lightly ran along her bottom lip, and she sighed against his mouth. His kisses along her jaw were so feathery that they felt ethereal. They gave her the same feeling as being picked up as a kid after she fell asleep in the car—that ginger, dreamlike wavelength.

“I don’t know if they’ll be your best friends for long if you keep this,” she gestured to his proximity to her, “up.” Something dark flashed in his eyes. Normally sparkling with a friendly mischievousness, they had a looming depth, a heavy cloud over a tree she’d just settled to picnic under. “What’s wrong?” she asked, resting her forehead against his chest. She couldn’t decide between his eyes or his chest for her future home. She could live in either, senseless, floating, while everyone else navigated the world outside. “I was just joking.”

“Nothing. I know you were,” he assured her easily, pushing her lightly and separating from her. “Don’t forget you came in here for water,” he called as he exited the kitchen.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When she returned to the office, still a little buzzed from kissing Bradley in a room where her parents easily could have seen, he wasn't around much. Monica had returned to her normal duties, not because everything had been fixed but because Bradley had taken over. He was holed in his office, only coming out to use the restroom from time to time or to ask Lainey to shred or fax something. He would do so without looking at her and without a please. Their honeymoon phase had waned rather soon, she thought, watching him retreat back to his lair.

"Is that normal?" Lainey asked, her eyes scanning over a welcome packet that Monica had asked her to proofread. She replaced an "its" with "it's."

"For him to run himself ragged taking control over something he should delegate to his employees? Yes." Lainey turned to look over her shoulder at her, and Monica shrugged, her shiny black hair falling to the front of her shoulder. "What? It is."

"Does it annoy you?"

“Do I sound annoyed?”

“Do I really have to answer that?”

Monica rolled a swivel chair over and sat next to her. “I’m not annoyed. He’s a great boss, and I guess I should be grateful he doesn’t pile on work. But I’ve known him for a couple of years now, and I just think—” Lainey hung on every word. She’d never had an office job before, and she got this tingly awareness that this was office gossip. She’d never really gossiped before either. Before Jill, she hadn’t been much for making friends. Her mother had told her to join band or theatre, hoping she’d loosen up and meet friends, and instead she’d opted for debate where everyone she talked to was arguing. But Monica stopped herself and bit into an oat ball.

“You think what?”

She sighed like she’d been caught, even though Lainey considered her prodding minimal, and lowered her voice. “Well, if you were a literal billionaire, wouldn’t you go and do things? He just spends his life away working.”

“Yeah, but his dad—”

“His dad is fine now. He did it. He made the thing. Why doesn’t he outsource now and go skydiving, you know? I’m not bitter. I’m fine being an office manager forever. I’m just worried about him.”

“Totally,” Lainey said, but if her stomach was a ship, it was belly-up. Monica knew about Bradley’s dad too? She thought that was a secret he’d told her, something he’d entrusted her

with—an envelope with a wax seal. And if she knew, how? She'd been such an idiot to not even consider the possibility that she wasn't the first intern Bradley had slept with. He was sexy and tall and smelled good and was powerful and charming. This could be his game.

Monica sat, unbothered, chewing on her oats and peanut butter, looking at her own laptop. She was beautiful and intelligent. Her hair was silky, and her eyes were deep, and her skin was unblemished. Most of all, she had a good work ethic, and she was professional. Lainey knew Bradley valued those qualities.

Bradley made an appearance, his door opening silently, a shadow in the corner of her eye.

“Hey, Monica, will you take a look at these and tell me if there's anything to them?”

“I'm not a lawyer,” she said coolly as she walked toward him, her heels clicking against the hardwood floor.

“Lawyers,” he said dismissively. “Lawyers don't even do their own work. Anyway, I trust you.” He handed her a manilla folder.

“Can I be of any help?” Lainey piped up.

Without even turning his eyes toward her, he waved a hand in her direction. “Monica will do fine, thank you.”

Add that he trusted her to the list.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Hey!” Jill greeted her with a cheery singsong. “How was work!”

“All right.” She kicked off her Mary Janes.

“Oh no, Eeyore, what happened this time?” Jill patted the couch next to her where she was wire-wrapping jewelry.

“Is my life that pathetic?” Lainey asked, flopping down on the couch.

“No, you’ve just been having a hard time lately. I didn’t mean to sound insensitive, I’m sorry.” Jill’s tongue was out in concentration, and Lainey laughed lightly at the juxtaposition of her words and her expression.

“It’s all right. I have something to tell you.” Jill’s eyes raised above the crystal she held in her hand. Seeing Lainey’s face, she set it down on the ground.

“Okay. What is it? You’re not moving out, are you?”

“No. I would literally be miserable with anyone else. It’s something else. It’s not about you at all.” She searched her

brain for how to tell Jill without it sounding too scandalous and found that there was really no way to.

“Please don’t drag it out. I’m on the edge of my seat here.”

“Basically, I had sex with Bradley.”

Jill blinked. “Who is Bradley?”

“Mr. Arnault.”

She sat there for a moment, computing, and then a slow smile spread across her face. “You did not.” Her smile was widening, opening into a look of thrilled shock. “You did, didn’t you? Lainey!”

“I know. Don’t sound so pleased, please, I can’t take it. Is it weird? It’s too weird, isn’t it?”

“Oh, it’s definitely weird! So, what’s wrong? No, first, how was it?” She gripped Lainey’s forearm. “Please, I want to live through you vicariously for a moment. He is so beautiful.”

Lainey shrugged, palms up and swaying. “Transcendental?”

“Shut up!”

“No, I mean, I literally felt like he’d ripped me open and there was another me inside that was just a big clit.”

Jill honked a laugh and shook her by the shoulders wildly. “Stop! Okay, okay. I’m done. What’s wrong?”

“He’s being so weird. Today, he ignored me completely. I asked if I could help once, and he said that he didn’t need me. He needed Monica. And that’s the other thing: Monica. He told her something I thought he’d only told me, and now I’m

in my head about it. What if there's more to their relationship than I thought? What if this is his thing, and he's just a skeezy boss that hires girls to bend over his desk?" Lainey was blathering, the words coming out faster than she would have liked.

"He bent you over his desk?! Lainey." Jill's hands ran down her arms to clasp her hands, and she just sat for a moment, her eyes shut and inhaling deeply. "I am so jealous."

"Jill, I don't know what to do."

"Why does it matter if he's just a skeezy dude? You got some ... energy ... out."

"Because I like him!" The women sat with the confession for a minute, both wide-eyed. "I guess I like him. And I want to ... I want him to keep liking me. I don't know what I did wrong or if I can fix this."

"I don't think you did anything wrong." Jill absentmindedly stroked the inside of her palm. ". Maybe he's feeling guilty. Just play it cool."

"Play it cool?"

"Yeah." She shook Lainey's arms around. "Loosey goosey, you know, like you don't care, and this happens all the time for you. He's just another guy on the roster."

"I've never played it cool in my life. I'm not sure how to even do that." Her head felt like she was underwater. The roster? He was only the second guy she'd ever slept with, and he was certainly not just another guy. He was Bradley Arnault,

a man who stood a foot above her and picked her up like a stack of papers. He was a man with fingers like vibrators and a dick that fit like it had been crafted just for her. He had siren eyes and a smooth rumble voice like a storm rolling in. And for a moment, he'd been hers.

Later that night, with Jill tucked in bed, Lainey tried to go to sleep as well, but her mind kept replaying Bradley's cold demeanor toward her. She kicked her blanket off and opened her laptop, squeezing her eyes shut against the harsh blue glow. She googled "copyright law" and quickly realized how simplistic that was. Sighing, she shut the laptop again and threw herself back against the pillow. Rolling over, she used her phone to search the man who had claimed to have come up with LiveSteady: Michael Egan. He looked like just a guy, not like someone masterminding a plan to rob a man of his hard-earned money. He was of average height and build, and his hair was a bright copper hue and hidden beneath a cap in most of the photos of him. She switched over to images and noticed that in one, he appeared to be wearing the actual LiveSteady. This guy was something else, flaunting it that way. She zoomed in on it to be sure, and there was the little emblem, the mountain peak lines of an electrocardiogram. Disheartened, she was about to put her phone on sleep mode when she saw the date under the photo. It was three years prior.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Friday morning came, and Lainey had never been so excited to go to work. Nothing could top the delirious anticipation she felt for the moment she told Bradley what she had found. Maybe all their problems would melt away, and he would tear up and tell her how thankful he was to have brought her into his office. Jittery, she printed the picture she had found with the date attached and hid it under a calendar Monica kept at the front desk. She needed the perfect moment to show him. She'd go and get him tea when he asked and then triumphantly return both the bearer of tea and the salvation of his company. She could hardly contain herself, bouncing her leg under the desk.

Hours passed while Lainey organized some desktop folders and emptied the recycling bin, but eventually Bradley emerged, looking frazzled. His cuffs weren't buttoned, his sleeves shoved up his arm, revealing his tan and rippled forearm she so loved. His hair was haphazardly sticking out as well—from running his hands through it tensely, she was sure.

“Monica, do me a favor and go on a coffee run for all of us, will you?”

“Why don’t you have the intern do it?” Monica said in a bored tone, jerking her head toward Lainey. Lainey was watching them closely for any sign of being past lovers, though she wasn’t sure what that would look like exactly.

“Because I’m asking you to do it,” he snapped. The women both widened their eyes. “Just do it,” he said even more loudly and went back into his office.

“Woah, what was that about? Are you okay?” Lainey asked after the silence had thickened beyond what she could stand.

“I’m fine,” Monica replied curtly. “He’s stressed. What do you want to drink?”

“I don’t want anything.” Lainey’s shoulders raised instinctively, her body tense.

As soon as Monica was out the door, Lainey took the picture to Bradley’s office. She knocked and waited for an answer. When one didn’t come, she knocked again. After the third knock, she just opened the door.

“Lainey, did I tell you that you could come in?”

“No, but I—”

“I don’t need an excuse. I’m very busy, and I need time to work through this.”

“I think I can help if you’d just—”

“Go.”

Initially, she did. She closed the door and for a moment just stood on the other side, staring at the cherry-stained wood. She opened the door again and stormed back in, letting it close behind her as hard as it was going to.

“You know, you’ve been acting really unfairly toward me. I thought when you protected me from Josh that it meant that you *are* a protector, but you’re not. I don’t know what you are, but I don’t deserve this treatment, and I deserve an explanation.”

Bradley dropped his pen and turned toward her. She had expected her words to soften him, but he looked just as self-righteous as he had before. “I’m sorry that you feel I’ve acted unfairly. I feel that I’ve acted like a boss.”

“Why start now?”

That hurt him, and he flinched.

“Exactly. How I acted before was ... out of character. I’ve never done anything like that before.” She had her answer about Monica. Too bad that under the circumstances, it brought her no comfort. “What we did was wrong.”

“Why was it wrong?”

“I think you know the answer to that, and if you really thought about it, you’d agree with me.”

“Don’t say something you don’t mean, Bradley, something you can’t take back.”

“I do mean it, Lainey. And your parents would never approve, Todd especially. Now, please go.” He turned back to

his paperwork, evidently dismissing her.

“So you used me.” Tears bit at her eyes, threatening to spill. She held her eyes wide open so they wouldn’t, refusing to let him see.

“No. I was caught up in the moment. If anything, you used me. I will still pay for your continuing education, whatever and whenever that may be, and you will still have the internship. You should be grateful.”

“Grateful?” She barked out a surprised laugh. “I didn’t use you. You said all of that was normal!” He opened his mouth to respond, and she threw the picture she’d found onto his desk. “Here. Michael blocked you, that’s all. He’s still on LinkedIn, and he’s still on Facebook. If you hadn’t been too pigheaded to hire a lawyer instead of making Monica play paralegal, I bet one would have figured it out by now. I liked you, Bradley. That’s it. And I thought you liked me too. It’s okay to lean on people. You’re old enough to know that.”

Lainey left his office for the last time. She would never see him again if she could help it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It had been a week since Lainey had even thought about going back to the office. She was done with Bradley Arnault and his ever-changing mood. She should have let herself be alone after Josh, she decided, and now was her time to do it.

On her way out the door, Jill stopped and looked Lainey up and down. “How are you feeling, Champ?”

“Like a champ,” Lainey responded, shoveling a handful of tortilla chips into her mouth and giving her roommate a cursory glance before training her eyes back on the television. Jill sighed and closed the door. She walked over and squatted, so that she could be on Lainey’s level.

“Maybe you should consider looking for another job now if you’re not going to go back to Arnault Enterprise,” she suggested melodically, stroking Lainey’s hair.

“No can do. I’m taking time to be alone. I never did that after Josh broke up with me. I just jumped right into something else. That was my problem, you know.” Her head

tipped back to empty the rest of the bag into her mouth more easily.

“Was it? Because, Lainey, I think your problem is that you don’t seem to have an identity outside of whatever you’re being told to do. Maybe you should fight for something.”

“Like what?”

“Like a certain man who took care of you in more ways than one and had a moment of doubt about the ethics of your relationship?”

Lainey didn’t answer, her eyes still fixed on the screen. She considered it—what fighting for him would look like—and a pit formed in her stomach as she imagined him rejecting her again. Her head instinctually shook a little, and she pulled her legs and arms into her long tee. She felt swallowed inside it, safe from advice that left her vulnerable.

“I did. I saved him from his legal issue. He—if he had been proud, he would have reached out,” she whispered tightly, her chest constricting into a straw.

“Proud?” Jill repeated. Lainey said nothing. She’d said too much. She’d let out the child that was meant to stay in her ribcage. “Okay, well, will you do something for me?” She looked up at Jill, who meant no harm, and stared right through her but shrugged in agreement.

“Will you shower? I promise you’ll feel better if you do. Shower, and then sit outside in the sun. Just give it twenty minutes and see what happens.” She was walking to the door.

“Fine,” she croaked back.

“Great. Because you smell, Lainey, and that’s, you know, putting it nicely. And you’re getting it on the couch.”

Lainey smiled despite herself. She wasn’t wrong.

Feeling sorry for herself, she showered. Feeling sorry for herself, she got dressed. Feeling sorry for herself, she put her clothes in the washer. Feeling sorry for herself, she threw away the empty snack bags and bottles. She grabbed her laptop, set an alarm for twenty minutes, and went outside to look for jobs and sit in the sun.

She favorited a couple of receptionist jobs and stretched her legs out underneath her on the grass, arching her feet. Lying there languidly, she gripped grass with her toes, ripping the blades mindlessly. She noticed a figure blocked by the sun making its way up her driveway and thought for a moment it was him, Bradley. The mistake stabbed painfully through her chest, and she tried to reorient herself as she called out, “Hi! Can I help you?”

“I think so,” came his answer, his voice clear. A wave of ice-cold anxiety pierced and then passed through her body as she realized she hadn’t made a mistake at all and that Bradley indeed stood in her yard. She felt like she was going to be sick, nausea percolating just under the surface. She stood up quickly, her laptop under her arm, and headed for the door. “Lainey, stop. Can we talk?” She stood frozen. Barefoot and under the sun, he seemed to her a mirage of her own invention.

This last week she hadn't been herself; maybe she'd hoped herself into insanity.

"What time is it?" she managed to ask finally, shielding her eyes with one hand and squinting to face him.

"I don't know. Around eight."

"Why aren't you at the office?" The question came out more accusingly than she meant it, but her tone earned a laugh from him.

"Perks of being your own boss. I don't have to be at the office if I don't want to be." He shrugged and took a step forward. "So, could I come in?"

"Okay. But *why* aren't you at the office?" she repeated, annoyed at his dodging of the question. His shoulders raised defensively to his ears.

"I just—I'm not. I came to talk to you." The answer hung there between them. Tiny dust particles caught in sunlight.

"So, talk." Her laptop was across her stomach defensively, a shield from whatever may come. His eyes roved around with wild reluctance, and she relented with a halfhearted huff. "Fine, come in." He followed after her through the grass and onto her porch.

"Good grass today?" She shot him a look over her shoulder.

"Is that how you want to start?" she asked, opening the door and gesturing with a sarcastic flourish for him to enter first. They stood at the entrance together, and she found herself

wondering why they'd even gone inside if they were just going to stand. But she wasn't going to sit first.

"I wanted to thank you for your help."

"Mmm." Her eyes were on the wall above his head. A thanks was quite late in her eyes.

"I know it's a little late." Her eyes snapped to him. The way he always knew what she was thinking still irked her—not in a bad way but in a comforting one, the way her mom had always seemed to have baked something before she'd even said her day was bad. Or the way he'd appeared in the twenty-minute window she'd been outside. Still, it felt strange having him in her house. She thought she'd never see him again, and now he was so close she could smell him—that leathery, old wood smell that was distinctly his. "I'm sorry for how I acted, how I treated you. I thought I was better than that." His jaw jutted outward, and he continued, "I am better than that."

"Okay. Well, it's okay."

He visibly untensed, relieved. "It is?"

"I mean. Not, like, *okay*. It's just what people say."

"You mean that you forgive me."

Lainey started playing with the corner of the rug with her toe, rubbing the edges of it at a ninety-degree angle. "Not exactly."

Frustrated, he threw his hands in the air. "Then why are you saying it's okay? Just to make me happy? To make me go away?" His eyes were pleading with her for clarification, and

she ran through how many “it’s okays” she’d thrown Josh’s way. She’d forgiven so much with that simple statement while communicating nothing. Bradley reached out to touch her, and she shook her head, letting him fall back in defeat and lean against the wall.

“Because I want it to be okay,” came her answer finally, and he lifted his head in acknowledgement.

“Why don’t you just come back to the office? It can be okay again. I can make this up to you.”

“I’ve decided biomedical engineering isn’t for me.”

“You’re back to doctor?”

“No, I don’t think so. Maybe a vet?” She looked up to gage his reaction, but he didn’t have one at all. His eyes were steady, his breathing even. He checked his watch, and that simple act gutted her. “Somewhere to be?”

“No, it’s just something I do when I’m—nervous.” A little tinkle of a laugh escaped him, and it clicked for the first time that that’s what he felt. That *he* was nervous. Bradley Arnault of Arnault Enterprise was in her house, and he was nervous. “If you want to be a vet, you go ahead. But I really think you should come back to the office. I think it’d be a waste of your great mind.” He reached out, and she allowed him to take hold of her head with two hands. She laughed quietly, and he kissed her hairline.

“Is that the only reason?” she asked bashfully, looking up at him through her eyelashes. He twisted a strand of her hair,

winding it around his finger.

“No. I’d miss ... *seeing* you around the office too.” She laughed wryly, and he pulled her chin up. His hands were holding her cheeks firmly, and her cheeks burned at his touch. “I’m serious, Lainey. You’re special and brilliant and weird, and we have a connection that I haven’t had with anyone before. Sometimes, when I’m with you, it feels like you’re reading my thoughts off a teleprompter. I would miss you. I *do* miss you. That’s why I’m here asking you to please reconsider. It’s up to you what you do, but I do want to give you all the information available.”

“And what’s all the information?”

“That you’d be breaking a heart you helped put together.” He tried to keep staring at her, but his eyes flitted down intermittently at her lips. She held a smile back at his apparent weakness. “Kiss me first, Miss Crane.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lainey watched Bradley's eyes betray his desire for her over and over. His breathing was heavy, his chest rising and falling. She covered his heart with her hand and let her lips drift along his skin, playing with him. Finally, she gave in and fit her lips onto his. He moaned primally, urgently, and hooked her under the thighs, spreading her legs around his hips.

“Which one's yours?” he whispered though they were alone, and she pointed to her bedroom.

It wasn't the same as before, the taboo and dirty encounter they'd had the first time. This time, he lifted her shirt over her head and kissed her while her arms were trapped until she shooed him away. This time, he wiggled her out of her underwear, throwing them on the ground while she unbuttoned his pants, yanking them off of him. This time, he held her breasts in his hands and told her what a marvel they were, his fingers circling her nipples while he sucked her bottom lip. He lowered his tongue to her left nipple while his fingers

playfully ran up and down her inner lips. She whimpered, and he nibbled on her nipple and moved to the other in response.

“Please,” she begged him.

“Please what?”

“Please touch me.”

“I am touching you.”

She bucked against his fingers, hoping he would get the message and comply, but he pulled away, trailing them down her inner thigh instead.

“No,” she whined.

“Behave, then.” She nodded feverishly, and she felt his mouth curl into a smile around her nipple. His grin sparked something in her, and she pushed him down onto his back, crawling over to him. “Oh, you are a good girl.” “Good girl” from his mouth was her kryptonite. She felt her thighs slick with her juices. Finding the head of his penis with her tongue, she traced small circles and was delighted to see that his mouth had fallen open in reverence. “Fuck,” was all he said, but it was laced with such arousal that she couldn’t help but to envelop his shaft, swallowing with every inch her throat resisted to fit more of him. “Oh, my God, Lainey.” She answered with a spitty mumble, and he gripped her hair and hoisted himself upward to finger her while she sucked him. “Stop before I cum,” he demanded fervently.

“Cum,” she said plainly.

“No.” He pulled her on top of him, and she positioned herself so that she could watch his entire length and girth disappear inside her as she lowered. His head was tipped backward, his mouth slack. Moving on top of him at an even pace, she monitored the way the butterflies in her groin fluttered more and more at each grind. Eventually, he couldn’t take her role as leader anymore, and he jerked her up and down by the hips as he thrust at the same time. She bounced on top of him, ascending to another realm where she wasn’t Lainey. When he was inside her—stuffing her, stretching her—that fast, she was nothing but nerve endings. Needing to let out that energy, she clutched a pillow to her face and screamed. Bradley took the pillow from her and sat up so he could kiss her while she came. Their tongues swirled around each other until she gave up and just threw her head back to scream her orgasm into the air. He gripped her sweaty back tightly, gliding slowly as she quivered against him. When it was over, she crawled off him and tongued his erection again, tasting the sharp flavor of her own wetness. “Lainey,” he warned, and she answered by stroking him as well. When he came, it was almost sweet, and the ropes were so forceful that she did nothing but drink his ejaculate for a minute. Spasming his release, she milked the last drops and collapsed onto his chest.

Wordlessly and delicately, he swept his fingertips through her hair. Wordlessly and delicately, she fell in love with him.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

EPILOGUE

Four Years Later

“I’m nervous. What if they don’t like me?”

“Then they’ve been hiding it very well for thirty years,” Lainey told Bradley as she applied lipstick in the mirror. He came up behind her and snuck his arms around her, resting his chin on her shoulder.

“I love that color on you.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh yeah.” He nibbled on her ear. “You have beautiful lips.”

“Stop, let me get ready,” she giggled, pushing him away so she could straighten her bangs.

“Aw, come on, you’re ready! Let me mess it up.” He eyed the bedroom of their shared loft apartment, and she shook her head at him.

“This is a big day. I want everything to be perfect.”

“I know you do,” he conceded and sat down to watch as she agonized over jewelry and makeup choices.

They took the elevator down the seventeen floors to the parking garage, where they got into the Tesla that Bradley had insisted on buying despite her protests that they were snooty and started the twenty-minute drive to her parents’ home. On the way, she stared out the window, watching all the things that she’d seen nearly every day of her life through new eyes. Ever since getting together with Bradley, it was like things were just prettier. She had a purpose, and that purpose was helping people. Together, they’d made a fortune coming up with devices that kept compulsions at bay and depression minimal and viruses detectable. Her mom and dad’s house no longer wowed her with its two stories—it was just a house compared to the luxury that had been afforded to her.

Bradley’s hand settled on her knee. “What are you thinking about?”

“Just how lucky I am.” She smiled genuinely at him.

“How lucky we are, Miss Crane.” She wasn’t worried about them not being married yet. She knew when he did propose, it would be meaningful and jaw-dropping. For now, they were a family whether they had the paper or not. Bradley rested his hand on her stomach. The three of them.

Thank You

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