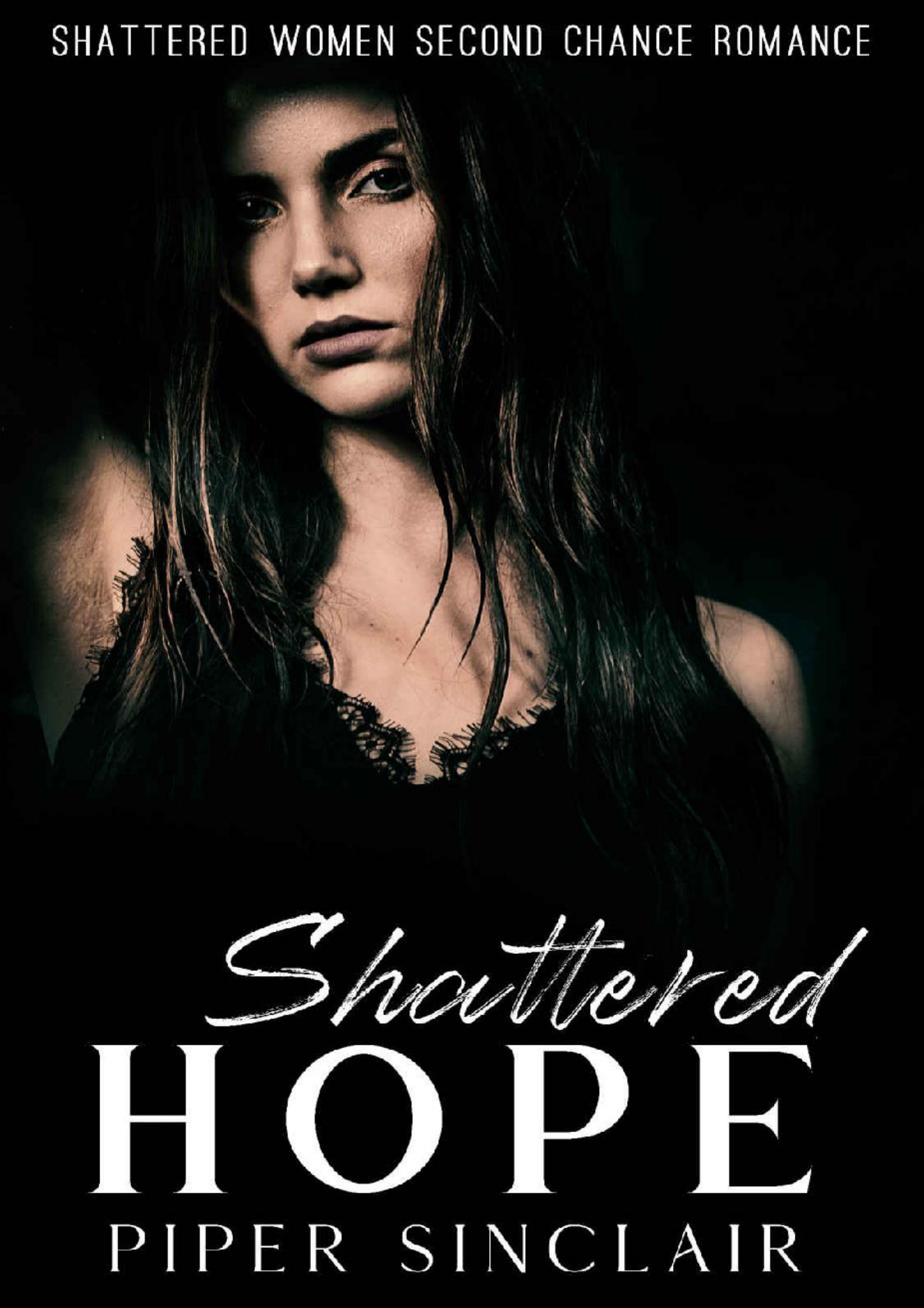


SHATTERED WOMEN SECOND CHANCE ROMANCE



*Shattered*

HOPE

PIPER SINCLAIR

# Shattered Hope

A Second change for Romance

Piper Sinclair

GTQ LLC

Orlando, FL

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# Contents

<a href="#"><u>1</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>2</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>3</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>4</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>5</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>6</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>7</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>8</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>9</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>10</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>11</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>12</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>13</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>14</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>15</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>17</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>18</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>19</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>20</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>21</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>22</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>23</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>24</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>25</u></a>

[26](#)

[27](#)

[28](#)

[29](#)

[30](#)

[31](#)

[32](#)

[33](#)

[Epilogue](#)

I was crossing the parking lot after my shift at the diner, skirting the row of parked cars on my way back to my motel. A car door opened and closed. I looked over and gasped in horror. Daniel.

Before I could say anything, he struck me in the face so hard, he made me lose my footing and fall to the ground. The harsh gravel on the parking lot bruised my hands and knees, and I bit down on my lower lip to hold back the painful sob.

“Did you really think you could run away from me? That I would allow you to embarrass me in front of my family and friends?” he shouted at me, combining his words with hard kicks to my curled-up body lying on the ground. “Till death do us part... remember? That was your promise at the altar, and I intend to make you keep your word.”

Even after almost a year, I still reacted instinctively to his attacks, curling up and covering my face as much as I could. It was a defense mechanism I rapidly learned a few days after our marriage. Explaining bruises on your face was not a simple task. People quickly read between the lines and discovered the untold truth.

Silently sobbing, I didn't even bother to answer his questions. He wouldn't listen to me, anyway, as he had never listened before. The problem was he hated to be ignored. As a true sadist, he thrilled in my pleas and cries for mercy.

Leaning over, he fisted my long black hair and pulled me up, ripping a painful sob from my lips. He shook my head hard a few times, hitting it against his knees a few times, making me feel dizzy with the pain.

“It seems you still haven't learned your lesson. After all these years, you still don't know you're mine, to do with whatever I want,” Daniel snarled at me, his fetid drunkard's breath making my stomach roil and bile to rise up to my throat.

God, I hate him so much... I still couldn't believe he had found me. I had been so careful, and yet he had been able to track me down to this small town in the middle of nowhere.

"Please..." I begged, as pain coursed through my head and down my neck, due to the strained position.

He pushed me back to the ground, pressing his heavy boot on my neck, constricting my throat and making me pant heavily. I could feel every single one of the small, sharp pebbles, on the ground, digging into the sensitive skin of my face, and I whimpered loudly.

"Do you know how easily I could end you? All I have to do is press harder, and your neck will break like a worthless twig," he threatened me, slightly increasing the pressure on my throat.

I sobbed and prayed in silence that he would end my torment. I was so tired... so desperate...

"Who's there?" a man's voice broke the night's silence around us. "What the hell is going on here?"

Startled, Daniel turned around to look at the man approaching them, releasing me in the process.

"Go back inside. This has nothing to do with you," he snarled at the man.

Though I had little hope I could escape, I slowly crawled away from Daniel and got up while he was distracted with Bob, the owner of the small restaurant where I had been working for the past few weeks.

"This is my parking lot, not yours. I already called the police, so why don't you get the hell out of here?" Bob threatened him, though he was no opponent for Daniel, a tall, sturdy man, whose strength seemed to double whenever he got drunk.

"She's my wife... you're interfering in a marital affair," Daniel replied, not even worried with the possibility of the police showing up.

During our marriage, police had been called to our house so many times I had lost count. The staff used to call them

whenever he lost his temper with me, which was quite often. After the first time, he decided to fire them all and have people come over and clean the house twice a week. This way, there were no witnesses to his abuse.

I had never found the courage to file a complaint against him. I knew he would destroy me in a court of law and walk out free as a bird. I, on the other hand, wouldn't survive the aftermath.

"I don't care if she's your mother... you won't do this on my parking lot," Bob ranted at Daniel, standing tall at his five feet seven.

With Daniel's attention focused on the other man, I decided it was now or never. Gathering all my strength, I jumped into action, running away as fast as I could, ignoring the pain on my ribs and my sore throat. I had to get the hell out of there, and that was the only thing that mattered.

It took Daniel a few moments to realize I was gone. His piercing shout reached me the moment I was crossing the street, but I didn't stop, nor looked back.

"Ailani!"

Running as fast as I could, I managed to put some distance between us, and soon I was in front of the highway restaurant, crowded with trucks of various sizes and shapes, not far down the street.

Desperate, I looked around, trying to find one about to leave, while I prayed to all the gods I ever heard of, the driver would give me a ride out of this town. If Daniel had found my working place, he knew where I lived and going back to the small motel, wouldn't do me any good.

As I ran through the parking lot, I could hear Daniel yelling, getting louder, and I was about to give up my search and run away when I noticed a man opening his truck.

"Sir... please... could you give me a ride?" I begged as I ran towards him. The man turned to look at me, already shaking his head. "Please... please..." I insisted, tears rolling down my cheeks as I looked over his shoulder, making sure Daniel still hadn't found me.



“Ailani!” Daniel’s yell sounded closer, and I shuddered, with little time to spare.

“Did he do this to you?” the truck driver asked, grazing the bloody bruises on my cheek.

I recoiled, hating the man’s touch, but did my best to stand still as I nodded, desperate for his help.

“Jump in and crawl to the back, so he won’t see you,” the man instructed me, and I didn’t waste a second.

He was closing the door behind him when Daniel reached the truck and stood in front of it, to prevent him from driving away.

“Is there a problem?” the man asked Daniel in a very calm tone.

“I’m looking for my wife. Have you seen her? She’s mentally unstable and hasn’t taken her pills in a while,” he said, as he walked towards the truck’s door.

“I haven’t seen anyone since I left the restaurant,” the man replied, nonchalantly.

“Are you sure? She’s small, thin, with long black hair,” Daniel insisted.

“Yes, I’m sure!” he said, sounding impatient. “Now, if you don’t mind, you’re wasting my time.”

I knew Daniel wanted to insist, but I also knew he wouldn’t dare. He only abused those he knew were weaker than him, and the truck driver was not helpless

“Thanks for your help.”

The truck finally drove away from the parking lot, and a few minutes later, the driver invited me out of my hideout.

“You can come out if you want,” he told her.

Still shuddering, I stumbled back to the passenger seat, fastening the seat belt. “Thank you for helping me,” I mumbled.

“My pleasure,” he said, glancing at me with a smile on his face. “There’s a first-aid kit in the glove compartment. You should clean those wounds,” he advised me.

“Thank you,” I mumbled as I looked for the kit.

“Where are you going?” he asked as he entered the highway.

“As far away as possible from this town,” I said, my voice still shaky and unstable.

“My destination is Portland, Oregon. You can ride with me if you want,” he offered.

I turned around to look at him. I hadn’t been able to take a good look at his face in the parking lot, too focused on escaping to worry about the look on my rescuer’s face.

I realized now that it was a mistake. I could have ended up in a far worse situation with a stranger meaner than Daniel. Truck drivers weren’t the most trustworthy people in the world, but I hadn’t stopped to think. Honestly, I would have taken my chances with Freddy Kruger instead of going back to New York with Daniel.

The man sitting behind the wheel was probably in his mid to late fifties. His kind face showed the passage of time, but he was still handsome with his broad smile and his shining blue eyes.

I, more than anyone, knew how deceiving appearances could be, but for some reason, I felt safe.

“How long for you to get there?” I asked, with a slight frown.

I only had a few dollars and my driver’s license on me. That certainly wouldn’t take me very far.

“A couple of days. I’m in no rush,” he replied with a smile.

“I can’t afford that,” I mumbled, feeling slightly embarrassed. “Perhaps, you could drop me off wherever you stop to spend the night.”

“I’m not stopping until tomorrow morning. I much rather drive during the night. Less traffic and better music on the radio,” he explained, with a teasing smile.

“Can you take me that far?” I asked, with a trembling smile.

The further I went, the better it would be. Daniel would have fewer chances of finding me again.

“I can take you to Portland if you want to go that far. It would be my pleasure to help you,” he said in a soft tone.

For the first time since Daniel had found me, I dared to hope, yet I hesitated.

People didn't do anything without expecting something in return. I knew that, and since I had no money to pay him for his help, I feared to ask what he wouldn't want in return.

"My daughter had an abusive husband. At first, she refused to see the need to leave the bastard, but when she did, she had a support group that kept the bastard away from her and her kids," he continued. "I can see that you don't have that, and though I know how hard it must be for you to trust a stranger, especially a male stranger, please let me help you. I'll take you to Portland, no strings attached."

His words moved me, but I still felt uncomfortable and, yes, a bit scared of accepting his offer. "It's very kind of you..." I mumbled.

"If it makes you feel better, I'll give you my bank account info, so you can pay me back when you get a job. What do you say?" he suggested, still smiling.

Knowing it would be offensive and disrespectful to insist on the matter, I decided to accept, for now. I could always run away if things got rough. "Thank you, that makes me feel better," I conceded.

"Perfect," he cheered. "Why don't you get some sleep in the back? The sheets and covers are clean since I never use them. My old body requires a proper bed," he said, with an amused grimace. "You look like you could use it."

"Thank you, but I'm fine. It would make me feel dizzy and nauseated," I explained.

"Fine by me. I sure as hell will appreciate the company," he said with a smile. "Just let me know when you get tired of my voice," he warned her.

I smiled and assured him that it wasn't possible.

"My name is Brett Johnson, and you are?"

Since he knew I was running away, and from whom, I decided there was no harm telling him my real name. After all, he could have turned me in with Daniel at the parking lot.

“Ailani Kekoa.”

“Those are Hawaiian names, aren’t they?” he asked, intrigued.

“They are. I was born in Maui. My mother went to Hawaii when she was twenty-five, on a business trip and fell in love with my father. Though marriages between Hawaiians and haoles, also known as foreign people, weren’t well tolerated back then, my father married her, and they lived happily for a few years,” I explained, with a sad smile. “Mom was from New York. Paradise for her was strolling along Fifth Avenue, not the golden beaches of Maui. They got divorced when I was ten, and my mother brought me back to the mainland with her.”

“Do you miss Hawaii?” he asked, in a low tone.

“Every single day. I guess I could have gone back when I turned eighteen, but my father never asked me to,” I explained, with a hint of scorn in my tone. My father’s blatant indifference towards me still hurt, even after fifteen years. “He got married again to a native woman, and they had three kids, so I guess I would be out of place.”

“That’s very sad.”

I shrugged. “It’s life.”

“Is your mother still alive?” he asked, after a moment of silence.

I shook my head. My mother’s death had been the decisive moment of my life. I had tried so many times to tell her how Daniel made my life a living hell. But she had always refused to listen.

Daniel was the perfect son-in-law, and she wouldn’t hear a word that might ruin her little fantasy. When she died, I felt I had no one to please but myself and that it was about time I started thinking about what I wanted, instead of what other people expected of me.

A couple of weeks after the funeral, I had packed my things and left the house where I had felt trapped for two years. Though I was scared to death, it also felt amazing walking away and not looking back.

“No, she died last year, in a car accident,” I explained.

Though my mother’s death had been a shock to me, it hadn’t been heartbreaking. We had never been very close, and my mother always resented the way I looked. It was impossible to deny my Hawaiian roots, and she had never been comfortable with that.

She used to say my looks were her punishment for her wild youth. I had inherited the green eyes, but not the fair skin, the tall, slim body, or the golden mane. Instead, I was short, with long dark curls, tanned skin, and generous curves. Certainly, not the daughter she had always dreamt of

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you,” I mumbled, not willing to give him too many details. “What about you?”

Those words were enough for the man to start a profound monologue about his life. But I was happy with his chitchat. This way, I didn’t have to talk about myself and my dreadful life.

Brett stopped at sunrise when we reached Pendleton, Missouri. We would stay there for a few hours for him to get some sleep and restore his energy.

“Breakfast first. Then, we’ll find a nice motel with a huge bed, so that I can sleep properly,” he said, with a naughty grin. “I would offer to pay for you a room, but as I’m sure you would refuse, you can sleep in the truck. I guess you won’t feel dizzy if it’s parked.”

“That’s a great idea, thank you. And you’re right, of course, I won’t feel dizzy.”

“Great! This diner has the best breakfast in town. The coffee is to die for. I’m sure you’ll love it,” he said, as he entered a vast parking lot, just off the highway.

In the middle of the parking lot, there was a brightly lit diner, capable of serving over a hundred people at the same time. It was only seven in the morning, and the place was already crowded.

Brett found us a small table by the window, and a few moments later, a cheerful girl literally rolled down to our table. Looking around, I realized all the other waiters were also wearing roller skates.

“Good morning. What can I get you today?” she asked us.

“Please, bring us two house specials and keep the coffee coming,” Brett asked her with a smile.

“Two house specials coming right out,” she said, as she rolled away.

“That’s a good idea,” I said, pointing at the skates.

“Indeed... in a place as big as this one, it saves them time, and it’s not as tiring as walking,” Brett agreed.

The food he ordered arrived a few minutes later and I had to agree with him. It was the best breakfast I’d had in a long time.

Sleeping in the truck was quite comfortable. I had slept in far worse places since I left Daniel. So, having a comfy bed to sleep on was something I truly appreciated.

By nightfall, Brett and I had dinner, and we were back on the road. Before I knew it, we were arriving in Portland. It had been a long journey, but I had felt safe while it lasted, something I hadn’t felt in years.

Brett drove into a small diner a few miles before the warehouse, where he was supposed to download whatever he was transporting in his truck.

“Well, kiddo... this is the end of the road. What are your plans?” Brett asked her, on their way out of the diner, after a copious breakfast.

“I’m not sure yet. I might go to Seattle or stay here for a while...” I replied with a faint smile, looking around.

Portland was a lot colder than I expected, but I would manage. I had lived in New York for most of my life, and cold weather was something I was used to.

“Do you have money to pay for a motel or to get to Seattle?” he asked, with a slight frown.

“I’ll be fine. You’ve done more than enough,” I assured him.

“Which translates to ‘no, I don’t have money,’” he stated, sounding worried.

“I had to leave all my belongings behind, and that includes most of the money I had saved,” I confessed, feeling a bit more than embarrassed.

He searched for something in his jacket’s inner pockets. “Here... this is all my bank account info. You can use them to pay me back when you get a job,” he said, handing me a small piece of paper.

“Of course, I will.”

“I know you will... you’re that stubborn,” Brett said, scowling. “And with that clarified, I want you to have this, as well. It will help you for a couple of days until you get a job,” he added, giving her a small envelope.

I stared at the white envelope, guessing its contents while shaking my head. “No... you’ve helped me... more than enough...” I mumbled.

“Damn it, girl. It’s freezing cold here. You can’t sleep out on the streets, it will get you killed,” he grumbled. “Take the money. You’ll pay me back as soon as possible,” he insisted.

I wiped the tears rolling down my face and watched him slip the envelope into my pocket before he pulled me into a bearhug.

“Stay in touch, will you? I want to know about you,” he asked when he finally stepped aside.

Sobbing, I nodded. “I will... thank you for all your help...” I mumbled, overwhelmed by his kindness.



“A word of advice... reach out to your father. You might be surprised,” he said as he walked up to his truck and got behind the wheel. “Take care, Ailani,” he said before he drove away.

Shuddering under the cold breeze, I looked around, trying to decide where to go now. I could stay here in Portland and try to find a job where people wouldn't ask questions I couldn't answer, but I guessed I would have better luck going up to Seattle. It was easier to disappear in big cities where people only minded their own business.

I went back inside and asked one of the waitresses where I could take a bus out of Portland, and she gave me the information I needed.

I was as careful as possible. Daniel had already found me once, and I knew he wouldn't give up. I had barely escaped last time, and I knew I wouldn't be so lucky next time.

Pulling up the small backpack I bought at our stop in Pendleton, I headed to the bus stop. It was freezing and I knew it would be colder in Seattle. I would have to get some winter clothes from the homeless shelters once I was in town.

On my way to the bus station, I ran across the train station and decided to try my luck there. Trains were a lot more comfortable than buses, and if I was lucky enough, there would be one in the next few hours.

There was one leaving in thirty minutes, and though it cost a bit more than I was hoping to spend, I decided to take the train.

Five hours later, I was wandering the streets of Seattle. My first priority was to find a cheap place where I could stay for a few days and a job. In my hands, I had a small list of the homeless shelters in town, and I was determined to look there first. I needed to stretch the money I had left as much as possible.

But after walking for hours, I came up empty-handed. With the extreme cold, homeless shelters were packed. One of the managers at the last shelter I tried gave me the address of a small, cheap hostel, and I hurried there.

The night was about to fall, and the last thing I wanted was to wander the streets at night. Seattle wasn't New York, but still, the streets were dangerous at night. I needed to find shelter as soon as possible.

The hostel was packed too. No one wanted to be caught at night on the streets. A blizzard had been forecasted, and people were doing all they could to stay inside.

With no other options, I headed to a motel I had been told about, and though it would cost me more than I could afford, I needed a place to spend the night.

The blizzard hit the city with all its might around midnight. Going out was practically impossible, and I saw myself caught in the small room at the motel, unable to find a job and watching how the little money I had quickly disappeared.

The storm finally disappeared three days later, and I rushed to the streets looking for a job. I was ready to do whatever it took to get enough money for food and rent. I could only afford one more night at the motel, and while I was looking for a job, I was also visiting the homeless shelters, in case someone had room for me.

I went back to the motel that night, still jobless and with no other place where I could stay. The motel owner had already asked me how long was I staying, making sure I understood he would kick me out if I didn't pay the rent.

With no other option, I left the motel the following morning, carrying my backpack and with no idea where I would spend the night.

I was handing the keys to my room, at the reception desk, when a couple of women entered brushing the snow off their coats. I had seen them before around the place, and their line of work had been evident from the beginning.

"Leaving so soon, sweetheart?" one of them asked me, with a slight frown. "It's snowing outside. Do you have a place to go?"

Intrigued by her curiosity, I gave her a faint smile. "I'll find a place."

“John here told me you were looking for a job. Did you find one?” the woman insisted.

“She wouldn’t be leaving if she had, Darla, don’t you think?” her friend said, scowling.

“You can’t spend the night outside... it’s snowing, and another storm is expected. You’ll freeze to death,” Darla pointed out.

“Thank you for your concern, but I will be fine,” I assured her, though my tone lacked confidence.

I had no idea what I would do, and it worried me. Coming to Seattle in the middle of winter hadn’t been a good idea, but there wasn’t much I could do now. I couldn’t afford a ticket out of here.

Darla looked at her with a deep frown. “The homeless shelters are packed. You won’t find a place cheaper than this one,” she pointed out.

“I’m well aware,” I admitted, in a low tone.

The woman took a step towards me and picked one of my dark locks. “With your looks, you would do well on the streets. Have you considered it?” she asked, keeping her voice down. “I can help you if you want to try.”

My whole body trembled as a wave of disgust rushed through me. The idea of letting a man touch me was enough to make me want to puke. Having sex was something I doubted I would ever try again. Daniel had ruined me forever.

“It’s very... kind of you... but I... I couldn’t...” I managed to say, trying to hide my reaction from the woman’s sharp look.

“You can get good money from it,” she insisted.

“Darla, can’t you see it? She’s too prudish. I’m sure she’s outraged you even suggested that” Darla’s friend said, oozing scorn.

“No... really, I don’t... it’s just that I can’t...” I tried to explain, my hands shaking visibly.

“Your face was bruised when you got here. Are you running away from a man?” Darla asked, quickly understanding what

was going on. “Your husband, maybe?”

I gave her a sad smile but didn’t deny nor confirm it.

“I know it can be hard, but you have to see it as a business transaction. You used to do it for free. Where is the wrong to charge for it now? Think about it. It will get you enough to pay a few more nights in this dumpster, and it will buy you time to find something better,” Darla continued. “I’m sure you’ll do fine with your exotic almond-shaped green eyes and your golden skin,” she assured me. “Let me know if you change your mind. I’m sure my man can put you to work,” she concluded, handing her a small business card.

“Thank you, it’s very kind of you. I’ll take it into consideration,” I mumbled, putting the card away and praying I would never need to use it.

Back on the streets, I focused my attention on getting a job. If I had money assured, I would be able to pay for one more night at the motel. I would need a waitress job so that I could live on the tips until I got paid at the end of the month, but apparently, there weren’t any jobs available in the field.

The night caught me in the business district of the city. There were several diners, restaurants, delis, and bars around the area, but none looking for help. I had no idea what to do or where to go. The streets were practically empty, and the snow was starting to fall harder.

My life hadn’t been exactly easy that far, but that night, I hit rock bottom. I had no money, no job, no place to go, no food, and the snowfall was quickly turning into a storm.

Darla’s words kept swirling in my mind, but I still felt disgusted by the whole idea. Daniel had turned sex into an ugly thing, something he used to punish me whenever he thought I had done something wrong.

He took great pleasure putting me through the most degrading and humiliating situations, making me hate his very touch.

Allowing a stranger access to my body felt wrong, vilifying, and I wasn’t sure I would ever be able to do that again. Doing it for money was even worse. I do believe people have the

right to do with their bodies what they see fit, but prostitution was terrible for most of the people involved. I always thought you had to reach a very high level of desperation to even consider going into that kind of lifestyle. I sincerely doubted people got pleasure from that kind of work.

But what did I know? Perhaps I was wrong... but it still didn't feel like something I would jump into.

Unfortunately, I was rapidly reaching that level of desperation. What was I supposed to do?

I had no idea how the state of Washington handled prostitution, but it most certainly didn't allow it, so perhaps, all I had to do was pretend I was looking for a client and get arrested. I would spend a few days in jail, and that would keep me off the streets for a while.

I couldn't reveal my real identity to the cops, because that would bring Daniel to my door, but they wouldn't have the means to find out who I was. My prints had never been registered, and I knew Daniel hadn't filed a missing person report when I left home. That could easily turn against him, and my husband was a lot of things, but stupid wasn't one.

The problem was if I got arrested, my prints would be on the system, even if not associated with my real name, and that could become a problem in the future.

Then again, if I didn't get a warm place to spend the night soon enough, there wouldn't be a future for me.

I was walking by a huge office building when the parking lot doors started to open. It gave me an idea, and before I gave it too much thought, I looked around looking for the security cameras and doing my best to avoid them, I slid into the parking lot and hid in a dark corner and waited to see why the doors had opened up.

Soon enough, a car drove in and parked a few yards from where she was hiding. It was an expensive black sports car, and a man got out.

I waited for him to leave the parking lot, but he didn't. Instead, he stood next to his car, staring at his cell phone. He seemed to

be chatting with someone, but I wasn't close enough to hear what they were saying.

At some point, he looked straight to where I was, and I shuddered. Did the place have some sophisticated security system that alerted him of my presence? I had no idea, but I guess I was about to find out.

"Come on out. I know where you're hiding. If you don't come out by yourself, I'm calling the police," the man announced in a loud tone, enough for me to hear it.

I had been caught. Resting my forehead on the column I had in front of me, I considered my options and concluded waiting for the police wouldn't do me any good. The man probably wouldn't press any charges against me, so the police would only escort me to the exit.

Slowly, I came out of my hideout and showed myself to the guy.

"You're trespassing," he accused me, in a cold tone.

"I know, and I'm sorry..." I mumbled, tucking my hair behind my ears.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, taking a few steps towards me, making me step back when I notice just how big and strong this man was.

"I was looking for shelter..." I admitted. "The snowfall is turning to a blizzard, and I have nowhere to sleep tonight."

"The city has a lot of homeless shelters. I'm sure you can find a place in one of them," he retorted, clearly indifferent to my problems.

"I tried... but they're all packed," I assured him, shuddering. Even in a place like this one, the temperatures were dropping quite fast, which meant it would be worse outside. "Would you let me stay here for the night? I promise I'll be out of here first thing in the morning," I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

The man didn't strike me as generous or compassionate, and I was right.

“If I did that, I would have hundreds of homeless people trying to do the same tomorrow,” he stated, in a cold tone. “I’ll walk you to the door.”

“Sir, please... I really have no place to go... I’ll freeze to death if I spend the night outside. Couldn’t you make an exception? Please?” I begged.

“I’m sure that’s an exaggeration. There’s a church not far from here. Go there. I’m sure they will find a place for you to spend the night,” he said unmoved.

I had been to the church, and it was closed. They could use the place to shelter a few homeless, but they didn’t. I knew they ran a homeless shelter next to the church, but they could do more.

“I went there before I came here. They aren’t taking anyone else in,” I explained, but I could tell he wasn’t about to change his mind.

“It’s really not my problem. Follow me, and I’ll open the door for you,” he insisted, turning around and walking to the exit, sure I would follow him.

“Please, sir... there must be something I can do to make you change your mind...” I begged though I had no idea where those words had come from.

I knew how he would take what I said, and it would only make things worse for me. A man like him didn’t need to pay to get the services implied in my offer. And he certainly wouldn’t want them from someone like me. One of Daniel’s complaints had always been my poor performance in bed.

He stopped and slowly turned around to face me. “Seriously? What could you possibly offer me that might be worthy of my time?” he asked, in a scornful tone. “Do I look like the kind of man that needs to pay for whatever you’re offering?”

Yeah... I had just made things worse for myself. Now, he was insulted. No matter what I said, it wouldn’t change things in my favor. But then, something Daniel once told me jumped to my mind. I was so desperate; I didn’t think things through.



“All men have special needs... the kind they wouldn't dare ask of their wives and girlfriends...” I pointed out and immediately regretted words coming out of my mouth. “You could satisfy them with me.”

Was I out of my mind? Why the hell did I suggest that to a man I had never seen before? One that wasn't exactly friendly and that could have the worst kind of sexual fantasies, which probably included violence.

“And you think I do too? Is that it? You've assumed that after talking with me for like five seconds?” he asked in a harsh tone.

He was mad. I could tell that, and my self-protection instinct warned me to back down and get the hell out of there. Facing the elements was my safest option right now.

“I'm sorry... I clearly misjudged you. I just wanted a warm place to spend the night, that's all,” I mumbled as I walked by him, towards the exit door.

I didn't get very far. He stretched out his arm and grabbed me by the elbow, pulling me towards him.

My heart stopped for a moment, and I almost let out a loud shout. He took me by surprise and scared the hell out of me, especially when he towered over me and pierced me with his incredibly gray eyes.

“Do you think I have unfulfilled special needs?” he asked me again, his tone so hard it made me shudder and wish I was somewhere else.

“I said I'm sorry...” I mumbled, tugging at my arm to no avail. His grip felt like a damn iron band around my arm, and no matter what I did, it didn't budge. “What else do you want from me?” my last question came out in tone slightly pitched, but I was on the verge of tears.

“I want you to answer my question,” he insisted.

“I don’t know the answer. I don’t know you well enough. I shouldn’t have said anything. Now, please, let me go,” I begged.

There was no way in hell I was answering that question. I knew he wouldn’t like my answer, no matter what I said.

“Make a wild guess. You seem good at it,” he demanded, not even close to dropping the subject and letting me go.

Damn... my mouth always got me into trouble. Daniel had punished me more times than I can count for spurring the ugly truths to his face. I guess I never learned to shut up.

I gulped but decided to embrace my future... what else could I do? Taking a good look at the man’s face, with his perfectly chiseled features, I knew I couldn’t be more wrong about him. He was the kind of man who had everything his heart desired. And when it came to sex, I was sure women threw themselves at his feet, waiting to serve him as he saw fit.

A man like him had no needs unfulfilled, special or not.

“No, sir, you don’t look as if you have unfulfilled needs,” I whispered, my tone too shaky for my taste.

“I’m glad we cleared that up,” he snarled at her, straightening up. “Now, let’s get you out of here.”

He practically dragged me all the way to a small exit door and opened it. A gush of blizzard almost sent them to the floor, and by the time he was able to close the door, they were both covered in snow.

“Damn!” he cursed, wiping the snow out of his face.

Shuddering, I turned to him and tried one last time to convince him to let me stay.

“Please, sir... I know it’s none of your business, but I’ll die outside...”

“You’re right... it’s none of my business,” he grumbled. “But sending you out might be considered manslaughter.”

I waited in silence for him to finish talking, not wanting to jump to conclusions. He looked pissed, and for once, I was not going to fuel a man’s rage.

“Staying here won’t work either. I’ll have to explain the police why there’s a woman’s dead body in my parking lot,” he continued as he started walking towards the elevator, I had noticed near his parking space, dragging me after him. “So, I guess I’ll have to take your offer, won’t I?” he added, as punched a few numbers into a small electronic pad.

I was so shocked I could not utter a word as he pushed me inside of the elevator and then out of it when we reached the penthouse floor. He was taking me to his place.

The elevator door opened to an incredible living room with probably the best view of the city. I could see the Space Needle not far on my right, through the massive wall of glass. It was breathtaking and a bit scary. I had no business being here, and I turned around to leave, just to see the elevator doors closing on me. I’d need the code to open them.

“There’s a bathroom to your right. Use it,” he barked as he walked towards the other side of the apartment, giving me no chance to tell him; I wanted to leave.

Cursing my big mouth, I pondered what to do next. My coat’s dampness was reaching my other layers of clothes, and I was starting to feel cold. However, the idea of taking off my clothes in this place was a little less than terrifying.

I knew he wouldn’t attack me... he hadn’t shown a glimpse of interest in me, but it was hard not to be afraid of a potentially dangerous situation... not after everything I had gone through with Daniel. He loved to use my vulnerability against me, so I had learned to hide it as much as I could.

Trapped in an impossible situation, I just stood there by the door and waited for him to come back. I preferred facing the storm raging outside to staying here with this man. I was sure he would be happy to see me leave as well, so I just waited.

He wasn't away for more than a few minutes. When he came back, he had changed into a pair of worn blue jeans and a black long sleeve t-shirt, which revealed the muscled body that had been hidden under the suit and overcoat he had been wearing. The man was breathtaking... the kind that makes your heart stop for a moment and leaves a long-lasting impression in your mind and probably co-stars all your wet dreams.

It reminded me of Dorian Gray... the most perfect man on earth.

He frowned when he saw me still where he had left me. "Didn't you find the bathroom?" he asked me as he walked to a small bar in the corner of the room.

"I didn't look for it," I confessed, wriggling my hands nervously. "I was just waiting for you to come back and open the door for me. I believe it's better if I leave," I added, in the firmest tone I managed to conjure.

"You wouldn't get very far in this storm. The streets are empty, and no cab will pick you up in these conditions," he stated, in a cold tone as he poured himself a drink.

"I'll take my chances," I insisted.

He let out a burst of scornful laughter as he crossed the room to meet me. "What happened with the little vixen that offered to satisfy all my unfulfilled needs? Why are you chickening out at this point? You've got what you wanted," he said, cocking his eyebrow.

"That was a mistake, and I believe we've established that," I managed to say, struggling not to step back as he came closer and closer to me.

"Have we? Let me ask you a question. Who are you, and what the hell were you doing sneaking into my building garage?" he asked, and this time his tone was stern and somehow dangerous.

"I already told you... I was trying to find a place to spend the night," I said with a slight frown.

“You, my dear, look nothing like a homeless person,” he said, as he stopped in front of me, merely inches away, so close I could smell the soap he had used in the shower. “Your clothes are clean, and your luscious hair still smells of shampoo, so why don’t you tell me the truth?”

“I’m telling you the truth. I arrived at Seattle a few days ago, but these storms have prevented me from finding a job, and I ran out of money,” I explained my situation as plainly as I could, not trying to inspire compassion. I was starting to doubt he understood the concept. I wanted him to let go. “I’m sure I’m not the only person going through the same situation.”

“Probably... but you see, I don’t believe in coincidences. And you being at my door, just when I was entering smells fishy,” he insisted.

“Why would I be interested in you? I don’t even know who you are,” I assured him.

“That’s even harder to believe,” he stated, as his tone dropped to icy-cold.

“Why? Are you famous or something?” I asked, intrigued.

The truth was I had been living off the grid for over three years. Daniel didn’t allow me to own a cell phone, and the television and internet services in the house had passwords I couldn’t access. He had done a thorough job keeping me out of touch with the world around me.

His frown became more profound, and I realized I had only increased his doubts in me.

“Some would say so,” he replied.

“Well, I’m sorry, but I have no idea who you are, and my presence at your door was a coincidence. I had been wandering the area looking for a job and was caught by nightfall before I could find a place to spend the night,” I explained. “You don’t have to believe me. All you have to do is open the door for me, and I will be out of your life forever,” I added, gesturing toward the door.

He shook his head. “I don’t buy it, and until I get the answers to my questions, you’re not going anywhere,” he assured her.

“That’s kidnapping,” I replied.

“Hardly. I would call it common sense. There is footage of you entering the garage, walking with me to the elevator, and at the elevator. You came here on your own. I’m only preventing you from getting killed in the storm outside,” he stated, in a matter-of-factly tone.

“You dragged me here,” I protested.

“Your word against mine, but we both know your protest has no ground. You didn’t struggle, nor put up a fight while I was bringing you here,” he pointed out.

Of course, he was right. I had been too nervous, too freaked out to do much.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to regain my calm and find a solution to the ordeal I was in, thanks to my big mouth.

“What do you want from me?” I finally asked, sure I wasn’t going to like the answer.

“Why don’t we start with you getting rid of those wet clothes and taking a warm shower? The bathroom door can be locked from the inside if that’s what worries you,” he said with a derisive grimace.

I pursed my lips, and knowing I had limited options right now, I nodded. “Thank you.”

“Do you have dry clothes in that bag of yours?” he asked, as I was turning around to head down the hallway he had mentioned before.

“Yes, thank you. I’ll be fine.”

Once behind the bathroom locked door, I dropped my things on the counter and leaned against the nearest wall, feeling suddenly weak. How the hell did I get into this mess? Would he let me go in the morning after the storm was over, or was he turning me in, to the police? I knew he had grounds to accuse me of trespassing, but he seemed more concerned with something else. Probably he thought I was into industrial espionage, considering his questions and his insistence on knowing what I was doing in the building.

Taking a few deep breaths to calm my shattered nerves, I decided to play by his rules and see where it led me. There wasn't much else I could do.

I rapidly took off my clothes and stepped into the luxurious shower stall for the quickest shower of my life. Being completely naked in a room so close to him was stirring confusing reactions in me, and I didn't like it. The sooner I had clothes on, the better.

A few minutes later, I was leaving the bathroom with a pile of wet clothes in my hand, not sure what to do with them. Putting them in my bag would only dampen the rest of my things, so I was hoping he would give me a plastic bag to put them in.

He frowned when he saw me coming into the living room. "You should have left the wet clothes in the bathroom. My housekeeper will take care of them," he said in a disapproving tone.

"That's very kind, but not necessary. I just need a plastic bag to put them in. I'll take care of them as soon as possible," I said, feeling embarrassed.

The whole situation was uncomfortable and awkward, and I hated to be in this position.

"I thought you said you had no place to go. Where exactly do you plan taking care of the clothes?" he asked, oozing scorn. "I doubt you have another coat inside that bag, so you'll need the one you were wearing if you don't want to freeze the moment you walk outside."

He was right, of course, but I didn't know what else to do.

Shaking his head impatiently, he walked over to where I was and grabbed the clothes, taking me by surprise.

Before I could utter a word, he was walking down the hall towards what I learned a few moments later, was the kitchen. I quickly followed him.

“Susan, would you mind taking care of our guest’s clothes, please. She will need them back tomorrow in the morning,” he asked the middle-aged woman stirring a tomato sauce that smelled delicious.

“Of course, Mr. Wells. I’ll take care of them.”

“Thank you, Susan.”

“Dinner will be ready in a few minutes, sir,” the woman informed, smiling at me.

“Perfect.”

He turned around and grasped my arm, dragging me out of the kitchen and back into the living room.

“Problem solved. You can put down your backpack. No one will take it away from you,” he pointed out, signaling the couch behind me.

“Thank you,” I mumbled, doing as told.

After losing all the things I had, running away from Daniel, I always needed to keep the bag near me. I couldn’t afford to lose its contents.

“What’s your name?” he asked, taking a seat in an armchair.

Whenever I reached a new town, the first thing I did was come up with a name easy enough for me to remember. My real name unusual and too easy to track down, and that was the last thing I wanted.

Other than using it at the motel, I hadn’t used it before, so it didn’t come out naturally, as it should.



“Anne... Anne Johnson,” I stuttered.

“That’s not your real name,” he stated with a frown.

“It’s the only one I’m willing to give you,” I replied, deciding there was no use in insisting.

He could read me too well, and I knew it was a lost battle. However, I would not share my real name with him. It was too dangerous.

“Your answer makes it harder for me to believe your story,” he pointed out.

“That’s your problem, not mine,” I said with more confidence than I felt.

“Why would you lie on something so basic as your name, if you have nothing to hide?” he asked, piercing her with his gray eyes.

Damn, the man could make me feel as if I was under a microscope.

“I never said I had nothing to hide, but my secrets don’t concern you. I still have no idea who the hell you are,” I replied, doing my best to sound as if I was in control and not the nervous wreck I really was.

“Even if it’s your first time in Seattle, it’s hard to believe you never heard of the Wells Corporation,” he pointed out.

The name did ring a bell, but I wasn’t sure where I had heard it before. “It sounds familiar, but nothing else,” I assured him, with a slight frown.

He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and typed for a few moments before he handed it to me.

He had googled the name, and the number of hits was astonishing. I tapped the first link that took me to the company’s main website and realized why the name was familiar.

The company was into many things, but the technology was their primary field. Nanotechnology, to be more exact. They had had an enormous breakthrough not long ago, and I had

heard about it on the news, in the small restaurant where I last worked.

They had contracts with the government, which explained his suspicions. Industrial espionage was a real thing in his world.

I handed the phone back to him. "I'm guessing you're one of those Wells," I said, feeling my legs a bit weaker than before.

I was way over my head, and probably into a bigger problem than I could imagine. My behavior... entering the building... trying to seduce him into letting me stay... could be used as evidence of ill intentions.

"I'm 'the Wells'," he corrected her.

I let myself fall on the couch; suddenly not sure my legs would hold me up. "I had no idea. I know you don't believe me, and honestly, you have no reason to, but I truly had no idea what this building was," I assured him. "All I wanted was a roof over my head for the night, nothing else."

"We'll see about that."

His words echoed in the room, and once more, I wished I had stayed in the cold streets.

"I guess we will."

"Where are you from?" he said, clearly not done with the interrogation, but the housekeeper interrupted him, announcing dinner was ready.

The food was simply amazing. After spending a few days eating ramen day and night, because it's cheap... eating the three course meal was heaven.

The vegetable soup wiped the cold out of my system and the stuffed chicken breast, in tomato sauce, with sautéed potatoes was to die for. If that wasn't enough, Susan also served a delicious chocolate cake.

Fortunately, Mr. Wells refrained from asking questions while we ate, so I was able to enjoy it to the last crumb.

"When was the last time you had a good meal?" he asked me, while we enjoyed the coffee Susan had just brought.

“Not today, that’s for sure,” I admitted, grimacing.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” he noted.

“Which one?” I retorted, hinting a smile.

“Where are you from?”

“I would rather not answer any questions about me. It doesn’t concern you,” I replied, putting down the empty cup.

Though I doubted Daniel ever had any reason to contact him, I couldn’t take any chances. My appearance was enough to set him on track. Perhaps, it was time to dye my hair blond and put on brown contact lenses. There wasn’t much I could do with my skin color or my Polynesian features, but the change of colors might send him off course.

“Your looks tell me of Hawaiian heritage, but your eyes aren’t so common among the Polynesian,” he said, studying me across the table.

“Why, Hawaiian? I could be native American...” I said, not willing to admit anything.

“No... I’m sure it’s Hawaiian.”

I had to admit I was intrigued by his confidence. Most people couldn’t tell them apart. Again, I didn’t confirm his suspicions.

“What happens now? Will you let me go?” I asked, instead.

“Do you have a death wish? The storm has worsened,” he pointed out.

“You didn’t seem to have a problem with that when I was trying to convince you to let me stay,” I protested, scowling.

He shrugged while admiring the rich color of his Oporto. “I was sure you had your car parked outside. I didn’t believe your story.”

“And you do now?” I asked in disbelief.

He wouldn’t change his mind that easily. I bet he didn’t trust many people, and I was sure I wasn’t amongst those few.

“No... but I decided to give you the benefit of the doubt.”

“How generous of you,” I spurted, though I immediately bit my tongue. Really? Why was I provoking the man? “So... what happens now?”

He looked at me, and for the first time since we met a few hours ago, I saw raw lust in his eyes. My heart stopped for a moment before it jumped into a frantic pace, and I had to force myself to stay in my chair, while all my instincts shouted in alarm.

“I decided to take you up on your offer,” he finally said, putting down his empty glass.

Blood drained from my face, and I gasped, my hands clenched into tight fists as I tried to find a way to get out of this mess.

“My offer?” I mumbled the question though I knew exactly what he meant.

“Satisfying my unfulfilled special needs... weren’t those your words?” he asked with mockery.

Denying it would be futile and probably stupid, so I didn’t even try that road. I had to find another way out of this nightmare. Would I ever learn to keep my mouth shut?

“Why would you want to do that? You said it yourself... that you have no such needs...” I reminded him, fighting to stay in control of my racing heart and my frenzied emotions.

“I don’t... but I’ve had some fantasies from time to time ... they aren’t the kind you ask from your wife or girlfriend...” he said, with a sardonic grin on his face. “It wouldn’t be easy to find someone willing to... satisfy them.”

Okay... I was ready to run away. Perhaps, I could make it to the bathroom and lock myself in it until the following morning, before he could catch me. Probably, by then, he would have come to his senses and would let me go.

I cleared my throat, trying to hide my shuddering body from his sharp look. I didn’t want him to know just how scared I was. I knew some men relished a woman’s fear. Daniel did.

“I’m sure you don’t have that kind of issue. Most women would do whatever you asked,” I mumbled, unable to think

straight, my brain consumed by fear.

“You include yourself in that group, I presume, taking into account your offer,” he said, and I could sense a hint of mockery on his tone.

He was having fun with this... putting me against the wall to make me confirm my ill-conceived offer.

I tried to focus on the current situation, but the possible outcomes of this confrontation kept playing in my mind, and none was pleasant. The more I thought about it, the more frightened I got.

The thought of a man sexually touching me... even this God's gift to women gave me the creeps. All I had ever gotten from sex had been pain and humiliation. It wasn't an experience I was willing to repeat... with anyone.

My words to him earlier had been careless and desperate. I guess I would have said almost anything to make him let me stay. Deep down, I never considered the possibility he would take me at my word. He had been quite emphatic while denying his interest.

Why the change of heart? Why now?

"In... in normal... circumstances... yes, I would say so..."

"And these aren't normal circumstances?" he asked, cocking his eyebrow like the arrogant bastard he was.

"No... we can't say they are... I'm trapped here... with no guarantee, you'll respect my wishes... if I say no..." I mumbled, not even sure what I was saying, too desperate to filter the words coming out of my mouth.

"You had no guarantees when you made the offer. What changed?" he pushed me. "Or am I being too naïve? After all, your need is gone. You already have what you wanted, and I gave it to you before we reached an agreement," he added, in a derisive tone. "I guess I shouldn't have expected you to keep your word."

The contempt in his words hurt me, but how could I deny his words? That would mean accepting what he wanted from me, and I couldn't. I had been a fool and I could imagine how Daniel would enjoy seeing me in this position, trapped by my own thoughtless words.

I opened my mouth a few times, but no word came out of it.

When he jumped to his feet, I instinctively curled up and covered my face waiting for the blow.

A thick silence filled the room, and its steadiness made me lower my hands slowly and look at him. The shock on his face was terrible. My reaction had deeply offended him.

I tried to explain... to tell him it had nothing to do with him, but the words simply didn't come out.

"The door next to the bathroom you used earlier leads to a bedroom. Use it. I'll see you in the morning," he said through gritted teeth as he walked out of the dining room, leaving me alone.

Trembling, I sluggishly got up and walked in the opposite direction, towards the room he had offered me.

I didn't sleep. Hell, I didn't even lay on the bed. Not because I was afraid of what he might do to me – his actions in the dining room had told exactly the kind of man he was - but because I couldn't. I was too restless, too embarrassed, too ashamed of myself for the things I said.

I led him to think I was willing to do whatever he wanted in bed. I brought up the subject and insisted on it, just to back down when he decided to act on my word.

How could I blame him for being mad? All I wanted was to get the hell out of here and forget this had ever happened. I was becoming good at that: forgetting the dreadful things, pretending they had never happened.

While I was conscious, it wasn't that hard... the problem was during my sleeping hours. Most nights, I would relive the worst events of my life while married to Daniel.

I met him while I was in high school. I was in my senior year, and he came to the school to give a lecture on his job as a former SEAL, now working for a private company that handled security issues for other companies, celebrities, and the sorts. His speech had been inspiring. I was sure some of the guys graduating with me that year, joined the navy thanks to his words.

Charismatic, handsome, rich, and powerful. That was an intoxicating combination, and I fell for it from the beginning, though Daniel didn't know I even existed.

My mother's refusal to pay for college made me wholly committed to getting a full scholarship in a local business school. I had to work my ass off making ends meet, so I didn't have time for partying or dating. So, when I saw Daniel again, I had just come out of college with an MBA degree and still a virgin.

I met him at a party, given by a friend who graduated with me. Her family was wealthy and the party was crowded with influential people in the business and political world.

When I saw him, I couldn't stay away. I walked right up to him and told him about that visit to my high school. He didn't remember me, but this time he noticed me.

We started dating and before I knew it, I was walking down the aisle to marry him. He insisted on waiting for the wedding night to deflower me... his words, not mine.

It was a good thing... for him, of course. Had I known what he expected of me in the marriage bed, I might have turned him down. The whole night was a bad dream I couldn't wake from.

Daniel had rented a small cabin at the lake though it was midfall, and it was too cold to fully appreciate what the place had to offer. The reason for his strange choice was soon revealed. With no one around, he had the liberty to take off his mask and show me his true colors.

We got married in a small ceremony, for the closest family and friends, followed by lunch in a nearby restaurant. Nothing fancy, but then I had been so infatuated, it all seemed romantic. After all, there were only twenty people at the reception. Other than his best man, Daniel hadn't taken anyone with him.

He told me he hadn't spoken with his family in years and that he was happy with the situation, and so was I.



We had left right after lunch and reached the cabin he had rented by nightfall.

Things changed the moment he slammed the car door and practically dragged me out of the vehicle, straight up to the bedroom.

A little scared, I kept telling myself I should be flattered by his eagerness, but when he tore off my wedding dress, I was terrified.

“Let’s see if you were worth my trouble,” he said, his face twisted scornfully, as he pushed me, naked trembling onto the bed.

I had never been so scared in my life. When he started to take off his clothes, I simply snapped and jumped out of bed, making a run for it. Unfortunately, I didn’t go very far.

He captured me when I was trying to open the door and fisting my hair, he dragged me back to the bed.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going? I’ve waited long enough for you,” he snarled, climbing on the bed and straddling me.

“Daniel... please... what’s are you doing?” I asked, feeling confused and scared, but he didn’t bother answering my questions.

He slapped my face hard, back and forth a few times, ripping an incredulous sob from my lips. Then he put his hand to my throat and leaned his face close to mine.

“Shut up, bitch... these are the rules. You’re mine to do with what the fuck I see fit. It’s your duty as my wife to obey me, and defying me will entail proper punishment,” he announced, his tone so cold and cruel I trembled.

“You can’t do this...” I protested, but he rapidly shut me up, slapping me so hard, he split my lip.

“Who’s going to stop me?” he mocked me as he unzipped his pants and took his hard cock out.

Pinning me down to the bed by the neck, he slid down my body, forced me to spread my legs, and penetrated me with

one single raw thrust, forcing his cock up my dry canal, tearing me open and ravishing my innocence.

When he was done, I was bleeding so much, I thought I was going to die. Looking back, sometimes, I wish I had. He raped me so many times that same night I could barely move in the morning.

But he gave me no respite. Grabbing me by my hair, he dragged me to the kitchen and forced me to cook for him while listening to his insults. He sounded frustrated and disappointed. He had no trouble telling me what a waste of time I had been, and that he should never have married me.

I made the stupid mistake of telling him I would gladly disappear from his life, and before I knew it, he bent me over the kitchen table and held me down while he raped me in the ass.

The following days had been a copy of the first one, though he refrained from hitting me in the face again. Despite my tanned skin, bruises would show too much, and he couldn't afford that. Not if he wanted to maintain the perfect couple story, he had fed the people around us.

When we got back to New York, he locked me in his apartment while he went to work, but I still had access to the phone, so I called my mother, hoping for support. But my mother had ignored all the hints I gave her about my real situation and scolded me for not even trying to become a good wife.

With no prior experience and no one I could ask something so intimate, I was trapped in a nightmare.

Shaking my head, I pushed aside the memories and watched the night giving way to the dark, cold day. It was still snowing, but the storm was over, so I would be able to leave this place and put all of this behind me.

With a short visit to the bathroom, I was ready to face the world and take whatever came my way. Hopefully, I would be able to convince the housekeeper to open the door for me so I would be long gone before he even woke up.

As silently as possible, I went to the kitchen to wait for the woman to show up, hoping she would be there soon to make him breakfast.

Instead, I found him leaning against the kitchen counter, only wearing some pajama pants and nothing else.

His incredibly muscled body was breathtaking, and even my battered body responded to his potent masculinity with a very feminine response. My heart stopped for a moment, just to start drumming in my chest, and my lips became instantly dry.

He took a sip of his glass of orange juice and looked at her with a frown.

“Good morning,” I mumbled, wishing I had stayed in my room.

“Is it?” he asked, in a derisive tone.

I pursed my lips and clenched my hands into fists, struggling to stay in control and not follow my instincts that insisted I should run.

“The storm is over,” I stated, looking away.

The sound of him putting the glass on the stone counter startled me, and I crossed my arms over my chest to stop him from seeing me shudder.

“It’s still snowing,” he pointed out.

“That’s not a problem,” I assured him, though we both knew I was lying.

“What are your plans?” he asked in a cold tone.

I licked my lips and tried to find the best answer possible, knowing my credibility was as low as it could be. Though I couldn’t fathom why he was even asking. Why would he care?

“I’ll try to find a job while looking for a homeless shelter. I’m sure something will come up,” I said, sticking to the truth as much as possible.

After the fruitless search of yesterday, I would not waste another day looking for a job. I needed to find a place to stay,

even if it was an abandoned building or the sewers. Anything that provided a roof over my head would work.

“You said the shelters were packed,” he pointed out.

“They were... but that might have changed today,” I insisted.

“You think?” he asked, dripping sarcasm. “Temperatures will continue to drop today. No one will leave the shelters.”

“I’ll find a place. Besides, this is none of your business,” I ranted, out of sheer desperation. What the hell did he want from me? “If you’re not calling the police on me, I would like to leave now, if you don’t mind,” I added, doing my best to hide the trembling in my voice.

“What kind of job are you looking for?” he asked, ignoring my request blatantly.

For a moment, I considered not answering his questions. It was none of his business, and I couldn't understand why he was wasting his time asking. However, I could tell I wasn't going anywhere until I had pleased him. This was probably his way of appeasing his bruised ego.

"Anything... I have worked as a waitress, babysitter, cleaning lady, cooking assistant, dishwasher... that sort of jobs," I explained.

"Didn't you go to college?"

I was about to say yes, but that would require adding a lot more explanations than she was willing to give. "No, I couldn't afford it," I replied instead.

"But you finished high school?"

"Yes, I did."

"So, why not look for a professional school and become a secretary, personal assistant, paralegal, or something of the sort?" he insisted.

"Couldn't afford that either. Some people are born for manual labor. What's wrong with that?" I asked in a defensive mode.

He shrugged. "Nothing..."

"Exactly. So, now that I've satisfied your curiosity, can I go?" I asked, barely containing the impatience in my tone.

"Not yet. I have a proposition for you," he said, surprising me.

"I'm not interested," I spurted right away.

There was no way in hell I would be interested in anything that came from him. And not because I feared he would hurt me in any way – he had had enough opportunities last night and hadn't lifted a finger against me, - but because I didn't feel comfortable around him.

He was a threat to my peace of mind.

"You haven't heard it," he pointed out, in a cold tone.

I shook my head. “Whatever it is, I’m not interested,” I insisted.

“I believe you at least owe the courtesy of hearing me out, don’t you think?” he asked, straightening up.

“Why waste more time?” I grumbled.

He cocked his eyebrow and remained in a stubborn silence until I surrendered to his will. What else could I do? He would hold me, prisoner, if I didn’t.

“Fine... let’s hear it,” I grumbled.

“Susan has been asking me for some vacation time. I have been delaying it for some time now because I don’t like the idea of having strangers in my house,” he started explaining. “I’m asking you to substitute her for, let’s say, a month. This would solve both our problems: I would have a housekeeper, and you would have a job and a place to live.”

For a moment, I could only look at him. Was he for real? Last night he had been sure I was a spy, and now he wanted me to work for him, in his house? What was he hiding from me?

“I’m a stranger,” I pointed out, with a deep frown.

“True... but I could live with that,” he assured me.

“Why would you even bother?” I asked, failing to see what he would gain with this proposal.

He shrugged. “Susan has been very insistent, and your arrival was providential,” he replied, his voice as cold as his demeanor.

“Last night...” I started, but he interrupted me.

“Last night was a mistake, induced by your thoughtless words that should never happen again. We’ll barely see each other. Susan will instruct you in what is expected of you, and as long as you do your job, our paths will have little reason to cross,” he assured me.

I bit my inner cheeks nervously, finding it very hard to reject his offer. I had no other option in sight, and the idea of facing

a cold night out in the open scared me to death. How could I say no to this?

The lust I had seen in his eyes last night was gone, and his attitude towards her was cold and indifferent, making me doubt what I had seen.

“Think about it. You have the whole day to give me an answer. Susan will explain what you would be doing so that you can make an informed decision,” he said, walking out of the kitchen and leaving me to my thoughts.

“Good morning, miss. Would you like your breakfast now?” Susan’s voice startled me.

The woman had just entered the kitchen, already wearing her uniform, black pants with a black and white tailored jacket that looked elegant and comfortable at the same time, and the white details of the jacket were made of delicate lace.

“I can make my own breakfast, thank you...” I said with an embarrassed smile.

“Nonsense. You’re still a guest here. You’ll have enough time to cook for yourself if you accept Mr. Wells’ offer,” the woman replied with a wide smile. “Let me tell you, I’m praying to God you will. My daughter is having a baby in a few weeks, and I really would love to be there with her. Mr. Wells has told me to go... that he would handle things with the cleaning crew... but that’s a terrible idea. Those people need careful supervision to do everything right,” she explained, scowling.

I smiled and admired her loyalty to her boss. That wasn’t that common these days. “Why don’t we have breakfast, and after that, you show me what I would have to do?” I suggested refraining from promising anything.

“Perfect. Would you like some pancakes or perhaps eggs and bacon?”

“Eggs and bacon, please.”

“Take a seat. I can start explaining things to you while I cook,” she suggested.

“Thank you, that would be great.”

By lunchtime, I had a pretty good idea of Susan’s duties around the house. It was an easy job, but a thorough one. Mr. Wells demanded perfection and expected nothing less. Her primary responsibility was to see that all the tasks that went into running his household were carried out correctly. They included supervising the cleaning crew that came over three times a week, sending his clothes to the dry cleaner, and making sure they came back in perfect condition and cleaning his bedroom and cooking.

“He likes homemade cooking—good, delicious food. I have a small book with all his favorite recipes, so I’m sure you’ll have no problem there. If anything happens... because let’s face it, accidents happen and things can get out of control, you can order in from the few restaurants he has approved,” Susan explained, while they had lunch. “He rarely comes up for lunch, and he’ll always let you know when he does, so your main concern will be breakfast and dinner.”

“Does he bring guests over?” I asked, not sure I could handle dinner for more than six people.

“Sometimes, but when he does, he hires a catering service. You would only have to supervise their service and make sure everything goes according to his desires.”

“Does he have a family? I just realized I don’t even know his first name,” I said, smirking.

“His name is Jayden, Jayden Wells, and other than his mother, he has barely any family. Ms. Wells is not a frequent visitor,” she confessed, and I felt the impulse of asking why but decided not.

It was none of her business, and the woman would probably see it as gossiping.

Susan covered my hands with hers over the table. “So, tell me, will you do it? Mr. Wells told me you have done similar jobs before, and from what I’ve seen, I’m sure you can handle the job.”

There was so much hope in her tone I couldn’t help smiling.



“How can I say no when you put it that way?” I said, in an amused tone.

She squeezed my hands before letting them go. “Thank you, thank you. This will be perfect. I’ll give you my cell phone number, so you can call me whenever you feel the need, but I’m sure you’ll do just fine.”

“Thank you. I’ll remind you of your words if things don’t go as planned.”

“Nonsense. I have faith in you,” the older woman dismissed my words. She jumped to her feet. “Let me show you to your rooms. I’m sure you’ll love them.”

“Don’t you think we should wait for Mr. Wells?”

Susan waved down my protest. “He told me to show you everything in case you accepted. I must say he was very confident you would,” she said with a teasing smile.

The arrogant bastard... of course, he was. He knew I had no other options, and I would have to be insane to reject his offer. His confidence still infuriated me, but there wasn’t much I could do. Not if I wanted to survive this winter in Seattle.

Susan took me through a door in the kitchen I hadn’t noticed before. It led to a small hallway with three doors in it.

“This place is prepared for three people to live in, presumably the housekeeper, the butler, and the nanny,” Susan explained. “Each door leads to a suite with bedroom, bathroom, and living room, fully equipped to make you feel at home as much as possible,” she continued.

This was a different level of existence for me. Daniel wasn’t exactly poor, but this was a level of affluence way beyond his. Jayden Wells had to be a billionaire. I knew his company was gigantic but somehow, I wasn’t expecting something like this.

“This is my room,” Susan signaled a door to their right. “You can choose either of the other two.”

I opened the first door and loved the room. Decorated in green shades, it felt like a sanctuary of peace. “This one will do perfectly fine,” I told Susan.

“Perfect. I’ve ordered your uniforms, and they should be here tomorrow in the afternoon. Meanwhile, you can wear your own clothes.”

“Thank you.”

Susan glanced at her wristwatch. “It’s time to make dinner. Why don’t you settle in, while I take care of that?” she suggested.

I shook my head. “Let me help you. I could use the training,” I assured her.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Susan prepared vegetables and white rice to go with a thick steak she had marinating. She would cook it when he announced he wanted dinner, and I took note of those little details.

When all was done, I picked up my things and went to the new room, starting to feel a bit tired. The sleepless night was taking its toll on me, but I couldn’t go to bed this early.

Another thing that had been worrying her was how thick these walls were. Susan assured her the staff suites were soundproof, to respect both employer and employee’s privacy, but I wondered if it would muffle my cries during the night.

My nightmares could be quite horrific. I had been told I screamed so loud I scared everyone around. The last thing I needed was for him to know about my nightmares... besides, that little detail might make him think twice about hiring me.

Yawning for the tenth time, I decided to take a shower and change clothes. Mr. Wells would probably want to speak to me, so I would better be ready.

I was coming out of the bathroom, still wrapped in a towel when I heard someone in the living room. I had forgotten to lock the main door, unused to being in a suite this big, but I guessed it was Susan looking for me.

“Were you looking for me?” I asked as I stepped into the living room, rubbing my hair with a spare towel.

“As a matter of fact, yes, I was,” his hoarse voice disconcerted me, and I looked up to meet his gray eyes.

The lust was back, and this time there was no place for misunderstandings. It was crystal clear, even when it only lasted no more than a few moments.

“What the hell... are you doing here?” I asked, painfully aware I was naked under the towel.

His face turned into a stone mask. “I wanted to talk to you,” he said in a somber tone.

“Couldn’t it wait?” I asked trembling.

He nodded. “Get dressed and meet me in the living room,” he said, and a moment later, he was gone as if chased by all the demons from hell.

My legs failed me, and I fell on my knees, my heart thundering in my chest. But this time, fear had nothing to do with it. The lust in his eyes had provoked a response in me; I couldn't quite identify. My body was flushed, my heart was drumming, and I was breathing through ragged gasps.

No man had ever conjured such a response in me. Not even Daniel, when I met him for the first time and fell for him like a silly teenager.

It scared me, but after a few deep breaths, I was back in control of my emotions, once more determined to forget the whole incident and pretend it had never happened.

It was safer that way.

Wells was having a drink while contemplating the night falling over the city when I met him in the living room. It was still snowing, and the weather forecast had promised another storm for that night.

I cleared my throat to call his attention. "Did you want to see me?" I asked, standing as far as I could from him.

He finished his drink with one single gulp before he turned to look at me.

"Yes, please, take a seat."

"I'm good, thank you, sir."

"You can call me Jayden," he ordered as he sat down in an armchair in front of her.

"I don't think that's appropriate, sir," I insisted.

I needed to keep things on a professional level as much as possible. If it depended on me, he would barely see me around the house.

"As you prefer," he conceded, but I could see he wasn't happy with my insistence. Fortunately, he didn't have grounds to demand anything different from me than what he expected

from Susan. “I need your personal information to register you as my employee.”

His words were a cold shower on a winter day. “I can’t give you that. I thought that was clear.”

Last time I had used my social security number, Daniel had tracked me down in a couple of days. I wasn’t making that mistake again.

“Why not?”

“I have personal reasons for my request,” I assured him.

“And you’re not willing to share them?” more than a question, it sounded like a statement.

“Correct, sir.”

“Even if it costs you the job?” he insisted.

“Yes, sir, even so,” I assured him.

I wasn’t ready for another rendezvous with Daniel. God, I doubted I would ever be. I had barely escaped last time. I wasn’t taking any chances.

“How will I pay you?”

“Cash is the only option, sir,” I informed him, as I scolded myself for not having clarified these things earlier.

Losing this job would be a major setback for me, but it wouldn’t kill me... or so I hoped.

“Are you escaping from the law?”

“No, sir. I’m not escaping from anyone. I just decided to visit Seattle at the worst moment possible,” I explained, the lies coming out of my mouth quite effortlessly after all these months on the run.

I didn’t share my problems with anyone. One, because the last thing I needed was people’s sympathy and two because it could be dangerous, and I was done taking risks.

“Well, cash it is,” he finally said, and relief made my legs wobble.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Susan already left. I got her a flight to Los Angeles, first thing in the morning, and she wanted time to pack a few things,” he informed me. “She asked me to give you her apologies for leaving so suddenly, but she will call you tomorrow as soon as she gets to L.A.”

Knowing I was alone with him in the house tipped me off balance, but I quickly recovered.

“Thank you for letting me know, sir. Dinner is almost ready. When would you want me to serve it?” I asked, assuming my new role.

“We’ll eat in the kitchen in half an hour if that’s alright with you,” he replied, jumping to his feet. “Susan never felt comfortable sharing her meals with me, but I know you don’t have the same problem. Call me when it’s ready,” he concluded, leaving the room and heading to the master bedroom.

I stared at him, wishing I could throw something at him. Having dinner with him? When was that a part of the deal?

Cursing my luck, I went back to the kitchen to finish the meal. Susan had left me a quick note with some instructions on what was needed to finish preparing dinner and apologizing for her abrupt departure.

I scowled but focused on the task I had rather than obsessing over something I couldn’t change.

Thirty minutes later, he entered the kitchen just as I was about to call him. I had set the table for two, but making sure I wasn’t anywhere close to him.

Not that it did me any good. Jayden moved his setting closer to mine and took a seat at the table.

Pursing my lips, I served the Caesar’s salad I had prepared as entree and took a seat next to him.

“Susan was very excited about you. She told me she felt confident that you would handle the job almost as good as she,” he said, at some point.

“That’s very kind of her, but I’m sure she would feel the same about anyone capable of relieving her of her duties,” I mumbled, my eyes locked on the food on my plate.

“No... she wouldn’t. We interviewed a couple of housekeepers, and she turned them down,” he assured me.

“Well, I happy she’s pleased with me. I’ll do my best not to fail her.”

“Shouldn’t you be worried about not failing me?” he asked, sounding offended.

“I doubt you would notice if I was doing or not a good job,” I mocked him.

“What makes you so certain?” he asked, looking at me.

I could feel his eyes boring into me. It was almost a physical feeling, and I wish I could make him look somewhere else.

“Most men don’t,” I mumbled.

“I’m not most men.”

This time, I looked up, and my eyes met his. Once more, the lust was there, and my heart jumped in my chest.

Rapidly, I looked away and jumped to my feet, to serve the main dish.

“If you say so...” I mumbled as I placed his plate in front of him before I picked up mine.

It took a great deal of courage for me to get back on my seat. I wasn’t scared, but sure as hell, I wasn’t at ease, either.

We ate in silence, and when I was about to get up to offer him dessert, he jumped from his seat and growled ‘good night,’ leaving the kitchen without looking back.

Somewhat shaken, I cleared the table and set the dishwasher as fast as I could. Susan had told me I could retreat right after dinner, and that was what I wanted to do. The night was still young, but I needed to get some sleep after last night. With luck, I would sleep soundly until the morning.

The snow was still falling when I woke up in the morning. For the first time in a while, I hadn't had a nightmare, so I was feeling rested and filled with energy.

After getting dressed, I went to the kitchen and turned on the coffee machine. I knew Mr. Wells would be there soon to take his first cup, so I wanted to be ready.

I had set breakfast on the table and was finishing my first cup of coffee when he finally showed up.

"Good morning," he greeted as he walked into the kitchen, fully dressed for another day at work.

"Good morning, Mr. Wells," I mumbled, getting up to pick up his plate from the oven. "Do you have any special instruction for today?" I asked him when he took a seat at the table.

Susan had told her he usually didn't have lunch at home, but I wanted to be sure.

"Not today. I'll be back for dinner at around seven-thirty pm. Make sure it's ready," he replied in a very cool and indifferent tone.

The changes in his attitude towards me were quite maddening and very hard to understand. Well... I had to admit the man had never been nice to me... other than offering me this job, but still. I was never sure what to expect of him.

"Yes, sir."

He finished eating, and a few minutes later, he was walking out of the apartment. He only had to go down a few floors to get to his office, since most of the building was occupied by his company, so he would be nearby in case I needed anything.

Susan had given me the codes to access the elevator and the main door, but I really didn't have anywhere to go. So, I dedicated the morning following the list Susan had given me.

Incredibly, making his bed had been the hardest thing I had to face on my daily list of chores and not because it was a huge bed, with a heavy mattress on. My problem was dealing with his scent. It was everywhere: on his pillows, on the sheets, on the towels, he had put inside the dirty clothes basket...



It was irresistible. I found myself, picking something to inhale his alluring scent several times. It was insane. I had never felt drawn by a man's scent, so my reaction was strange, at best.

Forcing myself to finish as quickly as possible, I cleaned the room and promised myself I would stay away from it as much as possible. The last thing I needed was trouble, and Jayden Wells was trouble with capital T.

The first week on the job, went by smoothly. Wells had spent most of the time away from the apartment, and I had been able to work with barely any problems. He only had dinner at home twice, but the occasions hadn't been so awkward as the first night, mostly because he was silent, only speaking when absolutely necessary.

Before I knew it, it was Friday night, and I was supposed to be off during the weekend, but since I had no place to go to, I would be at the apartment.

Susan had advised me to stay away from the main part of the apartment. She told me Wells used to bring guests to the house, more specifically, female guests, but he usually took care of everything himself.

"He will call you if he needs help, but he usually orders food from his favorite restaurants and cleans after himself," she had told me. "He has no problem with us being in the house, but he does expect us to respect his privacy by staying out of his way."

It made sense, and I would be more than happy to stay away from him. Since I didn't have a cell phone or a computer, I had gone to the nearest library to pick up some books, so I had enough to entertain myself. It had stopped snowing, so I could also go sightseeing. Seattle was a lovely city, and I couldn't wait to see more of it.

He had told me he wouldn't be home for dinner that night, which probably meant he had a date. The whole idea made me feel uncomfortable, and I found myself hoping he wouldn't bring his date home. The thought of him having sex with another woman not far from her room was distressing.

I knew that was stupid since there was nothing between us, and there could never be. But it was impossible to deny my feelings, and this time, I couldn't even put them behind me, and pretend they didn't exist.

I prepared myself a sandwich for dinner that night and went to my suite early. If he needed me, he would call me, but I truly hoped he didn't.

I had a great week... with barely any nightmares disturbing my sleep, and I was hoping that didn't change. However, for some reason, my restlessness and anxiety that night made it hard for me to believe I wouldn't have nightmares if I tried to sleep.

The idea of disturbing Wells while he was with a woman was humiliating, and I would do all in my power to avoid that. Spending the night up was not a novelty for me, and with the books I had checked out from the library, I should be fine.

After a warm shower, I put on an extra-large t-shirt I used as a nightgown and curled up on the couch with one of Jane Austen's novels. The writer had the power to transport me to the regency era in England and make me forget the real world for a while.

But tonight, it wasn't working. I couldn't focus my attention on the words written, my mind too busy imagining what could be happening in the master bedroom.

I gave up trying around one o'clock in the morning and decided to go to bed, hoping I was wrong and that I could get some sleep.

After tossing in bed for over an hour, I decided it was safe enough to go to the kitchen and have some warm milk. I had read somewhere; it helped to calm down your nerves, and I sure as hell needed that.

Without bothering to put on my slippers I went into the kitchen and as silently as possible, keeping the lights off, I opened the fridge, and I was pulling the milk out of it when I felt him standing right behind me.

"What are you doing here?" he murmured, his tone gruffer than usual.

I tried to turn around to look at him, but he stepped closer to stop me from doing it. He was so close I could feel his body's warmth. I gasped, and my heart jumped into a frantic pace.

"I... I couldn't sleep... I just came for some milk..." I tried to explain, closing my eyes for a moment, my nostrils flaring as they inhaled his sent, a shuddering warmth trickling down my spine.

“Don’t you own a robe? That t-shirt barely covers your ass,” he snarled through gritted teeth.

I trembled but not of fear. His harsh words had excited me. “I’m sorry... I wasn’t expecting to find you here...” I confessed, wishing he would step back.

The cool air coming out of the open fridge wasn’t doing anything to turn off the fire in my body ignited by his closeness. I had never felt like this, and the feeling scared me a little.

“This is my house...” he said, his lips so close to my ear I could feel the warmth of his breath tickling my skin, making it harder for me to breathe.

“I know... I should have stayed in my quarters... it won’t happen again...” I mumbled, making the mistake of pushing my body against his, to escape his closeness.

The moment our bodies touched, the room filled with jolts of energy, thick and dangerous, ready to explode.

Instead of backing off with me, he wrapped his arms around my waist and pushed me closer to him.

So close, I could feel his hard manhood pressing against his jeans and the warmth of his naked chest. The only thing separating us was the thin fabric of my t-shirt.

“You’ve kept me awake for days...” he groused, nuzzling my neck, sniffing my scent.

“I... I have... no idea... why you are saying that...” I mumbled, finding it hard to believe.

He had been cold and distant to the point I was sure he regretted having hired me to stay in Susan’s place.

One of his hands slid down to my lower belly and pressed it back, so I could feel exactly what had been keeping him awake.

“Are you sure?” he asked, nibbling my earlobe, ripping a surprised moan from my lips as tiny waves of warmth rushed through me. “You promised me paradise... and then, shut the door in my face,” he protested, his lips and tongue drawing a

trail of fire from my ear to I neck, arousing feelings I didn't even know existed.

When his words managed to pass the fog of feelings and sensations clouding my judgment, the weight of shame fell hard on me.

He was right. I had offered him a night to fulfill his particular needs, and then, after he had saved me from certain death, I had backed down, pretending nothing had ever happened, taking back my word.

"I'm sorry... I never intended... to harm you in any way..." I tried to apologize.

"Are you sure?" he mocked me, finally letting me go and stepping back. "What would have you done if I had accepted your offer the minute you made it?" he asked, turning on the kitchen lights and leaning against the kitchen counter, crossing his arms over his chest, as if he wanted to see the expression on my face while I answered his question.

But how was I supposed to answer that? Desperation had taken me to that point. But I believe I would have chickened out at the last moment if he had said yes. Sex was probably the thing that scared me the most. It was painful, humiliating, and an abhorrent experience for all involved.

Daniel used sex as a punishment. He knew I hated it, so he took pleasure from forcing me to take him whenever and wherever he wanted. But that didn't stop him from ridiculing her for being the worst fuck he had ever known. I was broken goods, good for nothing, not even sex.

How would I ever expose myself and him to all that? I could take the pain... but I doubted I could take the scorn and disappointment in his face when he realized I had nothing good to offer.

"I don't know..." I confessed, lowering my head, hoping he wouldn't insist on the subject. All warmth and pleasure I had felt just moments ago were far gone, and I was shuddering like a leaf on the wind, fearing the outcome of this confrontation. "I was desperate... looking for a place to spend the night... the

words simply came out of my mouth..." I tried to explain, even though I knew I wasn't making any sense.

"Have you ever done that before?" he asked, clenching his jaw.

"No... never. The idea was planted in my head by two girls living at the motel where I was staying. They said I could make some money with my exotic looks..." I continued, pulling my hair out of my face with trembling fingers.

"Why did you choose me? Why not some of the other men you found on the streets, on your way here?" he asked, his tone cold and distant.

"It was getting dark very fast, and the snow kept falling... when I saw the garage door opening, I saw the opportunity to at least have a roof over my head, and I took it," I replied. "When I realized you were throwing me out, I offered you the only thing I had... even though I was sure you would never be interested in someone like me."

"However, you never intended to honor your offer," he accused me, his words harsh and painful. "When I decided to accept it, you reacted as if I was some kind of monster, ready to attack you..."

He was right. But to explain my reaction, I would have to tell him all about Daniel and my failed marriage. I wasn't ready for that.

"I'm sorry... please, believe me, I'm truly sorry," I assured him. "I never intended to provoke you, it just happened... I wasn't thinking clearly..."

"Go back to your room and please, stay there," he said, turning around to leave the kitchen. "I just hope you will keep the promise you made to Susan and stay until she's able to come back."

I took a few steps after him before I realized what I was doing. "Are you sure you want me to do that?" I asked in a shaky tone.

"Just stay away from me," he snarled before he walked away.

Rubbing my forehead in a vain attempt to soothe my dreadful headache, I closed the fridge and went back to my room, knowing for sure I wasn't going to sleep that night.

Being reminded of my desperate brazen offer when I was trying to convince him to let me stay in the garage left me shaken. I should never have alluded I would give sexual favors for a roof over my head. I still couldn't see myself letting him do whatever he wanted with me. The possibility still scared the hell out of me, even though I admitted it also aroused me a little.

Although I was off on Saturdays, I got up and dressed long before my usual hour. I wanted to have breakfast before he showed up and stay out of his sight as much as I could.

But when I reached the kitchen, I found an envelope labeled with my name. It contained my weekly pay, and a note that said I was free to do whatever I wanted up until Monday morning. He would be out of the house all day long.

Opening the envelope, I caught my breath in surprise. Inside, I found more money than I made in a month working as a dishwasher on my last job. It seemed like way too much for what I did in the house, and I wondered if he was paying me a week in advance.

After everything that had happened between us, it felt wrong to accept so much money, but for now, there wasn't much I could do.

I forced myself to eat breakfast, and after I cleared the kitchen, I went to his bedroom to clean it up. I knew I didn't have to, but reading all day long was just too much.

With that finished, I went back to my room and turned on the television, as I curled up on the couch. I must have fallen asleep at some point because before I knew it, I was struggling to wake up from yet another nightmare.

But could you accurately call them nightmares when they were accurate representations of things she had lived with Daniel? I didn't know.

Even after the horrific week I had spent with Daniel at the lake house, for some reason, I still hoped things would get better when we were back in town. He had a housekeeper and a maid living in the house, so I thought he wouldn't dare to treat me the way he had done so far with the presence of the staff in the house.

I had been right, to some degree. Daniel would play his role as a perfect husband while other people were around us, but the moment he closed the door to our bedroom, hell was unleashed.

He would rip off my clothes and fuck me wherever he got me, thrusting his cock inside me with no warning, hurting me so much my cries were heard by the staff.

The first night, the housekeeper had rushed to their room, startled with the noise, but Daniel had forced me to assure her that I loved it, that I was a masochist and could only reach pleasure through pain.

The woman had stared at me as if I had lost my mind, but she had accepted my explanation and left me to deal with Daniel's rage.

That night, he had pulled his belt from his pants and used it on me until I bled. He made sure he gagged me first, not willing to push his luck with the staff. When I was almost unconscious, lying flat on my stomach, on the bed, he had raped me a few times throughout the night, just to make sure I knew who was in charge.

That day, he locked me in the room and told the housekeeper I wasn't to be disturbed, and the woman followed his instructions to the letter.

The pain had been so excruciating, so overwhelming I had cried all day long, bedridden, and unable to move. The slightest move would reopen the wounds on my back, and the pain was just too much.

After a few weeks of living like that, the housekeeper defied Daniel's orders and decided to check on me at lunchtime. When she saw my back, she was in shock. It took me a long



time to convince her I was alright, that it looked worse than it was, and that going to the hospital wouldn't do me any good.

But the woman wasn't convinced, and despite my efforts, she decided to call the police. She was told they couldn't intervene unless the events were taking place at the time of her call or I called them myself.

For a moment, I considered that idea. The shock on the housekeeper's face told me what was going on wasn't normal, nor what I should expect on a marriage. But I was too afraid of Daniel to try it.

The housekeeper tried calling the police other times when Daniel got rough. He convinced the officers she misunderstood. Daniel fired her and hired a service to clean the house twice a week.

The rest of the time, I was expected to keep things spotless and squeaky clean. My lack of skill at the beginning had been the reason for a few more punishments, and though I tried to confide in my mother, she was never much help.

She kept telling me a wife had to indulge her husband in every way possible. If she had learned to do so, she would have never divorced my father, and she wouldn't be as poor as a church mouse, raising her child on her own.

The guilt trip always worked on me, and I would go back to Daniel determined to do best.

But after six months of abuse, I was ready to give up. I had gathered some money from the house expenses, and I decided to escape. I left the house half an hour after he went to work and bought myself a bus ticket.

Unfortunately, I never got on the bus. Daniel had put a GPS app on my cell phone that notified him of my whereabouts the moment I left the house. He met me at the bus station when I was about to get on the bus. He sounded so worried, so concerned about my health, I never saw the syringe he was hiding in his hand.

After he injected me, I collapsed in his arms, still conscious, but unable to move or utter a word. He had no trouble

convincing the bystanders I was ill and had forgotten to take my meds.

Once at home, he waited until the drug wore off before he taught me a lesson I wouldn't forget. This time, he didn't even protect my face. He unleashed his fury so viciously on me, I still wonder how I'm still alive.

My screams were bloodcurdling, the pain so vivid as if it all were happening now. When I finally woke up and saw Wells, on his knees, in front of me, I couldn't say I was surprised.

"You were screaming... are you alright?" he asked in a stern tone.

I rubbed my face and moved away from him, sitting up on the couch, embarrassed that he had found me like this. "I'm sorry... I must have forgotten to close my door... it won't happen again..." I assured him, in a low, emotionless tone.

"Why were you screaming?" he insisted, jumping to his feet.

I frowned. "It was just a nightmare... I guess... I can't remember..." I lied, averting my eyes from his.

"You sounded as if someone was killing you... how can you not remember it?" he insisted, incredulous.

"I just don't. It's all fuzzy in my mind..." I insisted, getting up. "I didn't mean to disturb you. I'll make sure my door is locked from now on," I assured him as I walked to the bathroom and closed the door.

I need a moment alone to recover from the dream. The metallic taste in my mouth and horrible headaches were the usual aftermaths of the nightmares. I hated them, but they were becoming less and less frequent. I hadn't had one in months, but the encounter with Daniel and the stressful situation with Wells had probably triggered this one.

It had been worse than usual, and I was still trembling.

I washed my face with cold water, and a few minutes later, I was able to go back to the living room. I was hoping I wouldn't find him there, but I wasn't so lucky.

"Are you feeling better now?" he asked from the window.

"Yes, thank you. I've lost track of time..." I mumbled.

“It’s nine o’clock. Have you eaten dinner?” he asked, with a slight frown.

The thought of food should make me feel nauseated, but it didn’t. I was actually starving. Having eaten nothing since breakfast, my body was asking for food now.

“No... I can cook something if you haven’t either...” I suggested, but he shook his head.

“Let’s order in. It will be faster. I’m hungry, too,” he said instead. “Do you like Chinese food?”

“Yes... of course...”

“Good!” he pulled his cell phone from his pocket and ordered. “The food will be here in twenty minutes.”

“Thank you.”

“I realized this afternoon I don’t have your cell phone number,” he said, out of the blue, with a slight frown.

“That’s because I don’t have one,” I replied in a cautious tone.

“Why not?”

“I lost the last one I had, and I haven’t been able to buy a new one,” I explained, sticking to the truth as much as possible.

My cell phone had stayed behind when I ran away from Daniel.

“I see. I’ll make sure you get one from the company on Monday morning. My employees are encouraged to use them.”

“Or else you fire them?” I asked, even though I knew I was being unfair and mean.

He tilted his head to a side, looking at her as he examined her. “What makes you think that?”

I rubbed my face, repenting the groundless words. “Nothing... I’m sorry. I need to take a couple of aspirins... my head is killing me.”

His demeanor changed instantly. “Do you have some? If not, there should be some in my medicine cabinet.”

“I don’t... I was about to ask you...” I confessed.

“Let’s go to the kitchen,” he invited me, and I followed him, happy to leave behind the confined area of my living room. It was too small for a man the size of Wells, and he seemed to make it even smaller.

In the kitchen, he looked for the aspirins and offered them to me along with a glass of water.

“Thank you.”

“You can help yourself from the cabinet whenever you need it. Just make sure to let me know when we run out of something,” he said.

“I will, thank you,” I assured him.

“For the record, the phones are offered to the employees. They can choose to either use them, give them away, or even sell them. It’s entirely their choice, but since our phones are quite good, they usually tend to keep them for themselves.”

“I’m sure... I was just rude, with no reason...” I apologized.

He nodded and leaned against the kitchen counter, his eyes piercing my face as if he was trying to see into my soul.

“Who’s Daniel?”

The question stunned me, and I’m sure I paled. I didn’t expect the question, but probably I should have. I knew I used to call out his name in my nightmares, as I begged him to stop.

“I have no idea,” I lied, looking away.

“Are you sure? You kept asking him to stop when you were screaming,” he confirmed my suspicions.

“I already told you I don’t remember the nightmare,” I insisted, instinctively pacing the room, too restless to stay still.

“That, I could have believed... but that you don’t know who Daniel is when you call his name so many times as I tried to wake you up? That doesn’t make any sense, and you know it,” he pointed out in an icy tone.

He was right, of course, but how could I admit knowing who Daniel was? That would lead to a thousand more questions I didn't intend to answer. But maintaining the lie would just worsen my situation with Wells.

I rubbed my forehead in a vain attempt to ease the pain. "All right... I do know Daniel, I'm just trying to forget he exists," I admitted.

"Who is he? Has he ever hurt you in any way?" he asked, and I scowled.

Damn the man. He was never pleased with my answers as if getting to the bottom of things was his main goal in life.

"I really don't want to talk about it. Daniel is a part of my past, and I'm doing my best to forget him."

"But he still haunts you," he pointed out.

I nodded. There was no use lying about that. "Yes... but not as much as he did. I'm putting it all behind me and moving forward. Talking about him is no help."

"Are you sure of it?"

"Yes, I am. So, if you please... I really don't want to talk about it."

He opened his mouth as if to insist, but the doorbell interrupted him.

"That must be the food," I said, sounding as relieved as I felt. "Would you like me to go get it?"

"No... I'll do that. Just set up a place to eat in front of the TV in the living room. There's a movie on tonight; I would like to watch," he instructed, as he left the apartment.

I did as he asked, and a few minutes later, he was back carrying enough food to feed a small army. I had brought a couple of plates from the kitchen, but we ended up eating from the little boxes that contained the food.

The movie was a thriller, with lots of action, sex, and pretty women, but it was also funny enough to make it worth watching.

By the time it was over, we -had finished all the food he had ordered and were still enjoying the sodas he had ordered with it.

“So... from which part of Hawaii are you?” he asked, out of the blue.

“Maui,” I replied, not giving in more details.

“But you’re not entirely Hawaiian.”

“No, I’m not. I’m also part New Yorker,” I admitted.

“That’s a long distance...from here.”

I shrugged. It is, of course, but it wasn’t an excuse for completely ignoring your child. “I guess...”

“Who’s from New York?” he asked, clearly curious.

I jumped to my feet and started to clear the table. “It’s none of your business,” I said before I left the room to get rid of the trash.

He followed me, carrying the rest. “Why can’t you tell me? I won’t tell anyone.”

“Why should I tell you? It’s my life, not yours and I decide with whom I share it,” I snapped, feeling a bit on edge.

I wasn’t completely recovered from this afternoon’s nightmare, and that was still affecting my conduct.

“Fair enough... I just don’t see the harm in it.”

“How many people know about your private life?” I asked, in a cold tone, sure there weren’t many.

He didn’t strike me as the kind of man that would share his life with just anyone, but that didn’t stop him from wanting to know about other people’s life.

“Not many, I admit.”

“Well, not many people know about mine, and I really would like it to stay that way, if you don’t mind,” I concluded, as I quickly washed the dishes and glasses we had used.

“You’re a tough nut to crack, Anne Johnson,” he said, shaking his head.

“I guess I am,” I said, twisting my lips in a sad smirk. “Now, if you don’t mind, I would like to go to bed.”

He nodded, and I quickly disappeared into the hallway that led to the staff’s quarters. This time, I was careful enough to close the door. After the day’s ordeal, I needed a good night’s sleep, but my sleeping pills were left with all the rest of my things in the small room I rented over the restaurant where I worked.

I just hoped I didn’t have more nightmares tonight. I don’t think I could handle that. Not again, so soon.

By three o’clock in the morning, I just got tired of tossing in bed, so I went to the kitchen to get some cold water. I knew I wasn’t going to sleep, but with Wells sleeping not far from the kitchen, baking was out of the question.

While I was living with Daniel, I had learned that baking could be a very soothing activity. But I couldn’t risk meeting Wells in the middle of the night. It felt too dangerous for my peace of mind. The man was starting to affect me in the strangest ways.

Two hours later, I was going insane. Sleep still eluded me, and I hadn’t been able to focus on anything. I just couldn’t relax. Fed up, I took a shower and headed to the kitchen. If all the walls in the apartment were soundproof, Wells wouldn’t hear me in the kitchen, and I really needed to do something.

I had seen some chocolate chips in the pantry, so I decided to bake cookies. It would keep me busy enough for a while, just what I needed. I was removing the last tray out of the oven when he walked in.



“Am I smelling chocolate chip cookies?” he asked, picking one from the plate on the table.

“Yes... I was bored... I hope you don't mind,” I said, feeling a bit awkward.

The man was only wearing his pajama pants. His broad, chiseled chest was on display, and my heart skipped a beat while my eyes feasted on the display. He was too handsome, too manly, too much of everything. I could hardly believe how my body was responding to his mere presence in the room.

When the hell had this started? How could I feel so attracted to a man? Men only wanted sex, and I had established a very long time ago, sex and I were a terrible mix.

He leaned against the kitchen counter and bit the cookie, moaning with pleasure as he savored it. “These are delicious... why would I mind?” he asked, as he finished eating the cookie, turning every bite into a sensual act.

I cleared my throat and looked away, astonished with the wetness I was feeling between my thighs—unheard of... utterly incomprehensible... and yet quite real.

“I don't know... I thought you might... this is your kitchen after all, and I've used your ingredients,” I mumbled, wriggling my hands nervously.

“As long you share them with me, feel free to bake whenever you want,” he assured me, picking up another one. “Do you have plans for today?” he asked, changing the subject.

I turned to look at him, and my eyes got stuck on his naked chest, once again. “No... not yet...” I managed to answer after licking my lips.

“Do you like art?”

“Art? Yes... of course...”

“There's a new show opening today, in a friend's gallery. Would you like to go with me? The painter is a new impressionist, and my friend tells me he's outstanding.”

“That sounds interesting... but why would you want to take me?” I asked, finding his invitation intriguing, at best.

“I had forgotten all about it, and it’s too late to ask someone else,” he explained, in a blatant tone.

“But not me?” I asked, raising an eyebrow, not sure if I should be feeling insulted.

“You live here... and you wouldn’t expect anything else, right?” he replied, twisting his lips in a sardonic way.

“What could I possibly expect?” I asked, matching his sarcasm.

“Exactly... so what do you say? We could have lunch somewhere in town before we headed there.”

I opened my mouth to say no, but I didn’t. I wanted to go. I couldn’t remember last time I had done something like that... going out, like a normal person, without having to worry about my behavior or what I said... it sounded a little like paradise.

Each time I went out with Daniel, it felt like an endless nightmare. I had to consider every word that came out of my mouth... every gesture I made... everything I ate or drank...

“That sounds perfect, thank you.”

“Great!” Can you be ready at twelve?”

It was only nine in the morning, so of course, I could. “Certainly. I was about to make breakfast. Would you like some?” I offered, turning around to get what I needed from the fridge.

“It’s your day off,” he pointed out.

“I know... but I still have to eat, and so do you.”

“If you don’t mind, yes, I would love to,” he agreed.

“Very well. I’ll call you when it’s ready,” I assured him, not daring to look at him.

After all, I was virtually kicking him out of the kitchen, and the last thing I needed was for him to guess why.

“I’ll help you,” he said, grabbing the coffee machine to prepare fresh coffee.

I wanted to shout my frustration, but instead, I put on a smile and started making the eggs and the bacon he liked.

The kitchen wasn’t big enough for us. No matter where I turned, he was always there, in my way. I even bumped into him a couple of times while taking the food to the table. By the time we finally sat at the table, I was stressed out.

How the hell was I supposed to spend the whole afternoon with him breathing down my neck? But going back on my word wasn’t an option. He already thought I was a liar; there was no need to add more to that.

At noon, I stepped into the living room wearing my best clothes: a pair of blue jeans and a nice knitted green sweater. One of the things I missed from before I got married was being able to buy clothes of my choice. With my tanned complexion, colorful outfits looked perfect on me. I loved wearing them and sometimes even combining them in ways most people wouldn’t.

I guess that was my Hawaiian heritage, but the fact was I loved it. My mother hated it what she called my exotic taste, but I never listened to her regarding my clothes. Her favorite color was pale blue. Daniel, on the other hand, had supported my taste until the day we got married.

After that, he torched all my clothes and forced me to wear either white or black clothes. It became one more way for him to punish me and make my life miserable.

Now, though I couldn’t afford new clothes, I was thorough when I scavenged the church’s charity closets and second-hand clothes stores. I had gathered a respectful collection in a few months, but thanks to Daniel’s last visit, I had lost all that.

“Are you ready?” he asked as he entered the living room wearing black pants and a dark gray turtle neck sweater.

He looked ravishing, and my breathing quickened.

“Yes, I am.”

“You’re wearing that?” he asked, with a slight frown.

“It’s all I’ve got. If you think it’s not appropriate, I can stay home. There’s no problem,” I replied, perhaps a little too defensively.

“It is a problem, but nothing that can’t be solved,” he said with a determined expression on his face. “Let’s go.”

I should have known I wouldn’t get out of it that easy. We took the elevator to the garage level and climbed into his car. We drove for a time in what was an uncomfortable silence for me.

“Where are you taking me for lunch?” I finally asked in a fake excited tone.

“To a small restaurant on the shore. They have the best seafood around these parts,” he replied with a smug smile on his face. “But first, we’ll make a small detour,” he announced as he entered what seemed to be a shopping center.

“Last minute shopping?” I asked, surprised.

“Yes, we could say so,” he said, as he parked the car and jumped out of it.

Intrigued, I followed him, and a few minutes later, we were standing in front of a very exclusive boutique.

“What are we doing here?” I asked, with a slight frown.

“I can’t take you to the show wearing those rags. It would affect my image,” he said, as he took me by the arm and practically dragged me inside.

“I can’t afford a pin in this place...” I protested, trying to free myself.

“Good thing I can buy the whole place if I want to,” he replied, in a resolute tone.

“I’m not letting you buy me clothes... that’s not right...” I insisted.

“You already wear clothes I bought you,” he pointed out.

“That’s different, it’s a uniform for work...”

“Then, consider these clothes as your uniform, as well,” he retorted. “You’re acting as my companion today, and you need the right clothes for it, so stop whining and pick something.”

“I’m sure we can go somewhere else... this place is too expensive...” I protested, trying to get some sense into his stubborn head.

“You should know by now, money is not an issue,” he said, his impatience evident in every word.

“I do know... but still...”

“Good day, welcome to our boutique. How can I be of service?” a woman in a black pantsuit approached them with a friendly smile.

I could tell she had recognized Wells and that she would do her best to make him spend as much money as possible.

“Good day. We’ll be attending an art show this afternoon, and we need to find her the appropriate outfit,” he said in a demanding tone.

“Well, of course. Would you like to see pantsuits or dresses?” the woman asked him, not even bothering to look at me.

“Show me what you have, and I’ll decide,” he replied, ignoring me blatantly, when I cleared my throat, seeking his attention.

“Give me a few moments,” the woman said, turning around to search the racks.

“Excuse me...” I protested. “I’m not a doll for you to play dress up.”

He cocked his brow as he finally turned to look at me. “Aren’t you?” he asked a bit snidely. “Since you didn’t give me the pleasure of your body, you can, at least, allow me to buy you clothes and chose them for you.”

The clear reference to the famous movie was quite shocking, and I opened my mouth to reject his insinuation that I was a prostitute, just to be reminded by my guilty conscience that I led him into thinking just that.

Instead, I clenched my jaw and looked away.

The clerk woman brought out a few outfits, but I was strangely attracted to a dress I identified as a Chanel, in a black and white pattern. I had sworn I would never wear those colors again, but the whole outfit – the fitting dress, in a large plaid pattern, with the white silk shirt and the small jacket in a completely different pattern – was just too lovely to say no to.

I guess Wells noticed my interest in the dress because he sent me to the fitting room with it.

It fitted perfectly as if it had been made for me, and I loved it.

“Come out and show me,” he demanded, sounding to close for my peace of mind.

Taking a deep breath, I pulled the curtains and walked out. “Is it good enough?” I mocked him, twirling around.

He was silent for a few moments, with an expression I couldn’t read, his stone mask, shutting me out. But it only lasted a few moments, and he was back to his arrogant form.

“Yes, that will work. Do you have stockings and shoes to go with that?” he asked the other woman and after asking my size, she went looking for what I needed.

A few minutes later, we were driving away from the shopping center, towards the restaurant. Though I loved the clothes, it still felt weird wearing them. I didn’t even look at the price tags, afraid of what I might see there.

The restaurant was small, but the food was divine. Wells ordered a sample tray, with a selection of the best the restaurant had to offer, accompanied by sautéed vegetables and sinfully delicious French fries.

“This is an amazing place, but not the place I would have pictured you in,” I told him, intrigued.

“I love good food, so I’m always on the lookout for places like this one. A friend recommended me this one. She lives nearby, and she knows my tastes, and she was sure I would love it. And I do,” he explained, shrugging.

The mention of a female friend unsettled me. Why was a question I couldn't answer, but I couldn't deny the tiny knot on my throat and the sudden weight in my chest.

The truth was I hadn't thought about it. About the possible existence of another woman in his life... a lover, girlfriend, or even a fiancée. After all, I knew nothing about him and his life.

"Is she a good friend?" I dared to ask.

"Yes... she is. She also works for me, so she's not my lover if that's what you're thinking," he said while finishing his coffee.

I could feel the heat coloring my cheeks, but I did my best to ignore it. "No... I wasn't... I mean, I know nothing about your life. You could be married or engaged, for all I know..." I added, not sure that was a good idea. I seem to be getting myself deeper into the hole I had just dug.

"I'm not seeing anyone, Anne. If I was, I would have never considered accepting your generous offer," he pointed out, in a self-mocking tone. "Let me rephrase that... your deceitful offer. Yes, that's more accurate."

Beets weren't as red as my cheeks. I didn't think he still resented me for that. After all, he hadn't mentioned it again. Of course, I hadn't seen him much the past week, but I certainly wasn't expecting him to bring it up again.

"I didn't intend to deceive you..." I muttered, looking away.

"You didn't? And yet you never intended to stick to it either. So, how is that not deceitful?" he asked, sounding as if he didn't give a damn, but the look in his eyes said otherwise.

"I already explained to you why I did it... Will you accuse me of wrongdoing every time we're together?" I protested, knowing my defense was lame.

"No, you're right. I shouldn't have mentioned it again," he admitted, but somehow, he didn't sound regretful.

He had deliberately brought up the subject... as if he wanted to see how I would react. Why he would do that was still a mystery to me. But whatever his reason was, he seemed pleased with his little experiment.

"Why did you?" I asked, with a slight frown adorning my forehead.

"Perhaps, I was hoping you would tell me you would honor your offer," he replied. The intensity in his eyes looking into mine seemed as if he was trying to look into my soul.

"I'm sure you have better options... why insist on mine?" I asked, truly puzzled.

He shrugged. "You intrigue me... and I have to admit I haven't been intrigued by a woman in a very long time. Your offer woke a part of me that had been dormant for quite some time. Exploring it sounded like a good idea."

His explanation sent chills down my spine. But not exactly the chills of dread I kind of expected, and that scared me a bit. Jayden Wells stirred my emotions in strange ways, and I still hadn't figured out how to interpret them.

"Sounded?" I heard myself asking, against better judgment.



“It still sounds like a good idea,” he confessed, his tone huskier than ever, each word making my heart beat faster in my chest, with anticipation. “So, I believe we could say the ball is on your court,” he added, and once more, I saw that glimpse of raw lust in his eyes.

The man was good playing these games, I had to grant him that, considering the effect, he was starting to have on me. But what was I supposed to do? Ignore him? Let him know I was willing to act on my offer? I wasn’t even sure I could do that.

I mean... the outcome of such a deed would be terrible, and I could see myself jobless and homeless once more.

I shook my head in a vain effort to clear my mind. “I’m afraid I made an offer on something I cannot deliver.”

“You keep saying that... why? I should be the judge of that, don’t you think?” he asked, cocking his eyebrow.

“Trust me... I know. I’m a disaster... in that... field...” I stammered, struggling to find the right words to tell him the truth without actually spelling it out.

“I don’t think that’s even possible. You should let me be the judge of that,” he insisted, as he called the waiter and asked for the bill. “The show is about to start. We can continue this conversation later,” he said, as he helped me up and guided me out of the restaurant.

The art show was much more than I expected. It was held on one of the city’s most famous art galleries, and tonight was the opening night, so the place was crowded with celebrities and influential business people. Not the crowd I was used to, though Daniel wasn’t exactly a nobody in New York.

The paintings were as good as Wells promised, and I had a great time wandering around the place, contemplating the masterpieces, while Wells discussed business with his acquaintances.

I was particularly interested in one that represented a woman dressed in white running across a dark forest as if hunted by her own personal demons. I guess it hit too close to home.

“Do you like it?” a man asked me, at my back.

“It’s overwhelming... but yes, I do. I always considered this style as the best to portray emotions, with the masterful combination of colors, light, and shadow... don’t you think?” I asked, turning around to look at the man standing behind me.

“I agree with you,” the man said with a wide smile. “Jonathan Spade, at your service,” he introduced himself, stretching out his hand to me.

“Spade? Oh, you’re the painter...” I realized, feeling a bit embarrassed, as I slowly put my hand on his.

“Yes... and you are?”

“A... Anne, Anne Johnson. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Spade. Your work is quite amazing... breathtaking,” I said, with a shy smile.

“Thank you... I’m glad you feel like that because I would love to paint you... though I would want to portray every single detail that makes you this amazing woman...” he said, with what sounded genuine admiration.

“Spade, I was looking for you.”

Wells showed up before I was able to utter a word, which was a good thing since I had no idea how to respond to the man’s offer. Wells slid his arm around my waist and pulled me closer to him... so close his warmth set my body on fire.

“I see you’ve met Anne,” Wells added with a polite smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Oh, she’s with you, Wells?” there was a clear disappointment on Spade’s tone.

“Yes, she’s with me,” Wells assured him, pulling me even closer.

“I was just telling her how much I would love to paint her. You don’t often meet someone so exquisitely beautiful like your friend,” Spade said, his eyes traveling up and down my body, making me feel a little too uncomfortable.

“I know what you mean... though your style wouldn’t exactly do her justice,” Wells pointed out, signaling the paintings scattered around the room.

“I would use a very different style to paint her...” Spade assured him.

“I’ll consider your offer if we decide it’s the right time,” Wells said as if he was entitled to make decisions on my behalf. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, we have another appointment this afternoon.”

“Sure, you know how to get in touch with me,” Spade accepted his defeat in a chivalrous manner and stepped aside.

Wells guided me out of the galleria, and I waited until we were alone to interrogate him. “What the hell was all that?” I asked him, sounding more upset than I actually felt.

“Spade is known to bed all his models. I was just saving you,” he replied.

“Saving me? Or making sure no one took what you want for yourself?” I mocked him, just a little, but his reaction had been unexpected, and I wouldn’t be human if I hadn’t felt flattered watching them fight over me.

Well, ‘fight’ was a bit of an exaggeration... but it still felt good.

He snorted but made no comment whatsoever.

“Are we really going somewhere else, or was that just an excuse to leave the show?” I asked as he drove away from the parking lot.

“Yes, we are going somewhere else,” he replied succinctly.

“Where?” I asked, curious. He hadn’t mentioned we were to go anywhere else.

“My mother is expecting me for tea,” he said in a dark tone.

My mouth dropped open. “Your mother? Oh... well, yes... I see. You can drop me off anywhere. I’ll take a cab back to your place,” I replied, feeling a bit confused.

“You’re coming with me,” he announced and surprised me even more.

“I am? Why?”

He glanced at me, his eyes as dark as stormy skies. “Is there a problem?”

“No... no, of course not. I’m just surprised you want my company... that’s all,” I mumbled, though surprised was the understatement of the century.

Every time I thought I had managed to understand him a bit more, he would pull one off to shatter the ground underneath my feet. What an impossible man.

His mother lived outside Seattle in a huge mansion over a cliff with one of the most fabulous views I had seen in a long time. I’m not exactly sure what I had been expecting, ever since he mentioned this visit, but the woman standing in front of me was certainly not it.

In her early fifties, Madeleine Wells was an incredibly beautiful woman that looked more like Jayden’s older sister than his mother.

“Jayden darling, I’m glad you could make it,” she said, in a cheerful tone, as she got up from the couch where she was sitting. “And you brought a friend...” her cheerfulness faded when she saw me right behind her son.

“Hello, mother. Allow me to introduce you to Anne Johnson. Anne, meet my mother, Madeleine Wells,” he said, in a cold, distant tone, as if he was introducing me to an acquaintance he didn’t like that much.

Not what you would expect when someone introduces you to his mother. But, unfortunately, I could relate to that. Despite my constant struggle to get my mother’s approval, things between us were never easy and certainly never warm or affectionate.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Wells,” I said in a polite tone, but not even trying to get any closer to her for a proper greeting.

The woman was clearly not happy to see me there.

“It’s Ms. Wells. I’ve never been married,” the woman corrected me in a harsh tone.

“I’m sorry...”

“Don’t be. You couldn’t have known,” Wells interrupted me. “Are we on time for tea?” he asked, looking at his mother, apparently unaffected by the woman’s cold attitude.

“Yes... of course... but you didn’t warn me you were bringing guests...” she pointed out, in a sarcastic tone.

“Matty always has enough food to feed a small army. I’ll just ask her to bring us another cup,” Wells replied, sounding impatient as he walked out of the living room, leaving me alone with his mother.

I could have killed him for that, especially when she turned to look at me with a dark expression.

“So... Anne, is it? How long have you known my son?” she asked, not even pretending to be polite.

“About a week,” I replied, sticking to the truth. I had no idea why Wells had brought me here, but if he had a small game in his mind, he should have let me know.

“A week?” she sounded startled. “How did you meet?”

“At Wells Corporation.”

The woman was shocked. “You work for him?”

“What if she does? Do you have a problem with that, mother?” Wells asked as he returned to the living room, followed by an older woman, Matty, I supposed.

He was carrying a tray, and the woman was pushing a small cart filled with enough food to feed a small army.

“Have you lost your mind? I’ve introduced you to the most beautiful women in the damn country, and you choose to date one of your employees?” his mother ranted, ignoring me completely.

Finding her attitude quite insulting, I almost left the room to give them privacy to discuss their problems, but I thought better. This wasn’t my problem. I wasn’t dating Jayden, and though I could see he was using me to upset his mother, I shouldn’t care. It wasn’t any of my business.

Or so I tried to convince myself, as I took a seat on an armchair, while Matty poured me a cup of tea and offered me a choice from a splendid display of small sandwiches and pastries, while Wells and his mother continued arguing.

“Don’t mind them... they’re always arguing,” Matty whispered to me.

“I see... it must be tiring,” I assumed, as I picked a small sandwich.

“I’ve worked for Ms. Wells for over thirty-five years now... came to help her with the baby, so I guess I’m used to it,” she said with a teasing grin.

“How was he as a baby?” I asked, too curious to help myself.

“The most serious baby I’ve ever met. He barely cried, but didn’t smile much either,” she said, pulling a chair and taking a seat next to me. “It was as if he knew he would have to grow up really fast...” she added, in a somber tone, as she poured a cup of tea for herself.

“Why was that? If his mother could afford you, his basic needs must have been covered, right?” I asked, lowering my tone, too interested in what the woman had to say as to let the others overhear us and stop Matty from spilling the guts to me.

“She wanted to have an abortion. But her mother found out she was pregnant at the same time as she and threatened to cut her out of their will if she did,” Matty explained. “She never hid that terrible truth from Jayden, and when she lost her temper, she used to accuse him of ruining her life.”

Some people were simply not cut out to become parents, and Madeleine Wells was undoubtedly one of them.

“What about the father?” I asked.

“No one knows who he is. Sometimes, I even think she was never sure,” Matty explained.

The other two finally stopped arguing and turned to look at us.

“Have you finished? Your friend and I are enjoying our tea, so feel free to join us whenever you feel like it,” Matty said, signaling the cups and the teapot.

I was sorry the woman hadn’t finished telling me Wells’ story, but she had shed some light into the intriguing man. It sure explained a lot about who he was.

After that, the tea party became very awkward, but I didn’t mind. It was good to know he had a human side... sometimes I doubted that, with all his masks and coldness.

We left his mother’s house right after we finished eating.

“Do you visit your mother often?” I asked him while he was driving us back to his place.

“As little as possible,” he confessed. “We don’t get along... never did.”

“Why did you bring me with you?” I couldn’t help asking.

After all, we barely knew each other. Why did Wells feel the need to introduce me to his mother?

He shrugged. “I thought it would be interesting to see how she’d react,” he confessed, and though he didn’t seem to be lying, it was an awkward answer.

“Was it anything like you were hoping?”

“I didn’t think she would play the ‘concerned mother’ role. It was never her thing,” he said as if he was truly surprised.

“Well, I’m glad I was of use to you,” I mumbled, in an ironic tone.

“I knew you could handle it. You’re tougher than you look.”

“That’s a hell of an assumption coming from someone who barely knows me at all,” I grumbled.

“I know you’ve been through worse. The way you totally ignored her and started having tea with Matty, really got to her. I don’t think anyone else has ever ignored one of my mother’s tantrums the way you did,” he explained, and I could almost swear there was a hint of admiration on his tone.

“My mother was a lot like her... you know with the ability to turn things around to make them seem they were about her... I was never able to turn the tables on her, I guess I was too involved in the whole process,” I told him with some bitterness, “but your mother doesn’t have the same power over me, so it was easy to see her game.”

“She didn’t mean half of what she said,” he said as if comforting me.

“I wasn’t paying attention,” and it was the truth.

My little chat with Matty had been far more interesting.



He glanced at me, happily surprised. “I’m glad you didn’t.”

We got home at nightfall, and Wells disappeared into his studio after he rejected my offer to cook dinner. He said he wasn’t hungry and that I should make myself at home.

I wasn’t hungry, either. It had been an eventful day, and I had a lot in my mind. The questions swirled in my mind again and again, but I wasn’t anywhere near the answers.

At some point, I remembered there was a bottle of white wine in the fridge and decided I needed a drink. I wasn’t much of a drinker, but I’d had my share of fun on my college days.

The white wine was exactly what I needed: something to numb me and perhaps lend me some clarity. Overthinking it wasn’t working, so why not try it?

Leaving my shoes in the bedroom and convinced I wasn’t going to bump into Wells, I didn’t bother to put on a robe over the large t-shirt I wore as a nightgown. The apartment’s central heating was so efficient, the temperature was always comfortable.

Remembering I still had chocolate cookies from last time I baked, I grabbed the bottle of wine, a cup, and a few cookies and sat at the kitchen table. It was a strange combination, but it worked for me.

“Late snack?” Wells asked me, his voice coming from behind me.

By then, my inhibitions had been dulled by the cool white wine and all those chocolate cookies, to the point I ignored the fact that I was practically naked, with just the oversized t-shirt on and that he was only wearing his pajama pants. His bare chest was a sight for sore eyes, and despite all the shit troubling me, I was no different from any other woman when it came to admiring God’s handywork.

“Want some?” I asked, pushing the cookies tray to the middle of the table. “There’s also some wine if you want that too.”

“Wine and cookies? I’ll pass...” he replied, pulling a chair and taking a seat in front of me.

“You can’t say no if you haven’t tried it...” I pointed out, taking another sip of wine.

“True... but some things are best left untried,” he assured me, grabbing the bottle and pouring some wine for himself in one of the cups I had put on the table.

Perhaps, my subconscious had always expected him to join me for my night snack. Which was insane, of course... why would I want him with me when I was trying to forget he existed? Or so I kept telling myself...

“Coward...” I teased him, picking up another cookie.

He chuckled. “No... just cautious,” he replied.

“If you say so...” I said, my lips twisted into a scowl.

He stared at me for a few moments. “You look troubled.”

“That’s because I am...” I admitted.

“Care to share what’s troubling you?” he asked after he emptied his cup of wine.

It was my turn to chuckle, though there was little humor on my laughter. “You’re troubling me...”

“Me? What have I done to trouble you?” he asked, sounding intrigued.

“Everything and nothing... and that’s precisely the problem,” I tried to explain, the wine loosening my tongue. “First, you were willing to kick me out, into a raging storm, refusing to hear my pleas... then, I promise you a night in paradise, and you still insist on showing me the way out...”

“I thought you were a spy, someone that would have a car waiting for her just outside the building. You didn’t look like a homeless person,” he explained himself.

I nodded. I had gotten to that same conclusion. “Then, you changed your mind and let me stay, even after I backed out on my offer,” there was intrigue in my tone. Few men would have done that. “In fact, you not only let me stay, you even gave me a paid job and a place to stay. One would think you expected something in return... but instead, you spent the whole week

avoiding me,” I continued, summarizing what had happened between us. “Until today... Today, you bought me clothes, took me out for lunch, and even introduced me to your mother... just to ignore me again... so what the hell do you want from me, Wells?”

“You’re drunk, Anne...” he pointed out with a deep frown.

“Drunk? No, not even close. This is my second cup,” I showed him the half-full cup I had in front of me. “It takes a bit more for me to get drunk,” I assured him.

“Are you sure you can handle the answer to your question, Anne?” he asked, in a dark tone, not exactly what I was waiting for.

“I’m a big girl... I can handle much more than you think,” I replied, looking at him straight in the eye.

“Can you now? Because last time, you cowed... as if you were afraid of me,” he pointed out.

I shrugged, trying to dismiss his words. He still scared me, a little, but not because I was feared he would hurt me. The feelings he woke in me were different, and therefore a million times more dangerous. He took a no for an answer... that much I knew for sure.

“Let’s say it was an instinctive reaction... you took me by surprise,” I confessed, though not telling him the whole truth.

“Fair enough,” he conceded.

I looked at him through squinted eyes, not willing to let him see straight into my soul. “So, what do you want from me?”

“That hasn’t changed, Anne... I still want you,” he said in a firm tone.

“And yet, you haven’t done anything to get me,” I pointed out, not entirely buying his story.

“Are you sure?” he asked, cocking his eyebrow. “All the things I’ve done so far could be a means to an end.”

“Yes... but that would be the strangest way to seduce a woman...”

He shrugged. “Probably, but I think it’s working... don’t you agree with me? You’re intrigued, you can’t stop thinking of me...” he pointed out.

“Oh... mind games... I see where you’re going... but getting me intrigued will not necessarily get me into your bed,” I explained, finishing my cup, not sure I liked the turn the conversation was taking.

The man was an enigma, hard to read, and certainly impossible to understand. Of course, I had to be a little out of my mind questioning him the way I was, considering how I felt about the idea of having sex... but for some reason, I couldn’t help myself.

“I’m quite confident they will... when you’re ready. You’ll give me exactly what I want,” he assured me.

I frowned in the face of his impressive confidence. “Have you considered the possibility that what you want is not as good as you think? That it will probably disappoint you?” I asked in a mocking tone.

I had no doubts he would be disappointed that he would wish he hadn’t wasted a second of his time on me.

“No, never. You could never disappoint me,” he assured me.

“How can you be so sure? You barely know me,” his confidence didn’t cease to amaze me.

He leaned forward and took my hands in his, sending a jolt of energy up my arms and jumping my heart into a frantic rhythm.

“There’s fire between us, Anne. It sizzles every time we’re together in the same room,” he said, in a husky, sensuous tone, his thumbs caressing my sensitive skin. “I’m sure you feel it too.”

I did... but that was no guarantee... Daniel excited me too... until our wedding night fiasco. I spent months trying to become the woman he wanted me to be, despite the beatings and the humiliation. I was so convinced it was all my fault, that I was a complete failure I couldn’t look at my marriage

objectively and realize something was terribly wrong between us.

And although now, I was able to see I didn't deserve to be treated the way Daniel treated me, I was still certain I was a total failure in bed. I wasn't sure I could take that chance.

"That doesn't mean a thing," I said with all the bitterness I felt.

“It means everything,” he jumped to his feet and pulled me up with him, sliding his hands up my arms until he cradled my face. On his way up, his hands grazed the side of breasts, sending jolts of pleasure to my nipples, which immediately responded, getting hard as pebbles, poking out through the flimsy fabric of my old t-shirt.

Struggling to keep my breathing even and slow, I allowed my hands to cover his but didn't try to pull them away. I was too lost in the pleasure of having him so close to stop him. A part of me wanted to know how it felt to be kissed by Jayden.

He didn't disappoint me. Pulling me closer, he smashed my lips with his and forced his tongue inside, assailing every inch of my mouth, taking what he wanted and stealing my breath away in the process.

Was a kiss supposed to be this passionate? This hot? This lustful? It compared to nothing I had ever experienced in my life.

Like an addict craving my next fix, I trembled and moaned, stepping closer, silently begging for more of the pleasure he was granting me. The first graze of his lips had awakened a hunger in me I didn't know I had, and with each move of his lips and his naughty tongue, it grew stronger, igniting the fire he had mentioned before.

I wanted more... it didn't matter the pain or the discomfort I knew would come along if I saw things through... I wanted it anyway, I wanted the little taste of heaven he was giving me. A moan of complaint left my lips when he finally released my lips, to allow some air into my lungs.

“There's no way this could be disappointing, Anne,” he whispered in my ear, his warm breath tickling my ear as his tongue sent shivers down my spine. “In any way.” And with those words, he stepped back. “But that's your decision to make, not mine. No strings attached... no consequences...” he

said, as he left the kitchen towards his room. “You know where to find me.”

Damn... what an impossible man! How dare he leave me on fire like this? He should have taken me... proven me wrong... but he wouldn't do that... oh no, he wanted it to be my call, my decision, and I wasn't sure I was ready to do that.

I might have played along, let him seduce me for the sake of his mind-blowing kisses, but I wasn't ready to walk into his room and take what I wanted, right?

Rubbing my face, I paced the kitchen, cursing my fate, and cursing him for leaving me like this, hot and flushed, with the strangest feelings gnawing at my very core.

I was a coward, I knew that, but I was still afraid I would be a total failure and that he would treat me differently in the morning, despite his words. Was I ready to see the disappointment on his face? Or for him to avoid me as if I was some sort of an infectious disease?

Flashes of his kiss crossed my mind, and my whole body lit on fire in response. Even if sex sucked, being kissed by him again would be worth the trouble. The question was, would it be enough for him?

Not sure what to do, I cleared the kitchen table and paced the room for a few more minutes, still unable to make a decision.

One thing I knew for sure: he wouldn't hurt me intentionally. He had had the chance to do so, and he hadn't laid a finger on me. Not even when I gave him motives to do so.

It still amazed me I was even considering this. With any other man, I would be running for the nearest bus station at the first mention of sex, and with him, I was considering doing it, mindless of the consequences.

Had I lost my mind? What made him so different? Was I fooling myself?

I was never going to find answers to my questions, not unless I tried.

Before I knew it, I was standing at his half-closed door, shuddering and gasping for air... my heart thundering in my

chest so loud I barely heard anything else.

Slowly, I placed my hand on his door and pushed it open, gently, telling myself I would run back to my room if he was already sleeping.

But he wasn't. He was standing next to his bed, staring at the door, as if he was waiting for me.

Fire burned on his gray eyes when mine locked with his, and my heart stopped for a moment. Unconsciously, I took a step into the room, and it was all it took for him to rush to my side and pull me into his arms.

"Are you sure?" he muttered in my ear as he nuzzled my neck.

"No..." I confessed, with a hysterical giggle. "But I still want to do it..." I added when he stopped his caresses and stared at me.

"That's good enough for me," he said before he leaned forward and kissed me.

All doubts rushed out of my mind when his lips touched mine. I wanted this. The bliss of his kisses was enough compensation for whatever was to come. I threw my arms around his neck and pulled him closer, deepening the kiss and allowing myself to relax and enjoy.

With a victorious groan, he fisted my hair and pulled my head back, giving him full access to my mouth and my neck. He took full advantage of it, kissing, nibbling, and caressing every single inch of skin, each touch pushing me closer and closer to paradise. His hands slowly slid downwards, taking my full breasts and imprisoning my aching nipples, ripping a wanton moan from my lips as pleasure rushed through my body, straight to my throbbing clit. Never a caress had felt this way – passionate, hot, mind-blowing... - and with just a few, I was utterly lost in the blissful haze he conjured for me.

His hands slid to the hem of my t-shirt and pulled it over my head, revealing my naked body to his hungry eyes. For a moment, I felt exposed and embarrassed. Daniel's words screeched in my mind, reminding me of all my flaws – my big



breasts, my large hips, my short legs – and I instinctively closed my eyes, and braced myself for the blows I was sure would come, if not physical, surely delivered by Jayden’s harsh words. Why was I doing exposing myself to this hell? Was I so needy I would do anything for the crumbs of his kisses?

But they never came. His grunt sounded raw and primal, as he moved us onto the bed, lying naked right next to me. He thoroughly explored every inch of my body. His kisses, nibbles, and caresses were an intoxicating cocktail of pain and pleasure that quickly had me squirming underneath him.

My whole body jumped up when his hands finally reached my pussy, and by then, I was too lost in the haze of pleasure to care. I was his for him to do whatever he wanted with me.

And he did. His fingers were the first to touch me there, to caress and explore the wet folds until they reached the engorged knob, thoroughly stroking it until the pressure building inside me finally blew up the thin walls containing it, and I was sent spiraling out of this world.

Jayden grunted his pleasure, as he nestled between my legs, pulling them up and covering my inner thighs with sweet kisses, all the way to my gushing pussy.

I barely noticed what was happening, still riding the waves of that first orgasm, so when he finally rubbed his shaft against my wet pussy, I was still oblivious of the world around me.

His first thrust pulled me back to reality, and I tensed up. This was happening, and I had to be ready for it, to hide the pain from him and give him a glimpse of the pleasure he had given me.

I owed him that much.

“Am I hurting you?” he asked, with a slight frown, immediately stopping, his cock barely inside me.

“No... of course, not,” I assured him through ragged gasps. He wasn’t hurting me, not yet, at least, I was just getting ready for the pain I knew would come.

He leaned forward and kissed me, while sliding his hand between us, to caress my clit, sending another wave of pleasure rushing through me.

I moaned and arched my hips towards him, and he used my invitation to slowly push himself deeper into me.

I gasped, my walls stretching to fit him, but the pain never came. Instead, all I felt was pleasure, and my whole body surrendered to him. Still kissing me, he started moving inside me, slowly thrusting himself in and out of me, making sure I was enjoying it as much as he was.

At some point, my legs wrapped themselves around him, and I pushed him deeper inside me, urging him to go faster and take what he wanted from me. With a loud growl, he complied, and soon the powerful waves of orgasm washed over us.

His growl of sheer pleasure was music to my heart as I thought the haze of lust and pleasure to make sure he was as satisfied as I was. The way he tilted his head back and the rapture on his face felt even better than the orgasm ripping through my body. He wasn't disappointed.

Falling on top of me, he crashed his lips on mine and his sweeping his tongue deep inside my mouth, stealing my breath away.

"Nothing was disappointing in what just happened," he whispered in my ear, drawing trails of fire all over my face and neck.

I was beyond words. My mind was too astounded with the pleasure I had just found in the arms of a virtual stranger when all I found with the man, I was supposedly in love with, had been pain and humiliation.

He rolled over, taking me with him, still buried inside me, and invited me to lay my head on his chest while he wrapped his arms around me.

"Don't you agree?" he asked, caressing my hair.

"Yes..." I managed to utter, too overwhelmed with everything, still finding it hard to believe I wasn't dreaming.

He kissed the top of my head. "I knew things between us would be like this," he said, pulling me up until we were face to face.

I lowered my eyes, sure I had my whole soul on display, and I certainly wasn't ready to let him in.

"You're way too confident," I scolded him.

He chuckled before he cradled my face and kissed me again. Though there was still passion in this kiss, there was also so much tenderness my heart warmed up, and a lonely tear rolled down my cheek.

He saw it and kissed it away. "Are you crying?" he asked, sounding worried.

"No... no..." I assured him. "I'm overwhelmed..."

"That good, huh?" he teased me.

I laughed and hid my face in his broad chest. "That good..." I confessed.

"You haven't seen anything yet," he assured me, and once again, his exaggerated self-confidence made me laugh.

"Will you show me more?" I asked, tilting my head to look at him.

"Will you let me?" he asked, cuddling my face.

"I'm here, am I not?" I asked, kissing the palm of his hand.

A dark shadow clouded his eyes for a brief moment, gone so quickly I wondered if I had imagined it.

"Indeed, you are."

He sat up in bed with me still in his arms and jumped out of bed.

"We need a shower," he said, with a naughty grin, carrying me into the bathroom.

Only then I realized we hadn't used any birth control, and I frowned.

"What's the matter?" he asked, as he put me down in front of the shower stall.

“You didn’t wear a condom,” I stated in a low tone.

His frown was deeper than mine. “No... I forgot, but you don’t have to worry about it. I’m clean...”

“I’m sure...” I dismissed his words. I wasn’t worried about that. “But, I’m not on birth control...” I whispered, trying to figure out how far along I was in my cycle, but I was never regular, and when the birth control implant Daniel insisted, I get was due, I didn’t bother replacing it.

I had been on the running for a few months back then, and sex was not on my agenda.

“Oh...” I could see he was in shock. “Is it possible...?” he started asking, with a dark expression on his face.

“I don’t know... I don’t think so...” I mumbled, feeling suddenly awkward, and as the failure, Daniel had always accused me of.

I should have told him. This was my fault... I mean... who wasn’t on birth control these days? What was I thinking?

“I’ll go to the pharmacy in the morning...” I told him, looking for a towel to cover my body, too self-aware of my naked body with all its flaws.

“Problem solved,” he said, cuddling my face and making me look at him. “I’ll wear a condom meanwhile,” he promised before he leaned down and kissed me.

“Meanwhile?” I mumbled surprised.

I was so sure he wouldn’t touch me again, that I had ruined things between us, his words surprised me.

“The night is still young, Anne,” he assured me, as kissed me again, pulling me into the shower stall and under the warm stream of water.

I woke up in Jayden's bed, alone. The sheets next to me were cold, and I couldn't hear him in the apartment, which meant he had already left for work. Slowly, I sat up in bed and pushed my tangled hair away from my face as the night events rushed into my mind.

It still felt unreal like something taken out of a fantastic dream. Waking up in his bed wasn't enough to kill that feeling, and the red rose on the pillow next to me made it even harder.

I picked up the rose and inhaled its perfume, remembering the blissful world he had shown me the night before, again and again, with each caress and every single kiss.

The doorbell pulled me out of my daydreams, and I grabbed his bathrobe to cover my naked body before I went to see who was at the door.

I wasn't expecting anyone today, so it was probably someone looking for Jayden, but he hadn't told me anything.

I pressed the button on the small screen installed near the door to see who was visiting.

Seeing Jayden's mother standing by the elevator was quite a shock. What was she doing here? Didn't she know her son was at the office?

Taking a deep breath, I pressed the button to talk to her. "Good morning, Ms. Wells, what can I do for you?" I asked.

"Open the door. I won't be kept waiting at my son's door," she demanded lividly.

"Jayden isn't here," I said, trying to dissuade her from visiting the apartment.

Nothing good could come from that, considering I was naked underneath Jayden's robe, and I was a mess.

"I'm well aware of that," she said, firm on her decision, making it impossible for me to keep her waiting.

I gave her access to the elevator as I went looking for my cell phone, in desperate need to send him a message and warn him of his mother's visit.

But she reached the penthouse long before I was able to find it.

"Ms. Wells... would you like me to call your son?" I offered, with my best smile on.

"You spent the night here... in his bed, judging by the robe you have on," the woman pointed out, with more astonishment in her tone than scorn, and that by itself intrigued me.

"Well... yes..." I admitted, dragging the words, not sure it was safe to make such confession.

"He has never brought his... flings... here," she pointed out, walking towards the living room and looking around as if looking for evidence of last night's events.

"How do you know that?" I asked, finding it hard to believe it.

"Susan told me. She keeps me updated on my son's life," Madeleine said, taking a seat on the couch. "Where is she, anyway?"

"She's on vacation... I'm replacing her," I informed her, seeing no point in hiding the truth from her.

She would find out eventually.

"You're his housekeeper?" now the surprise was quite obvious and even a bit insulting.

"Yes, I am, for the time being," I confirmed it. "Would you like some tea or coffee?" I offered, not sure what to do in this situation.

"Have you had breakfast?" she asked me instead.

"No... I overslept..." the words came out of my lips before I could stop them.

"Well, it's lunchtime now, so why don't I order us something to eat from Jean Pierre's restaurant while you take a shower

and change into something more comfortable?” she suggested. I was so mesmerized over her strange behavior, I nodded.

“I mean... it’s not necessary... I can cook...” I mumbled, trying to fix things, but she didn’t give me a chance.

Madeleine jumped from the couch and gently pushed me towards Jayden’s room. “Nonsense! Go on, I’ll take care of everything.”

Knowing I couldn’t insist without insulting the woman, I accept it but turned away to go straight to my room, hoping I would find my cell phone there so I could call Jayden and invite him to join us for lunch.

But he didn’t take my calls. Desperate, I called his secretary, and Phoebe told me he was having lunch with a client.

With a sense of defeat weighing on my shoulders, I accepted there wasn’t anything else I could do, so I rushed into the bathroom, for the fastest shower of my life.

When I went back to the living room, Madeleine was sitting on the couch, sipping from a glass of white wine.

“The food will be here in a few minutes,” she told me. “I hope you don’t have food allergies... everyone seems to have one these days...” she grumbled, sounding more like the woman I had met the day before.

“No... I don’t. Anything will be just fine,” I assured her.

“Good...” she took one more sip from her glass. “Tell me more about you. What makes you different from the other women?”

There she was... I guess seeing me at the apartment had surprised her enough to shake her a little, but she was back to her rude manners.

“What exactly would you like to know, Ms. Wells?” I asked her, deciding I had nothing to lose by confronting her.

It wasn’t as if whatever I had with her son was something other than a fling. There was no future for us and not just because I was still married to Daniel, and I doubted he would ever let me be.

Jayden didn't strike me as the 'happy ever after' kind of man. Not that I blamed him.

"I just told you."

"I'm no different. Perhaps, convenient, if you'd like..." I assured her.

She squinted her eyes. "Do you really believe that?"

"Why shouldn't I? We barely know each other, and I won't be in town for more than a few months," I pointed out.

"That could change."

"Listen, I don't mean to be rude, Ms. Wells, but I really don't think this is any of your business. Your son is an adult, free to do with his life whatever he wants," I said, feeling uncomfortable with the whole conversation.

After my mother died, I had promised myself I would stop looking for people's approval. That promise had given me the strength I needed to leave Daniel and give myself a new life. I wasn't about to fall into old habits. I didn't need nor wanted Madeleine Wells' approval.

"You can't blame me for wanting to know more about you. You're the first woman he has ever introduced to me."

"I'm sure you shouldn't consider that important... it was just a coincidence. He had taken me to an art show, and I guess he didn't want to end our date so soon..." I tried to explain.

"You obviously don't know my son," she stated.

"I already told you that," I said, scowling.

"Things don't happen by chance when he's involved. There's not an impulsive bone in his body. He always plans things to the smallest detail," she assured me.

"Maybe he's changing..."

"Hell will freeze over before that happens," she warned me.

The doorbell interrupted me before I was able to answer her, and I almost sighed of sheer relief.



The delivery man brought the food, and I spent the next few minutes serving the food Madeleine had ordered.

She joined me at the dining room table when all was set.

“It smells good,” she said, putting some of the food on her plate.

I nodded but didn’t comment. I had texted Jayden again, but he still hadn’t seen any of my messages, so I had no way out.

“Even if things aren’t serious between you, as you claim, you could tell me a bit about yourself, don’t you think?” she asked me while we ate.

Of course, she wasn’t going to give up so easily. “Fair enough. What would you like to know?” I asked, cautiously, while I tried to remember what I had told Jayden so far, so I didn’t fall in contradictions.

“Were you born in Hawaii?” she asked.

“Yes, I was. My father is Hawaiian.”

“Is he still alive?”

“Yes, he is,” or at least, I thought he was.

He used to send me a card for my birthday every year, but I hadn’t received the last one. I had left Daniel by then.

“What about your mother?”

“She passed away last year. My parents were divorced.”

“You must miss her terribly,” she said in a polite tone.

“I can’t say I do. We were never close, and sometimes I think my mother only brought me with her because she wanted to hurt my father, not because she loved me,” I said in a cold tone. “I’m sure you can relate.”

Perhaps, I shouldn’t have told her that. But hell, the concerned mother role wasn’t convincing, considering all Matty had told me.

Madeleine pursed her lips and looked away, and for a moment, I thought she was going to ignore my remark.

“Point taken... I guess Matty did more than just have tea with you,” she said in a sad tone. “She never forgave me for my stupid mistakes, and I guess I deserve it. Some things can’t be taken back.”

Her words surprised me. Not the ones I was expecting from the woman who had told her son she wished she had aborted him.

“I don’t believe that... but yes, some are far harder to erase.”

She snorted. “Would you forgive me if I was your mother? You didn’t seem to have forgiven yours,” she called me out on my words.

“She never told me she regretted anything... not even when she was on her deathbed,” I replied, scowling.

“Would you have forgiven her if she had?” she insisted.

“I’m not sure... I guess it would depend on how sincere she was. But now, I’ll never know.”

“Jayden is not so forgiving...”

“You’ll never know if you don’t try. What do you have to lose?”

“Not much, I guess.”

We finished eating, and she even helped me clearing the table and setting the dishwasher.

“Well, this was certainly entertaining. I hope to see you again,” Madeleine said, as she picked her purse and headed to the door.

“Why not? You know where to find me,” I said with a teasing grin.

“Can I trust you not to tell my son what I told you?” she asked, as she waited for the elevator.

“It’s not my place. I’ll let you tell him,” I said in a firm tone.

She shook her head. “It’s too late...”

Before I could say anything, she was gone, and I was left staring at the elevator doors.

Shaking my head, I went back to my chores. After all, I was still his housekeeper, and the place wasn't going to clean itself.

I was finishing cleaning his room when he finally returned my calls. "I've just seen your calls and messages. What happened?"

"Your mother came to visit you," I replied, taking a seat on the edge of the bathtub.

"My mother? Didn't you tell her I wasn't home?" he asked, surprised.

"I believe she already knew that. She came to see me, and finding me wearing your robe and barely awake was quite a shock for her," I said with a hint of sarcasm in my tone.

"You slept late," there was some amusement in his tone.

"And it surprises you? I didn't sleep much during the night, as I'm sure you remember," I scolded him.

"I didn't hear you complaining," he pointed out.

I didn't. How could I when he was busy giving me the best night of my life.

"Anyway, we had lunch together... her suggestion, and she left right after."

"What did she want?" he asked.

"She claimed she wanted to know more about me. You surprised her introducing her to me," I said, though I wasn't sure those had been the woman's motives.

"I guess I did... she'll get used to it," he said in a dismissive tone.

"If you say so... I could have used your presence here, but Phoebe told me you were in a meeting."

“Believe me, my presence would have only made things worst. I’ll talk to her and ask her not to bother you again,” he offered.

“She didn’t bother me. I was just caught off guard,” I assured him.

“As you wish,” he agreed, but he didn’t sound convinced. “Don’t bother cooking dinner. We’ll order Chinese.”

“Are you sure?”

“You’ll be too busy to cook,” he assured me. “I’ll see you tonight.”

He ended the call before I was able to say anything, and it was a good thing because I had no idea what I could have told him after that.

Shivers of pleasure rushed down my spine, and my heart skipped a beat with anticipation. I was still a bit sore after last night, but I didn’t care.

I wanted more – more of him, more of the pleasure he gave me, of the feeling everything was for once so damn right.

One night in Jayden’s arms and I was questioning all the time I had wasted while living with Daniel, trying to be someone I wasn’t, believing there was something terribly wrong with me if I wasn’t able to please the man I was supposed to love.

All the accusations, the beatings, the humiliation... I had always felt they were my fault, and even when I decided to leave Daniel, I still felt part of the fault was mine. He had blamed me so many times for it, I ended up believing him.

I remembered once when I was serving him dinner and the bottle of wine slid out of my hands, and broke into a million pieces, ruining the white carpet in the dining room.

We had been married for just a few months, but I had already learned how brutal he could be. I just stood there, in shock, looking at the stain, getting bigger and bigger.

Daniel had jumped to his feet and forced me to kneel on the carpet, on the broken glass, ignoring my cries of pain.

“You’re the clumsiest woman I have ever met. Can’t you do anything right? When will you learn?” he had yelled at me as he forced me to stay on my knees.

“I’m so sorry... it won’t happen again,” I promised, again and again, but he didn’t listen.

Instead, he took off his belt and beat me until my back was bleeding as much as my knees. Only then, he had dropped the belt and raped me right there, oblivious of my pain and of how much I was bleeding. All he could think of was his own satisfaction... his own pleasure. I was just a means to an end, the doll he used to satisfy his darkest needs.

I had ended up at the hospital, with deep cuts on my legs, arms, and hands, and once more, he had played the role of the perfect husband, having to deal with a clumsy wife, a danger to herself, as he described me to the worried doctor.

No one doubted him, and I was too convinced of my own fault to say or do anything else. Even my mother believed him, despite my failed attempts to tell her the truth. She simply refused to hear me.

One night with Jayden had been enough to open my eyes and show me that there was nothing wrong with me, other than my lack of judgment when I decided to marry a damn sadist.

Determined to enjoy every second of my time with Jayden, I finished cleaning as fast as possible before I hit the shower. I wanted to be ready for him. Anticipation and desire coursed through my veins, and I was more excited than ever in my life.

I was just finishing braiding my tameless hair when I saw the shine in my eyes and forced myself to stop and think.

With shaky hands, I put down the comb and stared at myself in the mirror. I was falling for him, for a man I barely knew.

Hadn’t I learned anything? How could I trust another man so easily? I was just a fling for Jayden, a convenient lover, not the love of his life, that was for sure. Hell, he had even used me in his little war against his mother, and I knew it.

If I kept my foolish heart out of the equation, everything would be alright. I would have nothing to lose and a lot to gain, and when the time came, I would walk away from him with my heart in one piece.

Later that night, when he got home, I was still excited, still aroused, but my feelings were under tight control. I could do this.

And I was able to control them, for the few moments, it took him to cross the room and pull me into his arms. One single touch and I was melting all over him.

“Missed me?” he asked, pressing his lips against mine.

“Were you away?” I asked back, but I was sure the hunger in my eyes was the only answer he needed.

He chuckled and cradled my face kissing me as if there was no tomorrow, his hunger a perfect match to mine. In a matter of minutes, we were both naked, lying on the carpet, right there in the middle of the room, lost in each other’s arms, with one goal in mind – to give way to the fiery passion burning between us.

There was no time for foreplay... hell, there wasn’t even time for us to take our clothes off. There was barely time for him to pull a condom out of his pocket and slide it over his cock, aided by my eager hands before he thrust himself deep inside me.

I was more than wet and ready for him. My walls welcomed him inside me, stretching and clenching around his thick cock, while he plunged himself in and out of me.

To say we burst up in flames was an understatement. But it was worth every second of it.

A few minutes later, we were lying on the living room floor, trying to catch our breaths, with our wrinkled clothes still on.

“Will this be the welcome I’ll receive from now on?” he asked, his breathing still labored.

I chuckled through ragged gasps. “Would you like that?” I asked, tilting my head to look at him.

“What’s not to like?” he asked, with laughter in his tone.

“Right... though we really should try to get to the bed first... the floor is too hard...” I grumbled, but I didn’t mean a word I said.

It was perfect, and I would do it again in a heartbeat.

“Well, the bed is a bit far... perhaps you should wait for me there... can you picture it?” he drew a big square in the air. “You lying in my bed, with nothing on, waiting for me, ready to please me...”

I couldn’t stop myself and burst into loud laughter. “You’re watching way too many porn movies,” I managed to say as he laughed with me.

“Porn movies? How dare you suggest that? I just have a very prolific imagination,” he teased me, lying on his side and leaning his head on his hand so he could look at me. “No scars from the meeting with my dear mother?” he asked his tone now a bit darker.

“No, of course not. Why would there be any scars at all?”

“Madeleine Wells is not an easy person. The only person that puts up with her shit is Matty.”

“She was curious. Can you blame her?” I asked, moving up so I could look at him and twisting my neck in the process.

He shrugged. “No... I guess I can’t.”

“Why did you take me there?” I asked, as curious as his mother.

“I had told her I would be home for tea, and I don’t like to cancel our meetings. She can spend the whole week complaining about it,” he explained, scowling. “I guess I wasn’t ready to end a lovely day. I can see now that it could have ended in a very disastrous way, but you handled her like a pro.”

“I’m not sure how I’m supposed to take that last sentence of yours,” I complained, though my heart had jumped into a frantic pace when he admitted he had spent a lovely day with me.

He picked one of my hands and kissed the palm. “As a compliment, of course,” he assured me, pulling me closer and demanding one more kiss from my still swollen lips.

“Good...”

He chuckled. “Hungry?”

“Famish, actually,” I admitted, though I wasn’t in a hurry to get up.

“Perfect. The food should be here in a few minutes. I ordered on my way up,” he announced.

“Oh... we could have been interrupted...” I pointed out with a slight frown.

He laughed. “Yes... we could have... I wasn’t expecting such a warm reception,” he confessed, jumping to his feet and stretching his hand to help me up.

I laughed too, but I was suddenly a bit off, not sure how to interpret his words. Was he upset? Perhaps, I shouldn’t have waited for him in the living room... Should I have waited for him to call me?

He must have sensed my confusion because he pulled me closer and pushed my chin up to look straight into my eyes. “Though I wasn’t expecting it, I loved it. I missed you all day long,” he assured me, in a huskier tone. “Be sure I wouldn’t mind being welcomed like this every single night,” he added, with a naughty grin on his handsome face.

I lowered my eyes and giggled nervously, not completely convinced. After all, he was the man that didn’t take his dates home. That could only mean he valued his privacy a lot, and I should keep that in mind. Besides, I was his housekeeper, not his sex slave.

“I’ll see what I can do about it,” I teased him. “I’ll go wash up before the food arrives,” I added, with a faint smile.

He pushed my chin up once more and kissed me one last time before he let me go. “Don’t be long.”

Food was excellent, and by the time we finished clearing the kitchen and setting the dishwasher, I was a nervous wreck.



What was I supposed to do now? I had never been on a relationship like this one. I ignored the rules I was supposed to follow, and I hated that.

Deep down, I guess I was afraid I would screw up, and he would be mad at me. I didn't admit this, not even to myself, but the tiny little doubt gnawed at me, despite my efforts to silence it.

Jayden calmed my nerves, picking me in his arms and carrying me to his bed, so I guess I would have to play by ear.

The following week went by in a blur of passion and lust. I would spend my days taking care of the house and cooking for him, and we would spend the evenings together, in or out of the house, but the nights were always spent in each other's arms.

I don't remember ever being so happy, and though I was thrilled, I was also scared. How could this last? Jayden didn't know anything about my past. I hadn't even told him I was still married to a fucking bastard who had been hunting me down across the country.

I wanted to tell him... not everything. I wasn't ready to discuss the years of abuse, but he deserved to know I was still married. But how on earth do you slip something like that into the conversation?

'Oh, by the way, I'm married...'

My guts told me that wouldn't end well, so I convinced myself I didn't have to tell him anything. I knew my time with him had a deadline, that he would grow tired of playing house with me and would kindly ask me to leave. And of course, Susan's leave wouldn't last forever. I would have to go when she returned, which meant I had like two or three weeks left.

One morning, I was dusting the living room when the phone started ringing. The unexpected sound startled me. It was the first time someone called the house, and for a moment, I wasn't sure if I should take the call or not.

After a few moments of doubt, I finally picked up the phone. "Good morning, Anne, it's Phoebe."

"Oh, hi, Phoebe. Is there a problem? You usually call me on my cell phone," I asked, intrigued.

Phoebe chuckled. "Yes... that's right, but no, no problem. It's just that I received a phone call for you, and I wasn't sure I should give him your cell phone number."

The other woman's words froze me in place. How was it possible? How had he found me?

Trying to stay in control, I asked Phoebe. "Who's he?"

"Jonathan Spade... the painter... do you know who he is?"

An intense wave of relief washed over me. "Yes... yes... I know who he is..." I mumbled.

"He called me asking me if I knew you. I have him on the other line. Would you like to talk to him?" Phoebe explained.

"Yes... you can put him through," I decided, though I had no clue what he could possibly want from me.

"Sure thing. Have a nice day," she said before she transferred the call.

"Ms. Johnson... you're a very elusive woman..." the painter greeted me.

"I am? Why would you say that?" I asked, surprised.

"I've spent two weeks trying to find you. Our friend Wells wasn't very cooperative when I asked him about you, so I decided I needed to talk directly with you, but finding you hasn't been easy," he confessed, in a seductive tone.

"Why would you want to talk to me?" I asked, intrigued.

"Could we discuss this over lunch? I really would love to explain myself properly and over the phone is simply not the same thing," he asked.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I replied, not sure how Jayden would react to that.

"Listen, I'm well aware you're dating Wells, it's all over the social media..." he started saying, but I interrupted him.

"What?? What the hell do you mean?"

"Wells was known to be a hermit. The yellow press is feasting all over you two. Instagram, Facebook, Twitter... you name it, and you'll find pictures of the two of you, having dinner, walking in the snow... I have to admit I didn't think he had it in him," he explained.

“Oh, god... no...” I murmured in horror.

How could I have missed that? I had been so caught up in my feelings for Jayden and everything happening I didn't stop to think.

If Daniel saw one of those pictures, I was as good as dead.

“Anyway... I was calling you because I really want to paint you. I don't remember last time I met someone like you. Your face haunts my dreams,” the painter assured me, in a dramatic tone.

“It's very flattering... but right now is not a good time... I promise I'll call you back... soon...” I mumbled before I ended the call, so freaked out, my hands couldn't stop shaking.

How long was this going on? How the hell he hadn't told me anything?

I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and rapidly installed all the apps Jonathan had mentioned and searched Jayden's name.

And there it was... pictures of every single date we had ever since he took me for lunch at the beach restaurant, the first day.

Most of the posts didn't mention my name, calling me the mysterious lady, but my face was there, in full display.

Still shaking, I fell on my knees, trying to think and decide what to do. If Daniel was someone else, the chances he would see those pictures would be very low; after all, I was using a fake name... but he wasn't just any man. He owned a company that made a living, finding people on the run and tracking down people. With my luck, he was already here in Seattle looking for me. No one seemed to know I lived with Jayden, so that would give me some leverage, but I had to leave, and soon.

The idea of leaving crushed my heart, but being caught by Daniel terrified me. It was not an option. I couldn't even imagine what he would do to me if he ever laid his hands on me.

I could tell Jayden what was going on and ask him to help me, but that would put him in danger. Daniel wasn't in his right mind. Only God knew what he would do if he knew I was having an affair with Jayden.

No... I had to leave... it would be best for everyone.

I should go south... to California, lose myself in a city like Los Angeles... with the money I had saved, I would be fine until I found a new job and Daniel would have more trouble finding me there.

Perhaps, I should dye my hair blond and cut it short... that would make it harder for him to find me.

It broke my heart, thinking about saying goodbye to Jayden, but I really didn't have a choice.

Picking up my purse, I went to shop for a burner cell phone. I needed to estimate how much time I had and to do so, I needed to call the company and ask for Daniel's whereabouts. I had done this a few times, and I doubted Daniel knew I was behind the calls. I had learned to be very careful.

I bought the phone in a small store not far from Wells Corporation, and I placed the call. Daniel was still in New York, but he would be leaving town in a couple of days. Unfortunately, I had no way of knowing if his trip was related to me, but I wasn't taking any chances.

I had to leave tomorrow before he left New York. He would have a hard time finding where I was, and even if he found Jayden, he wouldn't be able to tell him much. I planned to give him false information.

I went back to the apartment, feeling as if I had a huge rock weighing me down, and I wished I was strong enough to face Daniel and call the police on him. Unfortunately, I had nothing on him, and even if he beat me again, all I could do was get a restraining order against him... one he would violate as soon as possible. But I wouldn't have the chance to call the police. This time he would make sure I couldn't call anyone.

He meant every word he said last time I saw him – that only death would part us.

“You looked troubled. Is everything alright?” Jayden asked me that night, while we were getting dressed to attend a fundraising gala for the organization ‘Food for every child.’

Madeleine was on one of its committees, and she had asked Jayden to attend. Despite their constant arguments, he never said no to her.

“Yes... all is fine,” I lied, not daring to meet his eyes.

I had planned to tell him I was leaving in the morning. I knew it wasn’t fair and that he would hate me for doing it, but I didn’t have much choice. Telling him the truth was useless and a waste of time. There wasn’t much he could do, and I even doubted he would want to do anything, once he discovered all I had kept from him.

“Are you nervous?”

I gave him a faint smile. “Well, this is my first gala... so, yes, we could say that.”

“It’s just another party, with boring people talking about how much they loved helping those poor African children,” he said, exuding all the scorn he felt for those people.

I chuckled. “It doesn’t matter what they say, as long as they pay,” I reminded him.

“I know... and this year, my mother made sure they paid enough. Each ticket costs ten thousand dollars,” he replied, scowling.

I gasped surprised. “That’s a lot of money.”

“Not for the people attending this gala, believe me,” he assured me. “Half that money will go straight to buying provisions for several refugee camps. Four hundred people are expected tonight, so, that’s a good number.”

“Why not help closer to home? There are way too many homeless people in this country, some of them in the most infamous conditions,” I asked, with a slight frown.

“Wells Corporation has several aid programs on the run, but you’re right, we need a lot more,” he agreed.

The gala was taking place in one of the most elegant hotels in the city, and the ballroom was decorated as a sophisticated Christmas party. I had lost track of time and hadn't realized Christmas was just a couple of weeks away.

This only made my decision even harder, but the longer I stayed, the more dangerous it would be for me.

"Jayden... I'm happy you came," Madeleine greeted her son when they entered the ballroom. "And you brought Anne... isn't that nice?" she added, but I could tell she was surprised.

Jayden noticed it too and clenched his jaw, not very pleased with his mother's words. "The more, the merrier, don't you think, mother?"

"Right! Please, enjoy the evening. I'll see you at dinner time," she said, with a polite smile on her face.

We entered the room, and Jayden introduced me to some of his friends, while we drank champagne and ate the most delicious hors d'oeuvres I had eaten in my life. I guess this crowd would demand only the best for their money.

I was looking around the room, while Jayden chatted with a man when I saw him.

He was standing a few feet away from me, his eyes locked on me, with a cruel smirk twisting his lips.

Daniel!

He had found me.

With my heart drumming loud in my chest, I turned to talk to Jayden, trying to decide what to do. I doubted Daniel would make a scene in a place like this, and that could work in my favor. If I was able to get to Jayden's house, I would be out of Seattle before he could find me.

"Jayden..." I called him, interrupting the old man he was talking with.

"What's the matter?" he asked, with a slight frown.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I need to speak to you in private for a moment," I told him with a wavery smile on my lips. "It's

urgent.”

“Matterson, will you excuse us, please?” he asked the older man.

“By all means. We have all night ahead of us. We’ll be sitting on the same table,” the man said, with a curious look on his face.

“Perfect. I’ll see you at dinner then,” Jayden said, as he turned to look at me.

I had lost track of Daniel, and that wasn’t good, but right now, I had more pressing matters to attend. I located an exit and quickly dragged Jayden there.



“What’s going on?” he asked me when we were alone.

“I’m not feeling well. Would you mind if I went back to the apartment?” I asked him in a shaky tone.

“I can’t let you leave alone,” he protested.

“It’s just a headache... I will be fine, there’s no need for you to go with me, believe me...” I assured him.

“No... I’ll take you home. I’ve been here long enough,” he said, determined.

I looked around, terrified Daniel would show up and desperate to convince Jayden to stay behind. I needed to escape tonight.

“There’s no need, believe me. Your mother would be very disappointed if you left,” I insisted.

“Something is wrong, Anne, I can tell... why don’t you tell me the truth?” Jayden insisted.

“Yes, Ailani, why don’t you tell him the truth?” Daniel’s voice sounded from behind me, and I almost passed out of sheer terror.

Jayden looked at me and then at Daniel. “Who the hell are you?”

“Why don’t you tell him, Ailani? Tell him who I am,” Daniel said in a mocking tone.

“Why is he calling you Ailani?” Jayden asked, clearly upset.

I closed my eyes for a second. “Because it’s my real name,” I replied in barely a whisper.

“You know this man?” Jayden asked in a harsh tone, and I shuddered.

This wasn’t the way I wanted things to end between us. It was so unfair I wanted to cry my heart out.

“Yes...”

“Of course, she knows me,” Daniel interrupted me. “I’m her husband.”

The shock on Jayden's face was more than I could take, and I sobbed.

"Husband? You're married?"

"It's not that simple..." I tried to explain, but he cut me off.

"Is he your husband?"

"Yes, he is, but..." I said, grabbing his arm, struggling to make him understand, but he pushed away my hand as if I was poisonous.

"There's no but here."

"Jayden, please... let me explain..." I begged, but he was already walking away from me.

Daniel laughed, oozing all his scorn as he walked towards me.

"Oh, did I ruin your little affair? Shame on me."

"Why don't you go to hell, Daniel? I'm sure the devil will welcome you with open arms," I said, confronting him for the first time ever.

"Feisty, are you now?" he said, mocking me. "We'll take care of that, soon enough," he threatened me.

"We don't exist anymore, Daniel, so we aren't going to take care of anything," I told him, determined to fight him to the end.

This time, I wouldn't go down without a good fight, even if it cost me everything.

He crossed the distance between us and slapped me in the face, as hard as usual, but this time, I stood my ground, not ready to give in.

"Please, go on... what better witnesses could I ask for than Seattle's crème de la crème?" I asked, leaking all my disgust in every single word.

He clenched his jaw and made a move to grab me, but I was faster than him and rushed back to the ballroom. Gods were on my side, and I was able to reach the door before he grabbed me.

“Let’s go somewhere private,” he demanded.

I struggled to free my arm from his grip, and the weird looks from the people around us forced him to release me.

“I’m not going anywhere with you... not now, not ever,” I assured him. “Good luck dragging me out of here,” I challenged him, as I surveyed the ballroom looking for Jayden, but he was nowhere to be found.

Desperate, I looked for Madeleine. The woman would be the perfect shield against Daniel, even if she wasn’t aware of it.

“Do you think I care about what these people think?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“Of course, you do... what would people say if they knew the sadist bastard you really are? Do you want to find out? I have nothing else to lose,” I threatened him, as I crossed the room, straight to where Madeleine was standing, next to some of her friends.

“I’m sorry to interrupt you, Madeleine, but I’m looking for Jayden. Have you seen him?” I asked her with my best smile on.

“Anne... what are you doing here? Jayden told me he was taking you home...” she asked, surprised, her eyes fixed on my cheek.

I resisted the urge to cover the bruising I was sure was starting to show.

“Yes... he is... but we seemed to have lost each other...” I said, making up as I went. “I had to use the ladies’ room, and now I can’t seem to find him,” I added.

“He’s probably at the lobby waiting for you,” she told me, with a polite grin, before she turned to look at Daniel that had followed me across the room. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?”

For a moment, I considered telling her he was no friend of mine, but if Madeleine was able to hold him back for a few seconds, I would be able to get the hell out of here.

“Of course, Madeleine Wells, meet my ex-husband, Daniel Hudson. He’s the CEO of a big company, back in New York,” I told her, disguising my disdain as much as possible. “He was just telling me he would like to hear all about the organization hosting this gala,” I added before I rushed away.

Daniel took a step to follow me, but Madeleine put her hand on his arm, and he was forced to stay, at least, for the few seconds, I needed to leave the hotel.

Jayden wasn’t in the lobby, but I wasn’t expecting him to be there, either. I didn’t even bother looking. I needed to escape, and that was my priority.

Grabbing the long skirts of my dress, I ran out of the hotel and jumped into the taxi that had just pulled over to drop a customer. For once in my life, luck was on my side, and we drove away, just when Daniel stepped out of the hotel.

Still frantic, I asked the taxi driver to take me to Jayden’s place. This time, I wasn’t leaving empty-handed. I needed to pick up my things.

I was counting Daniel still didn’t know where I was staying, and after the way Jayden had pushed me away, he wouldn’t bother looking in his place... or so I hoped.

I paid the taxi and rushed inside, still scared I would find Daniel again, but even more afraid Jayden would be home. The betrayal in his eyes would haunt me forever, and I wasn’t ready to see him again, because I was sure he wouldn’t listen to me.

Luckily for me, the place was empty, so I rushed to my room and rapidly packed the few things I could carry easily with me before I changed clothes.

Looking at the green dress puddling at my feet, I sobbed, remembering how happy I had felt when Jayden had given it to me. I had felt like a princess on my way to the ball with prince charming.

I knew the fairy tale was about to end, but I had clung to the last thread of hope just to be smashed hard against the cruel reality.

Wiping the tears running down my cheeks, I changed into a pair of jeans, a long-sleeved t-shirt, and a couple of sweaters. With Daniel looking for me, I would have to hitch-hike to leave town, and that meant I would be out in the cold, in the middle of the night.

But anything was better than letting him capture me.

I was putting on my coat when the door to my room slammed open, and Jayden entered.

“Running back to the arms of your husband?” he demanded. The utter hatred in his tone was like a dagger plunged into my heart.

“No... can’t you see? I’m...” I tried to explain.

He raised his hand and silenced me. “Please, don’t even bother. I don’t want to hear more of your lies,” he said in a harsh tone.

I bit my lower lip so hard the metallic taste of blood filled my mouth. I knew I should force him to hear my side of the story... but what was the point? I still had to leave. He couldn’t help me.

“As you wish,” I said through gritted teeth. “I’m sorry to leave unexpectedly, but I’m sure you’ll find someone to replace me,” I added, as I closed my backpack and buttoned up my coat.

He pulled a checkbook out of his coat. “I don’t have enough cash here to pay you for your services, so you’ll have to tell me your real name,” he said, showing his disdain in every word that came out of his lips.

I clenched my jaw and took a few deep breaths before I was able to utter a word without crying my heart out. “You don’t owe me a thing,” I assured him, as I walked past him. “Thank you for all your help,” I muttered.

He grabbed me by the arm and forced me to face him. “Why did you do it?” this time, there was only hurt in his tone, and I had to make a supreme effort not to cry and tell him the whole truth.

What was the point? Things would never be the same between us, no matter what. It was better to let things end here.

“I thought you didn’t want to hear my lies...” I pointed out, and he dropped my arm as if it was on fire.

I rushed out of the apartment, using the back exit, making sure there wasn’t anyone suspicious around before I stepped out into the dark streets.

It started snowing, and I hastened my step, trying to get to a small diner, open 24/7, where I could hide out until the morning. Wandering the streets at night was dangerous, especially with Daniel lurking around. I needed to lay low for a few hours, and then try to find a way out of town without being captured by Daniel.

The dawn found me hiding at the diner, with a few empty cups of coffee in the table and a couple of sandwiches I couldn’t eat. I had called Johnson, hoping he would be in town or know of someone who could give me a ride out of Seattle, but he was on his way to New York. He promised to call his friends and call me back if he found someone leaving town, but he didn’t sound very hopeful.

This meant I had to find another way out of town or find a place where I could hide for a few days until Daniel got tired of looking for me.

My head was aching, but my heart hurt more. The tears had been welling up in my arms, and I craved to be in a safe place to mourn my loss.

I was about to leave the diner when I remembered Jonathan Spade and his insistence on painting me. I could pose for him in exchange for food and shelter. Convincing him to hide me shouldn’t be that hard, considering how much he seemed to want me to be his model.

All I had to do was find him.

Frantic, I pulled my cell phone to call Phoebe. She should have his phone number. But it was just seven o’clock in the morning, and she wouldn’t be at the office for two more hours.

I asked for another coffee and waited. Going out was not a good idea, so I stayed there until it was time to call the other woman.

“Anne... I wasn’t expecting to hear from you again,” she said, sounding surprised. “Mr. Wells told me you had to leave in a family emergency.”

“Yes... I did... but I totally forgot I needed to call Jonathan Spade before I left town. Do you think you could give me his cell phone number?” I asked, trying to sound my usual self, despite the knot constricting my throat.

“He didn’t give it to you yesterday?” she asked, suspicious.

“No... we talked about so many things, I forgot to ask him.”

“Well, I suppose there’s no harm. Write it down,” she accepted.

“Thank you, Phoebe, you’re a lifesaver.”

“You’re welcome. Stay in touch, I would like to hear from you again,” she asked, in her kind tone.

I almost started crying over her kindness, and I barely managed to end the call without making a spectacle of myself.

Calling Jonathan wasn’t so easy. The man wasn’t exactly a saint, and I had no idea what his real intentions were, but right now, he was my best chance at evading Daniel until it was safe enough for me to leave Seattle.

“Anne... I wasn’t expecting to hear from you again,” he said, sounding as if he had just woken up.

“I’m sorry I was so rude the other day. You surprised me,” I told him, trying to ease his hurt pride.

“Why are you calling me?” he asked, still sounding upset.

“Are you still interested in painting me?” I asked, going straight to the point.

“Of course, I am. Are you offering to pose for me?” he jumped to the implicit offer.

“Will I have my clothes on?” I was desperate, but not so desperate.

“Of course, I want to paint you as a Polynesian princess.”

“Then, you can count me in.”

“What has Wells to say about this?” he asked, intrigued.

“We’re not together anymore,” I explained.

“What happened? You seemed very close.”

“I really would rather not talk about it if you don’t mind,” I said in a cold tone. “But there’s something I would have to ask you in return.”

“Sure... name your price,” he agreed, without hesitation.

“I don’t want money... just a place to stay while you need me,” I explained, hoping I hadn’t ruined things with him.

“You can stay at my guest house. I’m sure you will be comfortable there,” he accepted, sounding like a kid on Christmas eve.

“There’s another thing... you can’t tell anyone about our little arrangement, at least, not until the painting is ready,” I added.

There was a tense moment of silence between us, and for a second, I thought I had ruined everything.

“Are you hiding from Wells?” he finally asked.



“No... not at all... I just need to lay low for a while, but my reasons have nothing to do with Jayden,” I assured him.

“Perfect. When can you start?” he asked.

“When can you pick me up?” I asked in return.

Jonathan picked me up an hour later from the diner and took me to his house, on the outskirts of the city, not far from the beach. The guest house was a small cabin, on the back yard, fully equipped to allow complete independence from the main house. It was simply perfect.

His studio was over the large garage, and it had three of its walls made of thick glass, giving the place an enviable light and impressive view over the northern pacific.

“Will you be alright here? You can stay in the main house with me if you want. George won’t mind,” he said with a smile.

“George?” I asked, curious.

“Yes... my husband. He’s out of town now, but I’ll introduce you when he gets back from L.A.,” he explained.

His revelation was a bit surprising... Jonathan wasn’t what I would describe as the typical homosexual man, but the truth was I hadn’t been paying that much attention.

“It would be my pleasure,” I assured him, with my best smile.

He caressed my cheek with a slight frown. “What happened here?”

Instinctively, I covered my face, looking for the best words to explain the bruise on my face. “Oh... it’s nothing... I’m a bit clumsy... it probably happened yesterday, when I bumped into a door...” I mumbled the excuse I used a million times while I was living with Daniel, though usually, the bruises were on my arms, legs, back, or belly... anywhere out of people’s sight.

“A door, huh...” he said, clearly not buying my story.

“Yes... I’ll make it disappear with makeup, don’t worry...” I assured him, pretending it was nothing of importance.

“Don’t bother... we’ll start with a photo session and the first sketches... nothing that requires a flawless skin,” he assured

me, with a bright smile. “I’ll have my housekeeper bring you some food, but you’re welcome to eat with me whenever you want.”

“Thank you.”

He picked both my hands and kissed the back of them. “No, thank you... this means a lot to me. You have a unique face, and the deepness of your soul has bewitched me. This painting will be my masterpiece if I ever manage to portray ten percent of this onto my canvas,” he assured me as he signaled my whole self.

“You give me too much credit.”

“Mark my words, girl...” he insisted, as he walked to the door. “Why don’t you get some sleep? You look as if you had spent the night on that shitty diner,” he suggested, with a worried look on his face.

I gave him a shy smile but refrained from commenting on his last remark. “I might do that.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow at dawn at my studio. The morning light is always the best,” he informed me as he left.

I managed to hold myself together long enough to reach the bed and cover my head with one of the pillows. The tears I had been welling up ever since I knew Daniel was after me again burst out, and I spent the next few hours crying my heart out. I knew it was a pathetic use of my time, but I wasn’t strong enough to pull myself out of it.

Saying goodbye to Jayden had been so hard, so painful, I wanted to lie down and die. The way he looked at me when Daniel showed up to, once more, ruin my life would be forever engraved in my mind.

I must have fallen asleep at some point because when I woke up, the sun was starting to color the night sky with the most amazing palette of pinks and yellows.

I dragged myself out of bed and took a quick shower, knowing Jonathan would be in his studio, waiting for me in a few minutes.

He hadn't told me what to wear, so I just put on a pair of jeans, a t-shirt, and a warm sweater.

The fridge had been filled with food while I was sleeping, but I wasn't hungry. My stomach churned at the idea of food, so I just grabbed some orange juice before I went to the studio.

"Ah, my dear Anne... I was about to call you..." Jonathan said when I entered.

"Am I late? You didn't mention a specific time," I pointed out, walking towards him.

"No... it's perfect timing. Take off your sweater and get comfortable on that chair," he asked me, signaling an extravagant chaise lounge, covered in colorful throw blankets.

"I've never done this before, so please, feel free to instruct me," I warned him, feeling a bit lost as I pulled my sweater over my head and letting myself drop onto the chair.

"I will... don't worry," he assured me, as he walked towards me with a typical Hawaiian flower crown. "Have you ever worn one of these?" he asked me.

I smiled as I remembered all the times my father had given me one whenever I had a special event at school. I had been an eager participant in all school dance events, and I had been pretty good at it. I hadn't danced in fifteen years, and nostalgia hit hard.

"Yes... I lived in Hawaii until I was ten years old," I told Jonathan as he helped me to put on the crown.

"Did you ever learn how to dance?" he asked, excited.

"Yes... but it's been a long time since I have even heard the music..." I confessed.

My resentment against my father had made me avoid anything to do with Hawaii and its culture.

"Would you like to try?"

"With you watching me?" I asked, arching my eyebrow.

"You won't even know I'm here," he promised.

“I’m not dressed for it,” I pointed out.

He walked to a small trunk on the other side of the room and pulled out a white dress with a flared skirt. “Will this work?” he asked with a smile.

“I haven’t done this in years...” I protested.

Dancing hula had been so special to me; it was something I only shared with my father since my mother refused to participate in what she called stupid folklore shit. But perhaps it was time for me to embrace who I was and the hula dancing was a big part of me, even if I had denied myself that pleasure.

I went to the bathroom and quickly changed into the dress, before I returned to the studio, making sure I didn’t ruin the crown.

Jonathan had cleared a space in the middle of the studio for me to dance on.

“Do you remember any music in particular?” he asked me, sounding quite excited.

I chuckled. “Well, let’s go with one even you will recognize,” I replied, as I picked my cell phone and googled the ‘He Mele No Lilo’ hula. “Hit play when I’m ready, please,” I asked, handing the phone to Jonathan.

“Sure thing!” he sounded so excited, I had to laugh.

“Don’t expect miracles, please,” I warned him as I asked him to hit play.

The melodies of the song filled the room, and it was as if I was transported back to when my father took me to rehearsals at the community center back in Maui.

The music took over, and before I knew, I was dancing to it, executing the graceful moves of the traditional choreography, leaving behind the world, and the sad reality around me. I was one with the music.

The round of applause pulled me out of my trance, just as the music faded away.

“Amazing... that was incredibly beautiful,” a strange man’s voice sounded behind me, and I turned to look at him.

“Anne... meet George,” Jonathan said as he checked the video and pictures, he had taken of me.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. Jonathan hasn’t stopped talking about you ever since he met you, and now, I understand why,” the handsome man said, as he entered the room with his hand stretched to greet me.

Not so good dealing with such effusive compliments, I flushed and mumbled a thank you.

“I’m delighted you decided to pose for him,” George added.

“I hope it won’t be a disappointment,” I said, allowing my insecurities to surface.

“That’s impossible,” Jonathan assured me, as he walked towards George to greet him with a sweet kiss. “Welcome home.”

“It’s good to be home,” he replied. “I’ll leave you two to work, but I expect you both for lunch, okay? I’ll order your favorite.”

Jonathan chuckled and accepted. “We’ll be there.”

George left, and I looked at Jonathan. “Do you want me to change back to my clothes,” I asked, still a bit shaken after the dance through memory lane.

“No... you look perfect like that. Just take a seat on the chair and do whatever you want... I can get you a book, or you can use your cell phone...” he suggested, grabbing his camera once more.

I sighed but did what he asked, choosing one of the books he had on one of the shelves. If I picked up the cell phone, I couldn't resist going over the other night's pictures, and I wasn't ready for that.

I barely noted when Jonathan moved from his camera to his sketching book, but not because I was concentrating on the book, I held in my hands... I don't think I read a single page of it. I kept playing the other night's events on my head, trying different scenarios, making different choices, and hoping for different outcomes... a futile exercise, since I couldn't change anything, and dwelling in the past wouldn't help me.

Jonathan grazed my forearm with the tip of his fingers to call my attention. “Did you hit your arm against the door, too?” he asked, with a deep frown as he noticed the finger marks on my skin from when Daniel grabbed me.

“Yes...” I lied, with a scornful scowl. “But I won't be seeing that door anytime soon,” I assured him, with a brave smile, though bravery was the last thing I was feeling today.

Jonathan's frown became deeper, but he didn't say anything else. “George is calling us. Lunch is ready,” he announced, instead. “I hope you like Thai food.”

“I love it.”

Spending some time with the couple was refreshing. I could see there were genuine feelings between them, something I hadn't witnessed often in my life.

After lunch, we went back to Jonathan's studio until he decided the light wasn't good enough.

“Go get some rest. Feel free to join us for dinner,” he suggested.

“Thank you... but I think I’ll pass. I’ll see you in the morning,” I said with a warm smile.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. This modeling job is harder than I thought,” I complained in a teasing tone. “I need my beauty sleep.”

He chuckled. “Make sure you have some dinner,” he demanded.

“Yes, dad...” I mocked him as I left the studio.

The sun was settling on the horizon, lighting the winter sky with the most impressive colors, and I couldn’t resist the urge to watch the sunset from the small cliff, not far from the guest house.

I stayed there for as long as I could before I went back to the house to grab something to eat before I went to bed.

I was tired, but not sleepy. I was missing Jayden like a vital part of my life that had been torn away from me.

The urge to call him and hear his voice one more time was so strong I even dialed his number, just to erase it before I actually placed the call. He didn’t want to hear from me, and that was for the best. There was no future for us, and truth be told, he had never made any promises to me. I was just a fling... a commodity he had enjoyed for a short while... not something he would truly miss.

I was back on Jonathan’s chaise lounge, the following morning when a loud doorbell interrupted them.

“Who can it be?” he grumbled. “George is out of the house, and I’m not expecting visits,” he explained, as he dropped his sketchbook and walked to the small panel on the wall that gave him access to the security cameras placed all over the property. “Well, well, well...” he murmured.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, intrigued by his sardonic tone.

“Wells is here,” he said, turning to look at me.

I jumped out of the chair and wriggled my hands. “Did you tell him I was here?” I asked startled.

“I haven’t seen him since the art show,” he assured me as he pressed the button that opened the door and told Jayden he was at the studio.

“Please, don’t tell him I’m here,” I asked him, my heart thundering in my chest.

“Was he the one that hurt you?” he asked in a grave tone.

“What? No... of course not, how could think that?” I replied outraged.

He shrugged. “I had to know. Hide in the bathroom. I’m sure he won’t be here more than a few minutes,” he suggested, and I did as he told me, leaving the door slightly open to hear them and see Jayden. I simply couldn’t help myself. Only a couple of days had gone by, and I already missed him more than I ever thought possible.

Talk about a fucked-up mind... I was truly a mess when it came to men and my relationships with them.

“Jayden... this is a surprise. What are you doing here?” Jonathan asked when Jayden walked in.

“Have you seen Anne?” he asked, going straight to the point.

Why was he looking for me was the mystery.

“Anne? Why would you think that?” Jonathan stalled.

“Phoebe told me she called the office asking for your cell phone number,” Jayden explained.

That shouldn’t have surprised me, but it did. Why would she have told him that? It wasn’t a matter of interest for Jayden.

“Yes... she called me. She wanted to know if I was still interested in painting her portrait,” Jonathan answered, and I wish I could strangle him.

What the hell was he doing?

“And are you?” Jayden asked, his tone a bit harsher than before.



“Why wouldn’t I?” Jonathan replied. “She’s an amazing woman.”

“So, you have seen her,” Jayden concluded.

“I haven’t said that,” Jonathan pointed out.

“Don’t play fucking games with me, Spade. I’m not in the mood,” Jayden warned him.

“Why do you care where she is?” Jonathan asked. “She told me things were over between you two.”

“Did she tell you about her husband too?” Jayden asked, oozing scorn.

“Husband? No, she hasn’t mentioned any other man,” Jonathan said, and I could tell he was intrigued.

I knew I would certainly have to answer a few questions when Jayden left.

“Well, you should ask her. Apparently, she has left him too, since he was at the office today, looking for her,” Jayden explained.

“Did you tell him she was with me?” Jonathan asked, sounding startled.

“No... I had nothing to tell him. After he left, Phoebe told me about her phone call, so I thought you might know something,” he replied.

“Why are you looking for her?” Jonathan asked, curious.

“She left a few things back at my place, along with her last paycheck. I was wondering if I could leave them with you,” he suggested.

Wow... he was in a rush to get rid of my things... that spoke volumes on what I ever meant for him.

“Sure... she should be coming over one of these days,” Jonathan accepted.

“So, she hasn’t left town,” Jayden concluded.

“Not as far as I know,” Jonathan agreed.

“I thought she was going back home with her husband...” Jayden mumbled; in a low tone, I had a hard time hearing.

“You just told me he was also looking for her,” Jonathan pointed out. “Anyway, why would she do that?” he asked.

“He’s her husband,” Jayden stated the obvious.

“So? Was she happy to see him? They could be separated, as far as we know.”

What the hell was Jonathan doing? Why was he asking all those questions?

“What do I know?” Jayden grumbled, but his tone lacked his usual confidence.

“Did you see her after the gala?” Jonathan asked.

My new friend knew more than he was telling and it surprised me. I hadn’t mentioned the gala.

“Yes... for a few moments, back at my place, when she was packing her things to leave,” Jayden admitted.

“Did you notice the bruises on her face? It looked as if someone had slapped her hard on the face.”

Jayden gasped loudly. “Bruises?”

“Yes, bruises... and her forearm had finger marks, when I met her at a small diner, not far from your place. I could tell she had spent the night there,” Jonathan continued, and for a moment, I considered walking out of the bathroom and shut him up.

The man was cannier than I expected.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Jayden said, sounding lost.

“How did you meet her?” Jonathan asked, sounding more and more curious.

“She was trying to spend the night at my building’s parking lot. She claimed she had no place to go,” Jayden murmured, lost in his mind.

“And you didn’t wonder why?” Jonathan asked in an astounded tone.

Jayden rubbed his face. "I had other things on my mind..." he confessed.

"Perhaps, you should look into that so-called husband of hers..." Jonathan suggested. "Meanwhile, you can leave her stuff here. I'll make sure she gets them back."

Jonathan's last words seemed to snap Jayden out of a stupor, and he agreed.

"Thank you," he grunted, depositing something on the table.

"I'll tell her you came looking for her," Jonathan added, in a mischievous tone.

"There's no need for that," Jayden rejected the idea so fast my heart hurt a little more.

Nothing had changed, and I hadn't really expected them to change... but my heart didn't always see eye to eye with my mind.

"Whatever you say, man."

The door slammed behind Jayden, and Jonathan told me to come out.

"That belongs to you," he said, pointing at a cardboard box over the table.

"Thank you..."

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked me in a soft tone.

"Not really..." I confessed.

"You're hiding from your husband, aren't you?" he concluded.

"Let's not go there, please..." I asked, not ready to discuss Daniel with Jonathan.

"As you wish. Just know that you can stay here for as long as you need it. Don't expose yourself, unless it's necessary," he asked me.

"I won't. Daniel will leave town soon, and when he does, I will too, when you no longer need me," I explained.

“Why didn’t you tell Jayden the truth?”

I shrugged. “He wasn’t interested in hearing it... I know I should have told him before, but I really don’t like talking about my past. Daniel has ruined my life quite enough.”

“He’s responsible for your bruising, isn’t he?” he asked, with a dark frown.

I let out a burst of bitter laughter. “Yeah... he’s only happy when he’s hurting me.”

Jonathan opened his mouth to ask more about it, but I shook my head, dissuading him. “Please... let’s not go there. I know you have a lot of questions and I’ll answer as many as I can, but not now...”

Jonathan raised his hands, surrendering. “Right... whenever you’re ready.”

“Thank you. Now, let’s go back to work.”

Posing for a painter was a hard job... harder than I ever thought possible. Maintaining the same position for hours was hard and incredibly dull. It gave me way too much time to think, and I really didn’t need that.

I spent the whole damn day scrutinizing every word Jayden said during his visit to Jonathan, as well as every nuance in his voice and the slightest change in his stony mask.

I was more than happy to disappear when Jonathan told me he was done for the day, eager for a bit of privacy.

I picked the box Jayden had brought me, and after saying goodnight, I had rushed back to the guest house.

There was a warm meal on the kitchen table, but I wasn’t hungry. I needed a hot bath and a good bottle of wine.

I was just picking a cup from the cabinet when I heard a strange noise coming from the hallway.

Certain I was overreacting, I put down the wine and the cup grabbed my phone and went looking. Though Jonathan’s

house had a tall wall surrounding most of it, the house could be accessed from the beach. It was a hell of a climb, but certainly not impossible.

“Who’s there?” I asked as I walked towards the hall, trying to decide if I would be safer running away.

“Did I startle you?” Daniel’s voice sounded behind me, coming from the kitchen I had just left, and my heart skipped a beat.

I didn’t even turn to look at him. I ran to the main door and made it to the small front yard, but he was faster than me. Before I could call for help, he was knocking me to the ground and covering my mouth with his hand. My cell phone flew out of my hand, and I cried harder, knowing no one would come to my rescue this time.

“Oh, no, you won’t... not this time,” he snarled in my ear. “This time, no one will come to your rescue, my sweet unfaithful wife,” he added, pushing something inside my mouth – a small cloth, or something similar – gagging me effectively before he pulled my arms behind my back and tied them together in tight restraint.

I was crying so hard I couldn’t see anything, cursing my luck and wishing I had left town the other night.

“Do you have any idea how much time and money I’ve wasted looking for you? I’ll make sure you pay for it for every damn penny,” he assured me as he pulled me up and threw me over his shoulder.

I struggled and kicked him, but nothing I did, slowed him in the least.

Indifferent to my struggle, Daniel scurried away, staying away from the scarce lights that lit the garden until he reached one of the side doors. Dropping me on the ground with a loud thud, careless of what happened to me. My head hit the wall, but my cries of pain were muffled by the gag. He kicked the door open and dragged me to the car he had waiting, not far.

He opened the car’s trunk and threw me inside, taking a few seconds to tie down my ankles. Then, he taped my mouth to

keep me from spitting out his improvised gag.

“We’re going home. Aren’t you happy, sweetheart?” he said, with a cruel grin on his lips before he punched me in the face knocking me out.

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## *Jayden*

The apartment was so silent and felt so cold I almost turned around and left. Furious with myself, I undid my tie and threw it down before I went looking for a drink. I needed one... hell, not just one... a few, if I had planned on sleeping tonight.

Jonathan’s words still haunted me, and I felt incredibly frustrated about not being able to do much.

I had called one of the private investigators the company used to check on the staff’s backgrounds, and the man had promised to call me back as soon as he had news. But it still didn’t feel enough.

How could I have missed the bruising on her face? Why she didn’t ask for help?

‘You didn’t let her speak.’ A small voice in my head mocked me, and I knew it was only telling me what I already knew. I hadn’t let her explained herself.

The betrayal had hurt too much, blinding me to the little details I had been gathering ever since I met her...

I knew her story was sketchy. She was in trouble but did nothing to learn the truth. Probably because I was afraid of what that truth could do to us... to the fiery passion that burned between us. I was living with her, not daring to consider the future or her past. I lived just one day at a time until her past caught up with me and slammed me hard in the face.

Was she running away from him? Was he an abusive husband? Jonathan’s words implied he was. Was that why she was running away from him? So many questions... and not having the answers was driving me insane. I needed to speak to her, but I also knew she wasn’t ready to talk to me again.

I had been a total jerk, refusing to hear her side of her story, and now, there wasn't much I could do.

I poured myself another drink and stared at the cloudy night, wishing she was there with me.

My cell phone started buzzing in my pocket, and for a moment, I ignored it, not wanting to talk to anyone else. Then, it occurred to me it could be Matt, the PI I hired, and pulled it out.

It was Jonathan.

Intrigued, I looked at the screen for a few moments before I finally answered the call.

"Jonathan..." I started saying.

"Is she with you?" he interrupted me, sounding distressed.

"What are you talking about?" I asked him, frowning.

"Is Anne with you?"

"No, of course not. I have no idea where she is."

"She was staying here with me... while posing for the painting," he said in a frantic tone.

"Why...?"

"She told me not to tell anyone. But tonight, a few minutes after she left the studio, towards the guest house, one of the outside doors was broken, triggering the alarm," he explained. "We rushed to the guest house, but she's not there, and we found her cell phone in the middle of the garden. The guest house door was wide open..."

"I'm on my way!" I told him, as a bad feeling gnawed at my guts. "Meanwhile, call the police."

"Do you think he has her?"

I didn't want to think of that possibility, but I knew nothing else made any sense. "Let's hope not."

I ended the call and rushed to my car. I arrived at the same time as the police. The door was broken from inside the wall, and the guest house door had also been forced open.

“Is there another way to enter the property?” one of the officers asked.

“From the beach. It’s a long walk up the ravine, but not impossible,” George informed. He was standing next to his husband, supporting him.

“I should have insisted for her to stay in the main house,” Jonathan murmured.

“I doubt she would have agreed,” I replied, running my fingers through my hair.

“There’s sand inside the house... that probably confirms your guess,” the officer said, while he took notes.

“Do you have her full name? Or her husband’s?” one of the other officers asked.

“She went by the name Anne Johnson here, but her true name is Ailani. I have no idea what’s her last name. I have someone trying to find out her husband’s name,” I explained the officer. “He attended a gala hosted by my mother. There’s a good chance he bought the ticket using his real name.”

“So, you suspect she was kidnapped by her husband?” the officer asked, with a slight frown. “Isn’t it possible she just left with him?”

“She would never leave without saying goodbye,” Jonathan intervened. “Besides, she told me she wouldn’t go anywhere with him. We believe she was running away from him.”

“Was he an abusive husband?” the officer asked.

“I can’t confirm that. But Anne had some bruising on her face and arm when I met her after the gala,” Jonathan replied.

“There’s evidence a car was parked outside the broken door for a few hours,” the first officer informed them, after talking with one of his colleagues. “The chances of ever finding them are not good... especially if we have no idea who they are,” the officer warned them.

“I’ll call my mother... she might know something helpful,” I suggested, my stomach roiling at the thought of Ailani in the hands of that man.



I stepped aside and called my mother, oblivious of the hour. We needed information, and I doubted the PI would have found anything by now.

“Jayden... what time is it? Why are you calling?” my mother mumbled.

“I’ll explain later... this is important. Do you remember if you had people from other states at the gala? Someone that probably bought a ticket at the last minute?” he asked, firing the questions as fast as he could.

“I don’t manage that information...” my mother replied, sounding concerned. “Who exactly are you looking for?” she asked.

“Anne’s husband. Did you see him at...”

“Husband? She told me he was her ex,” my mother interrupted me.

“You met him?”

“Yes, she introduced me to him.”

“Do you remember his name?”

“David... no, Daniel, yes, Daniel Hudson. She introduced him to me and asked me to tell him more about the foundation before she disappeared. He rushed after her almost immediately.”

“Thank you... I’ll explain it later,” I ended the call. “Daniel Hudson. That’s her husband’s name,” I informed the officer.

“We’ll check it. Her name will make things a bit easier. I’m sure there mustn’t be that many Ailani’s married to a Daniel Hudson,” the officer said. “We’ll let you know when we find something.”

I watched the police leaving Jonathan’s place, feeling more frustrated than ever.

“Oh, God... what can we do?” Jonathan whimpered.

“The police will find them,” George comforted him, but I wasn’t so sure.

*Jayden*

I called the PI I hired and gave him the latest news. “I know it’s late, and I apologize, but this is a matter of life and death. I need you to find everything you can about this man,” I asked him.

“Any idea where they lived?” the PI asked.

“Try New York. She lived a few years there,” I suggested, with nothing else to say.

She had been very reserved about her life, and I hadn’t insisted.

“I’ll get on to this right away,” the man promised.

“Thank you,” I ended the call and turned to look at Jonathan. “Did she mention him to you?”

Jonathan shook his head. “Not much. I tried to get her talking after you left, but she refused to confide in me. She did say the bastard was only happy when he was hurting her... that can’t be good, right?” Jonathan’s anxiety was palpable and a true reflection of my own.

That wasn’t good at all... what kind of a man followed a woman across the country when she obviously wanted nothing to do with him?

“Please, call me the minute you hear something from the police,” I asked Jonathan and George, as I walked towards the door.

“Yes, and you do the same. She is our friend,” Jonathan asked.

I nodded and left the house. Sitting in my car, I rubbed my face, wishing I had done things differently. Perhaps if she had felt she could trust me, she would have told me all about her husband.

But I was to blame for this mess. If I had allowed Anne to explain things, I wouldn’t have let her leave the house, and I

would have done everything in my power to keep the bastard away from her.

Now, I was even starting to believe he had found her thanks to me. I had led him right to where she was hiding. It was the only thing that made sense, the reason why he had gone looking for her at my office.

He must have followed me when I went to Jonathan's house and assumed, she was there. He couldn't see through the high wall, so he found his way onto the property from the beach. No one would know he was there until he broke the door on his way out. He'd watched and waited for this chance to grab her. Now she was his prisoner again.

I was parking my car at Wells Corporation when I received a call from the PI.

"Are you sure this woman's name is Ailani?" was the first thing he asked.

"No... I can't say I am. It was the name he used to call her, and she confirmed it was a real name," I explained.

"Well, it doesn't make any sense. I'm sending a few pictures as we speak for you to confirm their identities."

"What doesn't make any sense?" I asked, surprised, as I downloaded the pictures, he sent me.

"The woman in the pictures is Ailani Kekoa Hudson, married to Daniel Hudson, three years ago."

"That's her," I confirmed, staring at the pictures of her wedding, my heart aching at the way she looked at her new husband.

"Well, that woman is supposedly dead. Killed in a car accident over a year ago," the PI explained.

"What?" I shouted startled.

"Her car flew over a ravine and burst into flames when it hit bottom. It was impossible to recognize the body, but there was no evidence of foul play, and the husband identified her purse and a necklace that belonged to her," he added.

“She’s not dead,” I assured the man.

“Well, someone went to a lot of trouble to make sure everyone thought she was,” the PI replied. “Do you think she was capable of doing it?”

“No,” I was sure of that. “She was definitely on the run, but I doubt she had the means to pull off something like that. What happened to her alleged body?”

“Cremated on a very private ceremony,” the PI confirmed my suspicions.

“Of course, it was... he wouldn’t leave evidence behind,” I mumbled, barely containing my rage.

“So, you think the husband did it?”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense. You don’t buy yourself a new life to live as a homeless person... and that’s what she was when I met her.”

“Yeah... it doesn’t make sense.”

“Besides, why would her husband follow her here if he was convinced, she was dead? He didn’t seem shocked when he met her at the gala.”

“I’ll keep digging.”

“Who’s this guy? Does he have the means to pull this off?”

“Oh, yes, he does. He’s an ex-SEAL and CEO of a big company dedicated to security issues... you know, providing surveillance systems, bodyguards, and that stuff to those able to pay for their services.”

“Damn!” I hit the steering wheel of my car. Finding a man trained to hide and move undetected was not an easy task. “We need to find them. Get all your men working on this.”

“If he did this, she’s the only person capable of exposing him,” the PI warned me, and I knew it.

The bastard was going to kill her. If only I had let her explain...

“I know... just do your best. I’ll tell the police what you found.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

Instead of calling, I went straight to the police station. It would be a lot easier explaining all this in person than over the phone. If I wanted to find her in time, I needed all the help I could get.

The police officers were a bit skeptical about my story. “How can you be sure these two women are the same person?” one of them asked me.

“How many women have you met like her?” I asked, showing him a picture of her, at her graduation.

She was unique, with her golden skin, her long, dark locks, and her amazing green eyes. I know there are millions of women in the world, but I am sure not many looked like her. Which was probably the reason she hadn’t been able to hide from him. She stood out.

“I understand...” the officer admitted.

“Do you have recent pictures of her?” the man asked me.

“No... I don’t.”

“Yes, you do...” a policewoman interrupted him. “I’m sorry to interrupt you, but I’ve seen pictures of you two all over the social media,” she explained, pulling out her cell phone. “You’re in all the town’s gossips newspapers,” she added, showing us pictures of Ailani and me at the art show, at the beach restaurant, and at the gala.

“Yeah... that’s definitely the same woman,” the police officer agreed. “And this is probably how he found her.”

“Damn... I never thought of it,” I cursed myself. “I never pay attention to this kind of news and never thought it could be a problem. Ailani never told me she was hiding away from her husband,” I confessed.

“Well, let’s see if we can track this guy’s movements. If he faked his wife’s death, I’m sure he’s not happy she resurfaced,” he voiced my fears.

“Will you keep me informed?” I asked him.

“Yes... and please, share whatever information your PI gets, as well. The sooner we find her, the better,” he said in a dark tone that sent chills of dread down my spine.

“Thank you.”

The sun was coming out when I finally got home. I was coming out of the shower when my mother showed up.

“What are you doing here?” I had ignored several of her messages.

“I figured if I wanted answers, I would have to come and get them,” she said sarcastically. “What the hell is happening?”

“Why do you care? You don’t even like Ailani,” I replied as I entered my dressing room to get some clothes on.

“That’s her real name? I always thought Anne was too simple for a woman like her,” she muttered.

“Yes, that’s her real name,” I confirmed. Once dressed, I returned to my room. “What else do you want to know? I have to leave in a few minutes.”

“Was she escaping from that man? The one you asked me about?”

“Yes... it’s a complicated story, but I really don’t have the time to give you all the details,” I replied.

“I understand. He looked furious when she ditched him at the gala. I stalled him as much as I could, but after a minute, he simply left me talking to myself and rushed after her,” she explained.

“Why did you help her?” I asked, curious.

“Her cheek was bruised as if she had been slapped recently, and since I’m sure Matty raised you better, that could only mean he had hit her,” she explained.

I couldn’t hold back the humorless laughter. “So, you admit Matty raised me.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, pain disfiguring her perfect face. “Of course, I do. I was never a mother a you... that’s no secret.”

“Right... you wanted to abort me,” I spurted. “Why do you keep playing this role you clearly never wanted? I’m an adult now. You can pretend I was never born. Believe me, I won’t mind,” I added, not in the mood for her stupid little games.

“I’m well aware of that,” she admitted, crossing her arms over her chest and looking away. “But we don’t have time for this conversation.”

I sat down on my bed. “I have time to kill... until the police call me, there isn’t much I can do,” I said, certain she would mumble some bullshit and rush out of the house as if chased by demons.

But she didn’t.

Instead, she pulled a chair and took a seat. “You never asked me about your father,” she said in a low tone, staring at her wriggling hands.

“I was always told you had no idea who he was,” I pointed out in a cold tone.

She laughed, but there was no joy in it. “Of course, you were. Your grandfather always pretended he didn’t know. He preferred to call me a liar rather than believing in me, his own daughter.”

“What did he know?”

“That your father was his best friend... a man old enough to be my father, that wasted no time, taking advantage of a young girl, too drunk to stop him,” she explained, and I’m not sure what I was expecting to hear, but it certainly hadn’t been that. “I was no innocent girl. Wild parties and so many boyfriends I lost count were my favorite ways to rebel against my parents. But this man was different.”

“What happened?” I asked, astounded with my mother’s story.

“I had always known him. As my father’s best friend, he was constantly invited to our house, mostly with his wife, but I had always avoided his company. There was something about him I didn’t like... he gave me the creeps...”

“Who is he?”

She shrugged. “The name is not important. He’s dead now,” she sputtered with all the scorn she felt for the man. “When I turned seventeen, he started to follow me around whenever we met in parties or events. Nothing I did or said dissuaded him, so I told my father about it, but he dismissed my complaint, certain that I was exaggerating.”

She jumped to her feet and started to pace the room, too restless to stay still.

“But I wasn’t. His wife died that year, and it only made things harder for me. He followed me everywhere... my friends mocked me about him, but he ignored them all, determined to get what he wanted,” she continued. “One night... after a Christmas party at the golf club, I was so bored I started drinking a lot more than usually did. Seeing the anger on my father’s face only made me drink even more. Watching Gerard Wells squirm on his chair was my personal pleasure.”

“Why?” I asked, intrigued.

I knew she hated her parents, but I had never learned why.

“Because I was the daughter, he didn’t want... the one that survived. He wished I was the one dead and not my perfect brother...” she spat out, all her pain and outrage clear as crystal.



“Brother? You had a brother?”

That was news to me. I had never heard about a brother.

“Yes... I had a brother... he was two years older than me, and he was the perfect son. I was just a freak accident.”

“What happened to him?”

“When he was seven, he decided to go fishing in the lake at night. My father had been teaching him how to fish, and he wanted to surprise him with a big catch,” she started explaining. “We were at the lakes’ house, and he woke me up when he was sneaking out of the room, so I followed him. He wasn’t pleased to see me, but he agreed to take me with him on the boat.”

“No one saw you leaving the house?” I asked, starting to see where the story was going.

“No... it was the seventies... kids were pretty much left on their own. The boat was already in the water, so it was simple for us to untie it. Though Rob was only seven, he was a sturdy boy. It was easy for him to row far enough from the shore for him to fish,” she continued. “He forgot to anchor the boat, and before we knew it, we were in the middle of the lake. Rob was so focused on his fishing rod; he didn’t see it until it was too late. I was too small to care. I had been playing with my doll, oblivious of what was going on around us.”

“No one noticed your absence?”

“No... my parents were sleeping. There was no one up at that hour,” she replied, walking to the small bar and pouring herself a whiskey she gulped in a single sip. “At some point, it started raining a lot, and it only took a few minutes for it to fill the boat. Rob panicked and started rowing as fast as he could, but he wasn’t strong enough to row back to the shore. The sudden waves and the strong wind didn’t help either.”

“What about you?” I asked, with a deep frown, astounded I had never heard this story before.

“I was so scared all I did was cry. Rob was so pissed at me he kept yelling at me to shut up, but I couldn’t. It was stronger than me,” she confessed, pouring a second drink. “Perhaps if I had shut up, he wouldn’t have done what he did next, and he would still be alive...”

“It’s useless to think like that,” I pointed out.

“Is it?” she shook her head as if pushing away her ghosts. “Anyway, when he realized he couldn’t row the boat back to the shore, he decided to swim back and ask for help. I begged him not to. I didn’t want to be alone on a boat, in the middle of a lake, while it rained. I was scared to death,” she explained.

“But he didn’t listen.”

“Of course, he didn’t. What did I know? I was just a stupid little girl that knew nothing. He promised I would be alright while he went looking for help, and he jumped into the water.”

Madeleine went silent for a few moments, her eyes lost staring into the drink she was still holding. She finished it before she continued.

“He never made it. We were too far, and he was just seven. I was rescued by a fisherman when the sun came up, and my brother’s body shored later that day a couple of miles away from where I was found,” she said, her tone cold and distant as if she was telling someone else’s story. “My parents blamed me. I should have called them when he decided to go to the lake; I shouldn’t have let him leave the house, and their best ever: I should be the one dead, not their precious son.”

“You were just a child,” I protested.

I knew my grandfather was a harsh man, and my grandmother always did what he told her to, but this was away too much. How could they have blamed their own daughter for something that was their own fault?

“Yeah... long story short... things were never the same, and my mother wiped out every bit of evidence of my brother’s existence. No one was allowed to talk about him.”

“That couldn’t have been helpful.”

“I guess it was her way of coping with the loss... I never asked. We were never close, and after that event, I was sent to a boarding school and only came home for Christmas and summer vacations. I became a rebel, got expelled from five schools, so you could say I was trouble, with major ‘T.’”

“What happened at that party?”

“I got so drunk I could barely walk. Father’s friend offered to take me home. He claimed to be tired, and he would have no problem giving me a ride home,” she said, with a scornful scowl. “I refused. I hated his guts, and the last thing I wanted was to be in a car with him, but my parents insisted, and my father practically dragged me to his car.”

“Did he take you home?” I asked frowning.

“Yes... he did. Although I kept telling him not to, he walked me to the house and followed me to my room. I was so drunk I stumbled a couple of times while going up the stairs, and he used that as an excuse to put his filthy hands on me. I tried to close the door to my room in his face, but he forced his way in,” she continued. “He said he wanted to be sure I was alright, but he wanted something else. Before I knew it, he was all over me, forcing himself on me...”

“He raped you?”

“I was too drunk to put up a fight...”

“Did you say no?” I insisted, rage boiling inside me.

“Of course, I said no... a million times, but he didn’t listen, or simply didn’t care. When he was done, he kissed my cheek and told me this would be our little secret,” she replied, pursing her lips with self-disgust. “I never told anyone about it... not until I found out I was pregnant. I hadn’t been with anyone else in a while, so I knew it had to be his, and I was furious. I was just seventeen years old, about to finish high school. I was not ready to have a child, especially not his child.”

She wiped a tear from her cheek before she continued.

I was in shock. Knowing that my father had raped Madeleine was not something easy to assimilate.

“My mother went to the doctor with me. She refused to hear the word abortion, even after I told her and my father what had happened. They refused to listen and insisted I was lying, trying to ruin a good man’s life with absurd stories to cover up my own shame.”

She sobbed. “Can you blame me for hating you? In my mind, you were the offspring of the devil himself... I wanted nothing to do with you.”

No... I guess I couldn’t blame her, nor put myself in her shoes and understand all she went through.

“What I failed to see was that you were my son too. In fact, there isn’t much of your father in you. You’re a Wells from the top of your head to your toes. When I finally realized that it was too late... things between us were ruined forever, and I could only blame myself for it,” she concluded.

“Do I have siblings?” I asked, not ready to analyze her last words.

She stared at me for a few moments, as if waiting for something “No... his wife couldn’t have children.”

“Did he ever know I was his son?” I asked, more curious than anything.

The man meant nothing to me, even before I knew the truth.

“Not as far as I know. I never told him, and I doubt your grandfather ever did. That would mean accepting I was telling him the truth, and he couldn’t have that.”

I nodded. Gerard Wells never admitted he was wrong. “Why didn’t you ever tell me all this?”

“You never asked,” she scoffed. “You were always so proper, so polite... a stoic child.”

“And you hated it,” I stated.

It was probably my own way to rebel against a mother that cared so little about me. I could see my lack of response to her tantrums drove her insane, and I forced myself to never show her how I really felt. Hiding my feelings became second nature

for me, and that was probably why Ailani didn't trust me with her problems.

She certainly thought I didn't care enough.

"Oh, yes... and you knew it."

"Why tell me now?" I asked.

She shrugged. "This time you actually asked," she clenched her hands into fists as if bracing herself. "I thought it was time for you to know the truth."

I opened my mouth to reply, but my cell phone interrupted us. It was the PI.

"I've just tracked Hudson's moves since he arrived in Seattle," he said, after a quick greeting. "He rented a car at the airport, and the police were able to place that same car near Spade's house around the time the woman went missing. They have sent out an APB on the car, but so far, nothing. He had a few hours ahead of us, so he could be anywhere."

"He might try to leave the state," I pointed out.

"Yes, but he won't use the highways. He's too smart for that," the PI pointed out.

"Has he rented a house, hotel, or cabin in the area?" I asked, running my fingers through my hair.

"Not in his name."

"Check the company. See if they own any property in the area or has made any recent transactions," I asked him. "Check his partner as well and the name Anne Johnson. He could be using her alias to hide his moves."

"On it," he assured me. "The police are reaching out for the FBI since this might cross state borders," the PI warned me.

"The more, the merrier, right?"

"I'll let you know if I have any news."

I put away the phone and looked at my mother. She looked worried.

"No news?"

“Nothing yet.”

“What do you think will happen?” she asked, wriggling her hands.

“I’m trying not to think about it, or I’ll go insane. I should have listened to her... I should have protected her...” I scolded myself.

“You couldn’t know... don’t waste time blaming yourself. Go down to the police station, help them track her down. Who better than you? You won’t miss the smallest detail. I’m sure you’ll be able to find the bastard’s car.”

My mother was right. But I didn’t need the police for that. Picking up my cell phone, I called one of my most valued employers: the best hacker I’ve ever known.

“Brad... sorry to bother you, but I need your assistance.”

“Sure thing, boss. What can I do for you?” he replied, immediately, no questions asked.

“Are you at the office?”

“Just parked my car.”

“I’ll meet you there,” I told him, ending the call before I turned to look at my mother. “Thank you. I’ll let you know if we find anything.”

“I’ll be home.”

I rushed to Brad’s office, and a few minutes later, we were hacking every single camera we found near Jonathan’s house.

It didn’t take Brad long to find the car leaving the area. Following it wasn’t easy, but not impossible.

At some point, I called the police and told them I had a possible location. It was up north, near the Canadian border, so the man in charge offered to send a few officers with me on the helicopter as I flew to the nearest town where the car had been spotted.

Hudson was careless... probably because he didn’t think anyone would go looking for her and that played in our favor.

\*\*\*

## *Ailani*

I slowly woke up, stiff with cold, still tied and still inside his car’s trunk. I had lost track of time, so I had no idea how long I had been in the car if he had stopped for gas or was still driving away from Seattle.

I doubted he would drive me back to New York. That would take days, and he wasn’t exactly a patient man. At some point, he was going to hire a private plane to take us back to the city.

My eyes filled with tears at the thought of going back to hell, and this time he wouldn't let me escape. This time, he would make sure I never left the house alone.

Time went by in a slow, painful way, and all I could think of was Jayden. Did he know I was missing? Did he care?

Chances were Jonathan would think I had escaped in the middle of the night, and though he would worry about it, about his painting, he wouldn't do much to find out where I was. He didn't even know my real name and didn't have enough details to call the police and report me missing. The police wouldn't listen to his claims. Not until it was too late for me.

The car finally stopped, and I braced myself for what would come next. Flashes of my life with him rushed through my mind, and I sobbed. I wasn't ready to revisit hell. Not after having been taken to paradise so many times by Jayden.

The trunk opened, and Daniel grabbed me roughly dragging me out, ignoring my pain. He threw me over his shoulder and carried me along a narrow trail in the middle of the woods. It was morning now, and it was so cold my whole body trembled violently.

He opened a door and dropped me to the wooden floor so he could lock the door behind us.

"Did you have a nice trip?" he asked, mocking me.

I stayed still where he dropped me. Old habits die hard, right? I had quickly learned never to move unless told. That would only piss him off and hit me harder.

"Where are we?" I asked, in a low tone.

"Does it matter?" he retorted. "No one will ever find us here," he assured me scornfully.

"Why did you bring me here? I thought you were taking me back to New York," I persisted, keeping my tone low and plain.

"Why would I do that? People there think you're dead," he announced, and my heart stopped for a moment in sheer fear.



Dead? People thought I was dead? When the hell did that happen?

“How come?” I asked, struggling to keep my chaotic emotions out of my tone.

He knew I was frantic, but I would not give him the pleasure of seeing it.

“Did you really think I would allow people to think you had left me? What would people say? That I was such a bad husband my wife had chosen to disappear?” he ranted. “My company is run on my reputation. People need to trust me to hire me,” he added, and I can’t say I was surprised.

His company was all that mattered for him—that and his precious reputation. What other people thought of him weighed heavily on his decisions. I had lost count of how many times I was forced to put on a dress and attended a party, when my whole body ached after one of his beatings.

I should have exposed him. I should have told someone what was happening, but he had efficiently isolated me. I had no one I could trust, not even my mother.

“How did you pull that off?” I asked, sincerely intrigued.

How far was he willing to go to cover up his messed-up personality?

“It was quite easy, actually,” he bragged. “I staged a car accident... I even got a woman’s body to play your part. I dressed her up in your clothes, put on your jewelry, and one of your purses... no one suspected anything. I told the police you loved speeding to let off steam.”

“And they bought your story? Even when I never had a speeding ticket in my life?” I asked, surprised.

“They believed it all. I was a distressed husband whose wife’s body was so burned it would have been impossible to identify her if it wasn’t for your jewelry and your purse,” he said, in a mocking tone. “We were the perfect couple... no one suspected anything.”

“What about the reports on domestic violence?” I asked.

“I had those erased a long time ago,” he assured me, in his darkest tone, as he crouched next to me. “I was not about to let you ruin my life... not when I gave you everything you ever asked for... but you were always an ungrateful bitch,” he continued, fisting my hair and pulling me up to face him.

“All I wanted was my freedom,” I spurted out.

“Freedom? You married me of your own free will. No one forced you to. You knew the terms - till death do us part – so, what freedom?” he asked, shaking my head from side to side as pain exploded on my head.

“This is the twenty-first century... not the middle ages,” I grumbled through gritted teeth, struggling to stay in control.

But it wasn't easy... not when I knew he had brought me here to kill me. He couldn't afford for me to show up and ruin his story. The police would want to find out the truth.

“You should have played your part, Ailani... things would have been so much easier...” he said, pulling me higher to slap me in the face a few times. “Now, I have to clean up the mess you made.”

Fighting the dizziness and pain from his blows, I dared to ask. “Aren't you afraid of the consequences?”

“What consequences? No one will ever find you,” he pulled me to my knees. “No one is looking for you, and the world thinks you're already dead,” he said with a cruel twist on his lips.

“How can you be so sure?” I asked, in a trembling voice.

I knew he was right... Jayden wouldn't bother looking for me, and Jonathan didn't care enough.

“I paid a little visit to your lover. Told him how many times you had done this... run away from home, to have fun with other men before you came home asking for forgiveness...” he mocked me. “I even played the loving husband that forgave it all and took you back with open arms... you should have seen his face. He looked so disgusted, I thought he was going to puke all over his fancy carpet,” he added before he threw me to the floor.

I closed my eyes to keep my tears away, determined to not let him see how much his words hurt me. Being with Jayden made me see how good a relationship could be in a short time—too short. I wanted more ... I deserved more...

Daniel untied my hands and ankles and dragged me to a bed on the other side of the room. I hadn't paid that much attention to the place he had brought to, knowing I wouldn't escape whatever he had in mind for me... not this time.

He threw me in bed. "Take your clothes off. I plan to have some fun before I finished the job that brought me here," he ordered, while he started to take off his own clothes.

I laughed. Hell would freeze over before I assist him in his damn games. "You want me naked? Do it yourself," I spat out, showing all my hatred and determination.

He stopped unbuttoning his shirt. "Really? Is this the way you want to play it?"

"The sooner you kill me, the better," I assured him. "I'm not making things easier for you."

"You'll change your mind... you always do," he said, with a disdainful scowl in his face.

At this point, making him lose his patience would be my best move. He had been very close to killing me in the past. Only my surrender had appeased his rage, but today, I planned to take him to the edge... make sure this was over as soon as possible.

Planning my next move carefully, I rushed to the other side of the room, hiding behind the small table. There was no place to run to, but I wasn't trying to escape... just to make Daniel lose his mind.

He fell for it, as I knew he would. He chased me around the room, getting more and more furious with each second that went by until he finally grabbed me and dragged me by my hair back to the bed.

He tied my hands to the headboard using his tie before he cut off my clothes with his knife, heedless of the cuts and wounds he inflicted in me. He loved seeing me covered in blood.

Once I was naked, he straddled my body and punched me in the face a few times.

“Do you know how hard it was not to hit you in the face?” he asked, with a fierce scowl, right after he slapped my face, splitting my lower lip. “But we couldn’t have people asking questions, could we? Fortunately, I don’t have to worry about that now,” he added, before he punched me one more time, knocking me out.

When I came to, he was already naked, standing over me with an empty glass on his hand. Cold water streamed down my face, and I shivered.

“I couldn’t start the party without you, could I?” he asked, crawling in bed and crouching between my legs.

I squirmed and struggled to push him away, but he only laughed at my vain attempts. Pushing my legs up, he thrust himself deep inside me, ripping me apart.

Oblivious of my pain, he raped me for a few minutes until he pulled out and came all over my naked body, his favorite way to humiliate me.

“Such a good slut,” he whispered in my ear before he bit the earlobe hard until it bled.

“You’ll burn in hell, bastard!” I yelled at him.

He laughed and pulled the belt out of his pants. Whipping me had always aroused him, and this time was no different. It only took him a few minutes to get ready for round number two.

I was in so much pain I just wanted to die. Nothing I did provoked him enough for him to lose his temper, and that wasn’t good for me.

He flipped me around on the bed and pushed my ass up before he plunged deep inside it while belting my back as viciously as usual.

“Perhaps I should keep you in this cabin for a few months. It’s such a pity to lose a good slut like you,” he said, right after he poured his cum all over my back. “Despite your flaws, you

always made me come like no other..." he added, as he slid out of me.

I ignored his words... sliding into the safe world I had conjured for me after the first months of marriage. I would become a ragdoll for him to use and abuse, but my mind would be safe in this world, far from the excruciating pain and the humiliation.

He hated it when I did that, and it usually only brought me more pain, but by then, I was far beyond caring. I would handle pain later.

## *Jayden*

“I think I found them,” Brad’s excited voice over the phone was the best news I could receive.

We had been looking for Hudson for a few hours now with little luck, and I was getting desperate, my mind filled with the most horrific images of what he might be doing to her. I would never forgive myself if I didn’t get to her in time to save her.

“Tell me!” I ordered.

“There’s a small cabin, an hour away from the last gas station he passed through that was rented a few days ago by a John Smith,” Brad explained. “He used cash and refused to show any identification. The owner didn’t mind since the cabin is only rented during the summer. He welcomed the extra cash, especially when the guy paid three times the regular price.”

“Send me the address,” I ordered.

“I already sent it. I’ve also warned the local authorities. You might meet them on your way there.”

“Thank you, Brad. Please, keep looking, just in case...” I asked.

“I will... but my gut tells me this is it,” he assured me.

I ended the call and introduced the address Brad had sent me to the car GPS. I was closer than I thought, and a few minutes later, I was parking the car beside Hudson’s rental. “Yes!” I exclaimed softly. I could just see a glimpse of the cabin at the other end of the foot trail that led to it.

I got out of the car and closed the door quietly. I didn’t want to let Hudson know he had company. He might kill her and run away, and that was the last thing I wanted. Two police cars arrived as I was getting out of the car. An officer named Josh introduced himself and the others, but I only remembered his name.

“It’s up there.” I pointed to the path.

“You stay back here. Let us take care of it,” said Josh. “He could be armed.”

“No, I’m going!” I asserted.

Josh looked like he was about to insist, but I think he knew how desperate I was.

“Okay, stay behind us.”

We walked up to the cabin, as quietly as possible, and I followed.

“Check for other exits,” Josh, instructed one of the police officers. “I’ll check the windows, and you’ll move to the main door,” he told the other one.

“Wait here,” Josh warned me. “Your presence might precipitate the events. I’ll call you when we have the suspect in our custody.”

“I’m not staying behind,” I insisted. “It won’t be easy to knock down that door, and he won’t hesitate to kill her if he sees the police,” I warned him.

I had had a lot of time to read his file on while Brad was locating this place. His conduct while a SEAL had been questioned more times than I could count, and he was about to be kicked out when he decided to resign.

He was good keeping his reputation clean, but Brad dug up a lot of information using his talent. Hudson had been kicked out of most of the BDSM clubs in the New York area for not respecting the rules and ignoring people’s hard limits. He was a hard-cold sadist, and not even the most masochistic people would put themselves in his hands.

It hadn’t been an easy reading, especially considering I knew Ailani was with him alone, but I wanted to know as much as possible about the beast I was about to face.

“What’s your plan?” Josh asked me, clearly impatient.

“I’ll knock on the door. He won’t feel threatened by my presence, and he might let me in. If he doesn’t, you can still

force your way in and take him by surprise.”

“He’s probably armed. What makes you think he won’t kill you too?” Josh pointed out.

“He’s not stupid. Killing me would ruin his life,” I assured him.

“Killing her will ruin his life,” the man pointed out. “And yet, you’re sure he’ll do it.”

“He’s already made people think she is dead. The bastard actually thinks he can get away with this. He doesn’t know we’re on to him,” I stated, keeping my tone as calm as possible when all I wanted to do was to barge into that cabin and take Ailani out of there.

“I’ll be right next to you, out of sight,” Josh finally agreed.

“I wouldn’t want it any different,” I assured him.

The officers took their places along the house, and a few seconds later, I was knocking at the door.

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## *Ailani*

The knocking on the door pulled me out of my fantasy world. The sound was so loud and unexpected that it startled me. Daniel was beyond frantic, and I couldn’t help but smile at his ordeal.

I wasn’t expecting to be saved. I had been in this position way too many times to believe anyone cared when they suspected something was wrong. A few calm words from Daniel were usually enough for them to turn around and forget about me and what they might have seen or heard.

Either way, I welcomed the interruption, even though Daniel shoved a small cloth into my mouth and dragged me to the furthest corner of the small room, before he picked up a gun from the table and shoved it under the back of his waistband.

“Don’t make a sound!” he threatened me, but he didn’t have too.



I knew how fruitless that was, and things were bad enough as they were. So, I closed my eyes and let my mind slide back to my safe place, shutting out the ugly world.

“Wells, right? What the hell are you doing here? How did you find me?” I heard Daniel asking, but I was sure I was hallucinating.

What would Jayden be doing here? It’s not like he cared.

“I’m looking for Ailani. She stole something important from me,” Jayden explained, in a dark tone.

The words reached me, but they didn’t make any sense. I shook my head and tried to pay attention, curious to know if my mind was playing tricks with me.

“She stole from you? That’s a new one... but I can’t say I’m surprised,” Daniel said, in a scornful tone, lowering his guard.

Bastard!

“Have you seen her?” Jayden insisted.

“No... I haven’t seen her since the night of the gala,” Daniel assured him, sounding so truthful, so sincere, I closed my eyes and allowed a few tears to roll down my swollen face.

“Then, you won’t mind if we take a look inside,” Jayden said, in a firm tone.

Daniel had little time to react, as Jayden and another man I had never seen burst into the cabin. Three other men joined them, just seconds after, guns in hand.

Daniel was astounded and utterly furious holding his hands away from his body as he saw the police with their guns drawn.

“What the hell is going on? You have no right to enter my house like this,” he yelled at the armed men.

One of them holstered his gun and stepped behind Daniel. “Gun,” said the officer, lifting from his bastard’s waistband. He handed it off to another officer then proceeded to cuff Daniel while reciting his rights.

Jayden rushed to where I was, and the look of horror on his face told me more than I could handle. I closed my eyes as I heard him walking away from me, darkness finally giving me the oblivion I had been craving.

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## *Jayden*

I'm not sure what I was expecting to see when I stepped into the cabin with the police. I knew it wasn't going to be easy... not, after all, I had read about this monster, but nothing prepared me to see Ailani lying naked on the floor, covered in bruises and blood.

I saw red.

Never, in my whole life, had I ever felt this raw, vehement fury. Rage coursed through me like a poison, at light speed, infecting every single cell of my body, and in a split second, all I could think of was killing the bastard in the most painful way possible.

It took three of the police officers to keep me away from him and his sneering grin.

"Wells! I know how you feel, but right now, she needs you more, man," Josh pointed out as I struggled to free myself from the other men's grip.

His words cleared my mind, and I calmed down. He was right. Ailani needed me more. I would have time to destroy the son of a bitch, later.

"Let me go, I need to check on her," I asked the policemen, and they reluctantly did so.

"I've called an ambulance, but it will take them thirty minutes to get here," Josh warned me as I rushed to her side and picked her up in my arms to carry her to the bed.

"Call them again and ask them to send a helicopter. I will pay for it," I asked as I gently put her on the bed.

There were so many bruises on her body, so much blood, dried, and still flowing, it was hard to assess her current state.

Her eyes were closed, but she was breathing heavily as if it hurt her, and I wonder if he had broken her ribs.

Seeing her like this was so heartbreaking I felt lost, wanting to help her and not knowing how.

The officers had dragged Hudson out of the cabin, and it was a good thing, or I would have probably lost it and killed the bastard.

I would make sure he paid for what he had done, even if it was the last thing I did.

I stayed with Ailani until the helicopter arrived. There wasn't enough room for it to land, so they had to send down a basket stretcher. I wasn't happy to let her go all alone to the hospital, but she was still unconscious, and I just wanted her to get the help she needed as quickly as possible.

"All this fuss for the little slut?" Hudson said after the helicopter finally flew away towards the nearest hospital.

The officers weren't fast enough this time. Before they could hold me back, I was punching the bastard's face as hard as I could, wishing he could feel all the pain he had inflicted on Ailani.

By the time the officers reacted, I had punched him a couple of times, turning his pretty face into a bloody mess.

"Stop, he's not worth it," Josh yelled at me as he held me back, with a friend's help.

Hudson scoffed. "I'll have your ass thrown in jail for this. Officers... arrest this man for assault," he said, in a hysterical tone.

Josh let me go and approached the man. "Assault? What assault? I didn't see anything. Did you guys see anything?" he asked his colleagues.

"No... nothing," they all agreed. They had seen what he did to Ailani, too.

"You can't do this," Hudson yelled, furious, struggling to free himself from the policemen holding him still.

"We're not doing anything," Josh pointed out.

“How the hell are you going to explain the injuries in my face?” Hudson snarled.

“Easily... you tried to escape and fell down a hill, hitting your face on the process,” Josh elucidated the man, oozing scorn. “Such a clumsy clown... aren’t you?”

Hudson’s face reddened so much I thought he would have a stroke. “I’ll have your badges for this.”

“Good luck trying.”

Hudson turned to look at me. “What? Was she your first?” he scoffed. “She’s the worse fuck I ever had in my life. I doubt she was better with you.”

I almost threw myself at him again, desperate to kill the sadistic prick. Struggling to control my emotions, I clenched my hands into fists. “Really? Why the hell would you go so far to get her back?” I mocked him.

He tilted his head, with a cruel smirk on his bloody face. “She was a hell of a punching bag,” he said, every word dripping venom. I needed all my strength not to kill him on the spot. “Besides... she’s mine. No one gets what’s mine.”

“She’s not an object,” I snarled at him.

“Well, she sure as hell isn’t yours... Will you tell her you’re the reason I found her?” he asked, mocking me.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I lost track of her in a small town near Pendleton... I had her in my hands when we got interrupted, and the bitch escaped. My guess is that she asked a truck driver for a ride...” he shrugged. “After that, I couldn’t find her anywhere. No one had seen her anywhere near Pendleton, and I lost track of her. That is... until you started dating her. Photos of the two started popping up all over social media... ‘The hermit billionaire has a new girlfriend.’ It was a matter of time for the pictures to get to me.”

I already knew this... and once more, I wished she had told me about her psycho husband. I wouldn’t have exposed her that

way. But for the first time, I didn't care if the world knew there was someone special in my life.

"They must have gotten to your friends too, I think. How did you explain the resurrection of your dead wife?" I asked, mocking him while I told him I knew everything he had done.

He shrugged. "I would think of something... a secret twin sister... a half-sister... any of those would work. People didn't know much about Ailani or her family. I made sure of it."

"Of course, you did."

"After she managed to ditch me at the gala, I imagined she would run back to you, so I just waited and went looking for you, certain that you would take me to her, eventually. And you did."

I had suspected as much.

Police sirens echoed in the night, interrupting us.

"Ah, just in time," Josh said, sounding relieved.

Composing myself, I took a few deep breaths, appreciating Josh's help, but certainly not afraid of the bastard's threats. Any punishment would be worth the pleasure of smashing the mocking grin off of Hudson's face.

"Will you make sure he gets arrested without bail?" I asked Josh, eager to meet Ailani at the hospital.

"Sure thing. I'll make sure the prosecutor charges him with attempted murder, considering how badly hurt the woman was."

I nodded, my lips pressed into a firm line. I should have killed the bastard, but Josh was right – he was not worth the trouble.

"Thank you. I'll take the car and drive to the hospital. Can you ride with the local cops?" I asked.

"No problem. I'll see you there in a few hours."

I thanked him and walked away, ignoring Hudson's curses.

I got to the hospital thirty minutes later, cursing the mountain roads that prevented me from driving faster.

I needed to know Ailani would be alright, that he hadn't hurt her as badly as it seemed. By the time I got to the hospital, I was a nervous wreck. If only I had just listened to her!

The nurse at the emergency reception wasn't very helpful, and I almost lost my temper when she refused to give me information on Ailani's condition.

"I'm sorry, but I can only inform her family. You're not her family," the woman insisted, in a bored tone.

"Her husband is her only family, and he was responsible for her wounds," I lashed at the woman. "Would you like to inform him?"

The woman finally dropped her act and frowned. "Who are you, exactly?" she asked me in a calm tone.

"I'm her lover, her future fiancé, if I manage to convince her not all men are dirtbags like her first husband," I yelled at her, my patience long gone.

"You should have started there..." she said, pressing a few keys on her computer. "Ailani Keko, right? She's still in the ER. The doctors are stabilizing before they can run all the necessary tests. She lost a lot of blood, and several of her ribs are broken, so she might need surgery."

"When can I see her?" I asked, rushing my fingers through my hair.

"Not yet, but I will let you know when the doctors allow it," she warned me. "Tell me. The man who did this... did the police get him?" she asked, after a brief pause.

"Yes, they did."

"Good. Why don't you get yourself some coffee and wash up a little? I'll get you a clean shirt," she offered, pointing at my bloody sweater.

I sighed and closed my eyes for a moment, the adrenalin rush starting to disappear, leaving behind the stress and tiredness. "Thank you. I would appreciate that."

She nodded and jumped up from her chair to grab a clean scrub from a shelf nearby. "There's a bathroom down the hall,

and the cafeteria is right after it.”

I nodded and headed to the bathroom. No wonder the nurse asked me to wash up. I looked as if I had come out of a bloody scary movie, with blood all over my sweater, hands, and face. Some of it was Hudson’s, but most of it was from when I picked Ailani up from the floor.

Resting my hands on the bathroom counter, I closed my eyes and took a few breaths, clinging to the thin threads of my shattered self-control.

Guilt and regret gnawed at me mercilessly as images of her battered body kept replaying through my mind. If I had listened to her, I might have been able to protect her, to keep her safe from Hudson.

I had allowed my jealousy and hurt pride to dictate my actions. Because of it, she had fallen into the bastard’s clutches.

Pulling my thoughts together, I forced myself to focus on Ailani and not my feelings. I would have plenty of time to dwell on them when she was out of the hospital.

With the scrubs on, and as cleaned as possible, I went for a cup of coffee. My phone hasn’t stopped buzzing ever since I got here, but I wasn’t ready to answer calls that didn’t come from the police or the hospital.

When I went back to the ER waiting room, I was feeling a little bit better.

Marilyn, the reception nurse, called me when I walked by to let me know they were taking her to the OR. The doctors confirmed she had several broken ribs, and some needed to be put back in place before they could do more harm.

“This will take a while. Try to get some rest, I’ll call you when she’s out of the OR,” Marilyn suggested.

“Thank you. I’ll be around.”

I took a seat in the waiting room and only then started to answer the calls. I called my mother first. I knew she would want to know if I had found Ailani, and after spending a few



minutes telling mother; she would be alright, without getting into details, I was finally able to end the call.

I was about to call Brad when Josh barged into the ER.

I jumped to my feet, frowning. “What happened?”

“Nothing... just came to let you know we’re staying at a motel in town. Hudson is in custody and waiting for his bail hearing,” he explained. “The local police charged him with attempted murder, rape, and aggravated assault. They are sending a detective, later on, to take your statement and Ailani’s when she’s up to it. The prosecutor will ask the judge not to grant bail, but we’re not sure if the judge will agree.”

“I’ll ask Brad to send the prosecutor all the information we have on Hudson. That might help,” I said in a dark tone. “He will leave the country if he’s granted bail.”

“I agree with you, and I’ve told the prosecutor all we know about him. My boss authorized us to stay here until after the bail hearing, in case he walks out. She’ll need protection if he does,” Josh pointed out.

“You think he’ll come after her?” I asked, worried.

“I’m sure of it. You should have heard him after you left, the way he cursed her and threatened her... the man is obsessed with her. He will do all in his power to get her back and finish what he started.”

“Did you record that?”

“We’re not wearing our body cameras since we weren’t sure we were in a official investigation, but I recorded him with my cell phone and sent the video to the prosecutor,” Josh explained. “It has little legal value, but it might be enough for the judge to consider him a threat to Ailani and keep him behind bars until the trial.”

“You don’t sound convinced,” I pointed out.

“The judge is a war veteran. The minute he finds out Hudson was a SEAL; he might be tempted to trust the man’s word. I wish we could take the son of a bitch back to Seattle, but there

isn't much we can do at this point," Josh explained, in a stern tone.

"Please, keep me informed," I asked him.

"Of course. I'll call you right after the hearing," he assured me.

I paced the room after he was gone, trying not to worry too much, but the bastard had been way too lucky so far. No one had ever noticed his abuse before now, and that might play in his favor.

He could accuse Ailani of infidelity and having acted in a moment of madness. He was smart enough to play his part well enough to get bail.

Troubled, I went looking for Marilyn, eager to be with Ailani and protect her.

“She’s still at the OR,” she said as I approached.

“Any idea when it will be over?” I asked, trying not to lose my patience.

“No. I’ll let you know.”

I sighed and walked back to the waiting room. I had never felt so powerless in my whole life, but there was nothing I could do, other than wait.

The detective Josh had mentioned arrived a few minutes later. Apparently, the prosecutor wanted all the information he could get before the bail hearing, and I was more than happy to answer the man’s questions.

When we were done, I was happy we had done everything by the book. Hudson had brought in a shark to defend him, who would prey on the tiniest detail to get the case dismissed against his client.

They still needed Ailani’s testimony, but I doubted she would be able to testify before the hearing.

“Do you think we have enough to keep him in jail until the trial?” I asked the detective.

“You never know, in cases like this one. It doesn’t help; she never called the police on him. The few calls registered were made by house staff or neighbors, and he always claimed they liked rough sex, that everything was consensual, and she never denied,” he explained.

“She ran away from him... how can that be consensual?” I stated, barely containing my rage.

“I know how you feel. Ailani was probably too afraid to accuse him, but the judge might not see it. We’ll have to wait and see.”

“Please, keep me posted.”

“I will. The policemen that came with you will be here, for extra protection, in case he walks out,” he handed me a small card. “Call me when she wakes up or if you need anything else.”

“Thank you.”

The man left, and I went back to pacing the waiting room. Staying still seemed impossible, and time seemed to drag along. I was about to visit Marilyn once more when she came for me.

“She’s out of the OR,” she announced with a smile.

“When can I see her?”

“Follow me.”

Ailani was still sleeping, but they had cleaned her up. Although still covered in bruises and bandages, she looked so much better than when I found her on that cabin.

“She’ll sleep for a few more hours, but you can stay here with her,” the nurse told me, and I thanked her. “Try to get some rest. You’ll need it.”

I knew she meant well, but I doubted I would sleep while there was still the possibility Hudson could walk out of jail and come for her.

I dragged a chair next to the bed and sat down, taking her hand in mine, kissing its palm. Once more, my mind was filled with all the ‘ifs’ that would haunt me forever, and I prayed like I never before that she would be alright.

I was still holding her hand when she finally woke up, early in the morning.

“Jayden...” she murmured.

I raised my head, startled. “Hey... how are you feeling?” I asked her.

“Where are we?” she asked in a weak tone.

“At the hospital. We flew you here in a helicopter last night,” I explained, my thumb caressing the back of her hand.

The caress was gentle and yet a test of some sort. I needed to know if Ailani saw me as a threat, after everything she had gone through. I still remembered vividly the way she flinched when I once startled her.

But there was no fear in her eyes.

“Oh... I would have loved that,” she whimpered in a teasing tone.

“That can be arranged. I’ll take you home in one,” I promised, kissing her hand, my eyes locked on hers.

She smiled but looked away. “How did you find me?” she asked, sounding slightly curious.

“Well, it wasn’t easy,” I said, pulling her hand gently until her palm rested on my cheek. I was probably pushing my luck, but after all the anguish and despair, I needed to feel her close. “When Hudson kicked the door open, he triggered the alarm, and Jonathan went to check on you. When he realized you were gone and all your things were still at the guest house, he called me and called the police.”

“Why would he call you?” she asked, cocking one of her eyebrows as if she was mildly interested in my answer. “You told him not to bother telling me you had been at the studio.”

“Jonathan knows me well. We’ve been friends for years, and he had never seen me more than a couple of times with the same woman. He knew I cared.”

“You did?” she asked, her eyes filled with hurt.

I clenched my jaw and struggled to keep my wits. I knew I had hurt Ailani deeply by rejecting her and not even letting her explain before the bastard got his hands on her. She was entitled to at least let me know just how much I had hurt her.

“I was stupid. Hudson showing up at the gala, pulled the floor from under my feet, and my whole world collapsed around me,” I confessed. “I felt betrayed and acted upon it. I should have allowed you to tell me the truth and not let you walk out of my life. If I had, you wouldn’t be here,” I concluded in a dark tone.

“You don’t know that,” she protested. “Daniel wouldn’t have given up... he has been after me for months.”

“I could have stopped him.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “It’s not that simple... you couldn’t be with me 24/7... it would have been a matter of time.”

I gently dropped her hand over the bedcovers and jumped to my feet, suddenly too uncomfortable to stay still. “I led him to Jonathan’s house. If it wasn’t for me, he wouldn’t have found you. I put you in danger.”

She scoffed and scowled with pain. “You had no idea... I never told you anything; you couldn’t know...” she said in a sad tone.

“I should have read the signs...”

She chuckled. “Why? Are you familiar with abused women as to know how to read the signs?” she mocked me. “I didn’t want you to know. Hell... when I offered you another day in paradise, I was truly hoping I had moved forward... moved past all the shit I had been through... but as soon as the words left my mouth, I started regretting it, fearing the possible outcome,” she explained, frowning in pain.

“I’ll call the nurse... you’re supposed to rest,” I said, scolding myself for not noticing her pain.

“I’m fine... I guess this time he managed to break some of my bones,” she said, exuding scorn and hatred.

“A few ribs... you needed surgery,” I explained, sitting back on the chair near the bed. “Why did you never called the police?”

“It was useless... he was a charmer, an expert with the words, and he easily convinced everyone I loved it all. I tried to tell my mother what was going on, but she told me men were just men...” she explained, with a bitter tone.

“Why would she do that?”

“She loved being his mother in law. He showered her with gifts, bought her a house, paid for her vacations... He was the perfect son in law. She would never jeopardize that just because he was a bit rough in bed, as she liked to call it,” she replied, covering her eyes for a moment, with a shaky hand.

“What convinced you to finally leave?” I asked, curious.

“She died. Suddenly, I had no one telling me it was my duty to put up with my husband, no one I wanted more than anything to impress, to be the daughter she always wanted me to be...” she replied, in a self-deprecating tone. “God, that sounds so lame...”

“No, it doesn’t. A lot of people would go through hell just for a word of appreciation... to know they matter...”

“Is that why you visit your mother every week?” she asked me with a slight frown. “Because, deep down, you want her to love you?”

I could have lied or changed the subject, but I wanted Ailani to know the truth. “What kid doesn’t?... She never allowed me to get closer to her... but at least, now I know why.”

“How come?”

I rapidly told her a summarized version of my mother’s story. I needed her to understand why I had kept her at a safe distance, even when I knew she had become a vital part of my life.

“That’s so sad...”

“It explains a lot, and I’m happy she finally told me the truth.”

“Will you forgive her?”

I shrugged. “There’s nothing to forgive. She was too young and in a terrible position, with little support to cope with it.

Her own father didn't believe her, so why would the rest of the world?"

"Yes, I guess it's easy to understand..." she mumbled, squirming in bed.

"You're in pain," I stated. "I'll call the nurse."

"Not yet," she stopped me, putting her hand in mine. "Painkillers make me sleepy, and I don't want to sleep."

I caressed her hand before I kissed it. "What do you want?" I asked, knowing she had wanted to ask me something ever since she woke up.

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## *Ailani*

I closed my eyes for a moment before I faced Jayden again. Though I had tried to ignore it, to pretend everything was alright, I was scared to death. The horror and the pain I had gone through had been so much worse than I ever thought it could be. Daniel hadn't restrained himself at all. I had felt every ounce of his rage against me on every inch of my body.

It would kill me to know he was out there, still free, waiting to drag me back to hell. I couldn't go through it again... not anymore.

"I need to know... where is he?" I asked, in a low tone.

"In jail, waiting for his bail hearing. The police charged him with attempted murder, rape, and aggravated assault," he answered, kissing my hand once more.

Jayden's eyes became as dark as the skies right before a storm. He was having a hard time accepting what had happened to me, and I guess it was too much to take.

I wanted to ask him how he felt, but the answer scared me more than anything. I wasn't prepared to see disgust or repulsion in his eyes. Though I would understand, it would kill me. Whatever we had; I didn't know if it was strong enough to survive the nightmare my life had been.



“Bail? Is it possible he will be granted bail?” I asked, scared.

“Possible yes... but it shouldn’t happen, not with all the evidence the police and the private investigator I hired dug up on Hudson. But you never know,” he replied.

“When will it be?” I asked, a bit anxious.

I knew he would come for me the minute he was free. He wasn’t thinking straight... his insane obsession was ruling his actions, and nothing good would come of that.

Jayden glanced at the wristwatch. “It should take place in an hour,” he informed me.

“Don’t they need my testimony?” I asked, with a slight frown.

“Are you up to it? The doctors didn’t advise...” he asked, concerned.

“If it will keep him in jail, then yes, I’m up to it,” I assured him.

“A detective is waiting outside. I can call him if you really feel the need,” he said, though it was clear he disapproved. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I’ll have to, sooner or later...”

He nodded and jumped out of his chair to get the detective. The man, in his mid-forties, immediately arrived, with a small recorder in hand, ready to take my statement.

I considered asking Jayden to leave us alone, but this way, I wouldn’t have to tell my dark story twice.

I invited the man to take a seat before I started to tell him all about Daniel and me, starting from the beginning. I told them how I met him while in high school and fell in love with him. He seemed nice while we were dating, but things went south from our wedding day. It was hard to say the words, but I married a monster who raped me, knowing I had never been with a man.

I tried to do what I supposed was expected of me, but his violence seemed to escalate, no matter what I did. He managed to convince people nothing was wrong when they suspected things weren't so perfect...

Everything... of course, I left out many of the nastiest details, like when he kicked me repeatedly, while I was on the floor, or how he belted my back until I was nothing but a bloody mess or the countless times he raped me, even though I begged him not to. No one needed to hear that, and I doubted it would make a difference.

During the whole process, I kept my eyes locked on the detective. I couldn't see Jayden's face and watch how he was reacting to the whole story. I wasn't ready for that.

"When did you leave him?"

"Right after New Year's Eve. My mother had died a few weeks before Christmas, and I guess losing her fueled my need to escape. I gathered as much money as I could, which wasn't easy since I had no access to his bank accounts or credit cards," I explained. "I had to steal one of his cards and take as much cash I could from it before he blocked it."

"What happened then?"

"I jumped on the first bus out of New York, and I have been on the running ever since."

"Did he ever come close to finding you?" the man asked, his expression as dark as my story.

"Yes... a few weeks ago. I was living in a small town, not far from Pendleton, and I was working as a dishwasher. My boss

asked for my social security number, and I explained my situation to him,” I told him, wriggling my hands. “He convinced me Daniel wouldn’t be able to track it, that I deserved to have health insurance and all the benefits from a legal job.”

“I’m guessing he was wrong.”

I nodded. “I should have known better. Tracking people is what Daniel does for a living. He showed up a few days after I was registered as an employee.”

“What happened then?” the detective asked.

“We were arguing, just outside the restaurant, and the owner heard us and came out to see what was going on. Daniel got distracted, and I was able to run away and jump into a truck leaving town.”

“When you say ‘arguing,’ you mean he was beating you, right?” the detective deduced.

“Yes... the truck driver noticed my bruises and agreed to take me away. Daniel stopped the truck and told him I was a mentally ill person, that I needed my meds, but Brett didn’t believe him and assured him he hadn’t seen me.”

“How did you get to Seattle?”

“Brett took me to Portland, and I took a bus from there. He lent me some money. Once I got to Seattle, I tried looking for a job with no luck. Soon I ran out of money, so I had no place to stay. I kept looking for work, but I was surprised by the snowstorm. I needed to get in out of the cold, but the homeless’ shelters were packed. It was then when I met Mr. Wells.”

The detective nodded. “How did your husband he find you here?”

“He told me he had seen pictures of me at the art show I went a few days ago. I hadn’t seen the pictures, or I would have left immediately. When I did, it was too late. He was already in town,” I explained.

“Did you ever confide on Mr. Wells about the whole story?” the detective asked.

I bit my lower lip and took a deep breath before I answered that. “No, I didn’t. I wanted to keep my past where it belonged – the past. But it caught up with me. The moment I saw Daniel at the gala, I knew it was a matter of time for him to capture me again.”

“Why didn’t you leave town?”

“I knew he would be watching every road, train station, bus station, and airport in town. Laying low until he gave up was my best option,” I explained.

“Did he take you to the cabin right after he captured you?”

“As far as I know, yes. He knocked me out, and when I came to, we were only minutes away from the cabin. He kept me on the car trunk the whole ride there.”

“Is he responsible for all the bruises and wounds you suffered?” the detective asked.

“Yes, he is... we were alone at the cabin.”

“Did he threaten your life in any way?” the man asked, with a grim frown.

“He told me he couldn’t keep me alive since he had told the world I was dead. He took great pleasure explaining how he staged my death and how he played the role of mourning widower.”

“He claims he knew nothing about that,” the detective warned me. “That he genuinely thought you were the woman on the car.”

“If that’s true, why was he after me? Why was he tracking my social security number?” I asked, my voice thick with all the hatred I felt for the man.

The detective nodded as he ended the recording. “Thank you for your help. I know this wasn’t easy for you. I’ll take this to the prosecutor. I’m sure he will make good use of it.”

I thanked the man and watched him leave hurriedly before I closed my eyes.

Jayden was still in the same place he had been since the detective entered the room – by the window, his eyes lost somewhere outside. Now that we were alone, a thick silence filled the room, and I pushed back a sob, not sure what to say or even if I wanted to say anything.

This wasn't the way I had planned to tell him my story.

“Josh and the other two police officers that came from Seattle with me are outside guarding your door. You're safe here,” he said in a dark tone I barely recognized. “I need to be at the hearing. I'll come back later.”

I opened my eyes just in time to see him march towards the door. “Jayden...” I called him out, but he pretended he didn't hear me, and before I knew, he had left.

I closed my eyes and finally allowed my tears to run down my cheeks, too weak to stop them. I felt drained.

“Hey there... how are you feeling?” a nurse asked me as she entered the room. “Your fiancé told me you were in pain. Would you like something for it?”

I nodded, wanting more than anything the obliviousness that came with the painkillers. “Yes, please.”

She injected something into my intravenous line, and a few moments later, my eyes were closing. “This will make you feel better soon,” she told me.

“Thank you.”

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## *Jayden*

I don't think I knew the real meaning of powerless until Ailani started telling her story to the detective. She had been through hell, and nothing I ever did would erase that. But I could make sure the bastard responsible for her pain didn't have another chance at hurting her.

I rushed to the court and got there just in time to hear the prosecutors recite all Hudson's charges. I needed all my strength and self-control not to jump to where the bastard was sitting and take justice in my own hands. The cynical smirk on his face, while he heard the charges, made my blood boil, and for a moment, I saw red.

In the end, the judge announced Hudson would stay in custody until his trial. Hearing him say what a disgrace Hudson was to the institution he once represented appeased some of the rage boiling inside me.

Not that Hudson cared. He was still convinced he could walk out of this situation as if nothing had happened.

The detective told me later, he had shown no regret nor shame while hearing Ailani's recorded testimony, and I can't say I was surprised.

"What are his chances?" I asked the detective.

"The NYPD is already investigating the staging of Ailani's death, trying to link it to him. Even if they can't, which is probable, since he cremated the body, he was the person with the most interest in declaring her dead," he pointed out. "Ailani didn't have the means to pull off something like that, and I'm sure she will be able to prove she was quite far from New York by the time of the accident."

"Good. He deserves to spend the rest of his life in jail."

"The prosecutor will definitely go for that," the detective said. "He was caught during the act. There is more than enough evidence of the rape and physical abuse he subjected her to. His semen was found all over her. Even if they can't charge him for his past crimes, he has no way out of this one."

I was pleased to hear that, but the way he described Ailani's personal hell felt like a strong punch to my gut. I should have protected her. I should have listened to her.

I still couldn't believe I missed the bruises on her face and arm. I had been blinded by jealousy.

"You'll probably be called to testify," the detective warned me.

“I’ll be here,” I assured him.

“Good. We’ll be in touch.”

The man said goodbye, and I drove back to the hospital, not sure how I was going to face Ailani.

Josh was there, ready to leave with his partner.

“We’re going home.”

“Thank you so much for your support. I had my helicopter brought here; it can fly you back to Seattle. It’s the least I can do for you guys,” I offered.

“We appreciate it, but we’ve got it covered. Won’t you be flying back today?” Josh asked, curious.

“No... Ailani is still too weak for such a journey. I’ll take her home when she’s better,” I assured him.

He frowned. “Oh? The nurse told me she wanted to sign her self-discharging papers... I thought you knew about it,” he said.

But I was long gone by the time he uttered the last word.

What the hell was going on? Where was she going?

When I got to her room, she was sitting on her bed, fully dressed.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” I asked, closing the door behind me. “You just had surgery yesterday.”

She didn’t look at me. “I’m much better. You don’t have to worry about me anymore. Josh told me Daniel isn’t going anywhere,” she murmured in a low tone.

“Exactly... so you’re not in danger. You can lay back and let your body heal,” I pointed out.

“And I will, but it doesn’t have to be here,” she insisted.

“Do you want to go back to Seattle? Is that it?” I asked, confused.

“Well, I have to go there, eventually. All my stuff is still there.”

“I can arrange that,” I offered, leaving the room to find a nurse or doctor.

“Ah, Mr. Wells, I was looking for you,” Nurse Marilyn told me when she saw me. “Your fiancée insists on leaving the hospital.”

“Yes, she just told me. Is it safe for her to go back to Seattle?” I asked, frowning as I wished I could see what was going on inside Ailani’s head.

“I wouldn’t say it’s safe. But if done correctly and she gets into a hospital in the city, she should be fine,” the nurse informed me. “She was rather disturbed about the medical bills.”

“What? What the hell are you talking about?” I asked her, startled.

“She asked to see her medical bills so far, and it definitely upset her.”

“I told you I would pay for everything. Why did you show her the bills?” I asked, furious.

“She’s entitled to see them,” she scolded me.

“Did you tell her I was paying for it?”

“She didn’t ask, so I assumed she knew.”

“Damn it, woman,” I ranted.

“Mr. Wells!” she protested.

I ran my fingers through my hair, trying to stay calm. “I’m sorry... these have been the worst days of my life... as you might understand, my patience is running thin. Please, prepare all the discharge papers. I’ll fly her back to Seattle in my helicopter, and she will finish her convalescence there.”

She nodded. “Very well. Just make sure she gets the proper treatment and some rest,” she asked me, with a smile.

“I will,” I promised before I returned to Ailani’s room. “All done, we’ll leave in a few minutes,” I told her, as I texted the policemen with the details of our trip.



“You didn’t have to do that,” she murmured, refusing to face me.

“We all have to go back home,” I replied, dismissing her worries.

She sighed. “Of course.”

“We’ll have to come back later for the trial,” I pointed out, more to check on her reaction than anything.

But she didn’t react... it was as if she was numb. “I’m well aware.”

Trying not to press her, I helped her gather all her things, and a few minutes later, we were on board my helicopter, heading to Seattle.

Ailani didn’t say a word during the whole trip, but I was sure she would say plenty when she realized where I was taking her. If something I had learned from her was that she could be incredibly stubborn, but I could be even more so.

The helicopter landed on top of the hospital. When the doors opened, a nurse was there with a wheelchair to take Ailani to her room.

“What’s going on?” she asked, grabbing my shirt in a tight fist.

“You’re not well enough to go home. I agreed to bring you back to Seattle, but you’ll stay here at the hospital for as long as necessary,” I warned her, picking her in my arms and carrying her to the wheelchair.

“Have you lost your mind? I don’t want to be here,” she ranted, trying to struggle against me.

“This is not about what you want. It’s about what you need,” I said in a firm tone. “And I’ll make you get it.”

“You can’t keep me here against my will,” she said, furious.

“Actually, I can,” I said, letting her down on the chair. “I can ask a judge to rule you incapable of deciding for yourself, due to the trauma.”

“No judge would agree with that,” she spurted, through gritted teeth.

“Oh, I’m sure I could find a few, especially when the doctors informed them that you’re a danger to yourself.”

She pursed her lips but said nothing else. I could tell I would have to watch her 24/7 if I wanted to keep her here.

A few minutes later, she was settled in her room, and the nurse was giving her the meds she needed.

“Why the hell are you doing this?” she asked when the nurse left us alone.

## *Ailani*

“I can’t afford this,” I told Jayden in a stern tone.

“That’s not important,” he dismissed my worries, and I pursed my lips, wishing I could understand him.

“How can you say that?” I asked him, furious. “Why are you doing this? Whatever guilt you might have felt for what happened has been fully compensated when you rescued me,” I added, my eyes locked on my trembling hands.

“Guilt? Yes, I felt my share of that. But that was never what moved me to find or help you,” he assured me, dragging a chair near the bed and sitting on it.

“It wasn’t? What else could it be? After all, you barely know me,” I scoffed, “and I’m sure you don’t like what you’ve learned so far.”

He took my hand on his and caressed its back with his thumb, a caress I had grown used to, ever since I woke up at the hospital.

“You think? Other than your lack of judgment for marrying an asshole like Hudson, I haven’t heard anything about *you* I didn’t like,” he assured me, kissing the palm of my hand, sending tiny waves of pleasure rushing through me.

I closed my eyes for a moment, allowing myself to fully relish the feeling before I pulled myself back to the cold reality. “Oh, please...” I grumbled.

“I mean it,” he insisted. “If anything, I just wish I had met you before you met him.”

His words intrigued me. “Why is that?”

He kissed my hand again before he looked up with a naughty grin on his face. “You would have fallen for me and not him.”

My heart stopped for a moment before it jumped into a frantic pace. “What makes you think I would fall for you?”

“Wouldn’t you?” he asked, directly and looked away, not sure how to answer his question.

From the very first moment I saw him, I knew I could trust him. Hell, I had offered myself to him, despite my fears and horrors. Deep down, I knew he would never hurt me, that he would take care of me, despite everything. And he had.

At least, until I broke his trust. I should have told him the truth after we made love... but I was too afraid to lose him, that he wouldn’t want anything to do with me. By then, I was so into him, I wasn’t ready to say goodbye.

Now, I knew I would never be ready.

“Why would you want that?” I asked in self-deprecation.

He jumped up from the chair and joined me in bed, sliding his arm underneath me and pulling my head to his chest, as gently as possible. I had missed being in his arms so much, this was blissful.

“Would I want you to fall for me? Of course, I would. I still do,” he stated in a firm tone. “I know we barely know each other, that so many things happened in such a short period, but I’m convinced what we have is the real thing.”

I tilted my head to look at him, not sure what he was saying. “You let me walk away...” I pointed out.

“And I’ll always regret that. If I had listened to you, things would have been quite different,” he said, and a glimpse of darkness flickered in his eyes. “Thanks to my mother, I was never able to trust a woman. My feelings for you were new, too strong, and overwhelming, and I had no idea how to handle them. I had never felt so lost in my life,” he confessed.

My heart thundered in my chest, but I forced myself to ignore it, to not let my hopes resurrect when this could be all just an infatuation... a moment of passion, fueled by all we had been through.

“When you gave me a reason to doubt them, I was more than eager to grasp it. Your apparent betrayal took things to a turf I knew well, one where I could handle things... I had the motive to step back and protect myself,” he explained.

“I see...” I mumbled.

He chuckled and kissed the top of my head. “I doubted... but it didn’t last long. When Hudson came looking for you at my office, I realized things weren’t as clear as I pictured them, so I started looking for you and ended up guiding him to you.”

“You can’t blame yourself for his madness... it took me a while to understand that,” I murmured.

“I know that... or at least, my rational side knows that. But when it comes to my feelings... it will take a while for me to make peace with that,” Jayden said in a dark tone.

“He would have found me, either way,” I assured him.

“We’ll never know...”

“The good part is that I don’t have to worry about him anymore,” I said, yawning.

“Exactly...” he kissed my hair once more before he carefully slid off the bed. “Get some rest. I’ll be right here.”

To say I missed his warmth was an understatement, but I didn’t complain. I was too tired for anything. I would face the world tomorrow.

After a restless night, I opened my eyes to a new day. Jayden sat on the chair near the bed, his head resting on the mattress and his hand holding mine.

A dense stubble covered his face, and I could see the dark half circles under his eyes, standing out on his naturally tanned skin.

I must have made a sound because he opened his eyes and smiled at me.

“Hey, there,” he mumbled before he kissed my hand and straightened up.

“You should have gone home,” I scolded him.

“Not happening,” he assured me, vehemently. “Not until you can go with me.”

“Let’s go today,” I suggested, ignoring his last words, sure it was just a way of speaking.

I had nothing to do at his place. Once I left the hospital, we would go our separate ways. Even if he decided he wanted to see where this, whatever it was, could go, I wasn’t sure I was ready for it. My last encounter with Daniel had left too many scars, most of them not even physical.

He shook his head. “Not until the doctors say it’s okay.”

A gentle knock at the door warned us we had company. The door opened, and Madeleine entered, carrying a duffel bag.

“Good, you’re up. I was afraid I would wake you up,” she said with a wary smile. She handed Jayden the bag. “Here’s what you asked me to bring,” she said.

“Thank you, mom,” he grabbed the bag, kissed her cheek, and disappeared into the bathroom.

I wasn’t sure who was more surprised, Madeleine, or me. I was sure he didn’t often kiss his mother, and her reaction confirmed it.

She cleared her throat before she turned to look at me. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better, thank you.”

The woman wriggled her hands and paced the room for a few minutes. “You must be wondering what I’m doing here...” she mumbled, finally breaking the silence between us.

I smiled. “It crossed my mind,” I admitted.

“Jayden called me last night and asked me to come and keep you company. Apparently, he doesn’t trust you’ll stay put if you’re alone,” she explained, amused.

“He knows me better than I thought,” I said, scowling.

“I hope you don’t mind. He has a crucial meeting at the office,” she added.

“One I couldn’t solve by Skype,” he said, coming out, his hair still wet from the shower, wearing black jeans and sweater. “I’ll only be away for a couple of hours,” he promised,

walking to the bed and kissing me gently on my lips. “Be a good girl.”

I showed him my tongue. “Please, take all the time you need,” I told him as he walked out of the room.

Madeleine took a seat on the small couch, not far from the bed. “I heard Jonathan is painting you,” she said with a genuine smile.

“Well... he was...” I replied, grazing some of the bruises on my face.

“Sweetheart, nothing would make him give up on that. I’m sure he will tell you that himself when he comes by later. He has been so worried about you,” she told me with a slight frown. “We all were when we realized you had been taken away.”

I frowned. “You barely know me.”

She shrugged. “Sometimes, all it takes is a look, a word, even a gesture... for you to know the kind of person you’re dealing with,” she said, intuitively. “How long did it take Jonathan to ask to paint you?”

“A few minutes, I think...”

“He was still talking about you when I got to the art show that same night. He was blown away by your exquisite beauty... his words, not mine,” she assured me. “And believe me, he wasn’t talking about the way you look.”

“You didn’t seem happy when you met me,” I pointed out.

She sighed. “Going against Jayden became a bad habit, something I couldn’t seem to avoid,” she confessed. “The truth was... I was bewildered. I had never met any of his girlfriends. He would go to the most incredible lengths just avoid introducing them to me. So, you can imagine my surprise when he took you home.”

Matty had mentioned something of the sort, but I hadn’t quite believed her.

“I see...”

“All I said was meant to annoy him. There wasn’t an ounce of truth in the things I said.”

“Why say them, then?”

“I grew used to making his life a living hell. Blaming him for my sorry life was a lot easier than dealing with my problems and acting like the adult I’m supposed to be,” she confessed. “He never reacted... not even when he was a child. He used to stay there, still as a statue, listening to my rants,” she added, wiping her cheek. “At some point, I realized what I was doing, but I didn’t know how to stop. I guess I preferred his indifference to his disdain.”

“What changed?” I asked, intrigued.

“We talked... the night you disappeared. For the first time, he asked my version of the story, and I told him everything,” she explained. “Somehow, I felt free to drop the act.”

“I’m glad you did,” I told her with a smile.

“I was so happy to help him that night. I remembered your ex’s name from when you introduced him to me, and that helped Jayden and the police to track him down.”

“You helped me a lot that night, stalling him,” I told her, with a faint smile.

“Yes... I imagined it. I tried to keep him with me, but he only stayed a few seconds.”

“It was enough for me to escape.”

“Would you like to tell me what happened? From the beginning? Sometimes, it helps to talk about it,” she suggested.

I shook my head, rejecting the idea of going through my personal hell, but before I knew it, the words were coming out of my lips.

I told her everything... how I met him, how we started dating, our marriage, the beatings and rapes, and my mother’s death.

“We weren’t close, but her death affected me more than I expected. It took away my chance of ever becoming the



daughter she wanted me to be, I guess..." I told Madeleine.

"It was her loss," she assured me.

"Anyway... with her gone, I finally found the courage to leave Daniel. Getting my hands on some money was the hardest part, once I made up my mind, but once I did, I planned my escape thoroughly."

"Why didn't you reach out to one of the organizations that help women in your position?" Madeleine asked.

"I didn't know any in New York, and googling it was too dangerous. I didn't have my own phone or computer, and if he found out, I would be in deep trouble," I explained. "I guess I could have gone to the police, but I truly didn't believe they would help me, not after the few times they had been called to the house and the way Daniel convinced them we just liked to play it rough."

Madeleine nodded. "Come to think of it, there aren't enough organizations to help out on these cases, and most don't have enough funds to help women escape or provide them with a new life."

"Well, with your experience, you should start one," I suggested, in a teasing tone. "You know, one that would give women shelter, money, or a place to start over. It should be connected with the witness protection program, so they could have new legal identities... that sort of stuff."

Madeleine stayed in silence for a while, and for a moment, I thought I had insulted her. Her following words surprised me.

"That's actually an excellent idea. I know a lot of people in a lot of places. Getting them to help us with this shouldn't be so hard," she said, with a thoughtful look on her face. "We would start in the three cities with the highest number of cases of domestic violence and see how it goes."

"We...?" I asked, with a slight frown. "You mean, you and Jayden?"

She shook her head. "Jayden is too busy, but we certainly will use all his influence to get this done," she replied, excited. "I meant you and me. You've been through it. No one, better than

you, knows what we need and how we can truly help these women.”

“Me? I’m not even sure how long I’ll be in Seattle...” I protested.

Madeleine shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. Wherever you and Jayden move to, we can still do this. This is the technology era; I should know since my son has played an important part in it.”

“You’re assuming too much,” I murmured.

She smiled kindly at me. “Am I? I can only imagine how hard it has been for you, all these years putting up with that bastard... but we both know how you feel about Jayden. It’s painfully obvious.”

Heat colored my face. “It is?” I asked, biting my lower lip.

“Just for some of us... I don’t think my son knows it. Or perhaps, he’s afraid to trust his eyes,” she assured me, in a sad tone. “You can blame me for that.”

“Still...”

Madeleine shook her head, silencing me. “I know it’s too much, too soon. Just give yourself the chance you deserve. Don’t run away. Face it, and life might finally surprise you, in a good way.”

I was still having a hard time believing I was having this conversation with Madeleine.

I chuckled. “Jayden won’t let me run away.”

Madeleine laughed. “No... he’s a very tenacious man, my son. When he truly wants something, he doesn’t let anyone nor anything stand in his way.”

The nurses interrupted us, and Madeleine stepped aside while they checked on me, making sure I had my meds and was comfortable enough.

“The doctors would like to run a few more blood tests, so I’ll take some of your blood if you don’t mind,” one of the nurses announced, and I frowned.

“Is it really necessary?” I asked, not very pleased with the idea.

“They think it is. We also need to know when was your last period.”

My frown became even deeper as I remembered I never went to the pharmacy for the morning after pill. Jayden had been careful after that, but not that first night.

I paled, barely controlling the urge to check if I was bleeding. If I had been pregnant, there was no chance in hell I still was... not after all Daniel’s kicks and punches.

“It’s been a while...” I stammered, struggling with the knot in my throat strangling me.

The nurse patted my hand. “Let’s run the tests before we jump to conclusions,” she advised, with a kind smile.

But it was too late. My mind was already going through every single second of my time with Daniel, trying to find out what could have happened. But the nurse was right... I had to stop.

The nurses left the room, and Madeleine looked at me, worried.

I managed to give her a shaky smile.

She pulled her cell phone from her purse. “You know what? I’ll call my lawyer. He has tons of experience with foundations, and he’s the right person to assist us with this,” she said, with a brighter smile.

“Are you sure of this? Don’t you think you should give it a thought before you call your lawyer?” I asked her, astounded.

“No... this is just what we need, right now. A goal for you to focus on and in the short run, it will be a great way to help

people. There's nothing else to think about," she assured me.

A few moments later, she was on the phone with a man called Geoffrey discussing what we had in mind for the foundation. She had him on speaker, so I could participate in the conversation, though I was still amazed by how fast Madeleine was moving with it.

We were still talking about it when Jayden arrived a little before lunch.

Madeleine said goodbye with a smile. "I'll let you know as soon as I have news from Geoffrey. I think he's more excited with it than us," she said, as she walked to the door.

Jayden stopped her, taking her by the arm. "What are you talking about?"

She kissed his cheek and smiled. "I'll let Ailani explain it to you."

Once she was gone, he turned to look at me, cocking his eyebrow. "Care to explain?"

"Well... your mother and I had an idea... and she seems to think it will work... I still think we should think it through... but she was so excited about it, she called her lawyer..." I rambled, not making that much sense.

Jayden raised his hands. "Hold on... why don't you start by telling me what's this idea about?"

I wriggled my hands, not sure what he was going to think about the whole thing. Would he consider it an intrusion? My way to get into his family?

"Well... we were talking about what happened. She asked me why I hadn't asked for help from one of the programs that help women in my situation to escape abusive husbands. I told her I didn't know of one that perhaps she should start one, with all her experience," I managed to explain. "One thing led to the other, and she decided to do it... with my help and Geoffrey's."

"She's making a new foundation? To help women on the run? And you'll be helping her?"

“Yes... I mean... if you think that’s a good idea... your mother is already going at lightspeed...” I was clearly overwhelmed and a bit afraid of his reaction, but so far, he was only smiling. As if he loved the idea.

“It’s a great idea. Count me in for everything you might need,” he assured me. “How are you feeling today?”

I gave him a faint smile, still feeling self-conscious around him. “I’m quite well, actually... just a bit tired of being here,” I admitted.

He leaned over and kissed me gently on the lips. “I’ll talk to the doctor to see if I can take you home. Susan is back, so she would be more than willing to take care of you,” he explained.

I was mortified. “Oh... she shouldn’t have... her daughter...”

He took a seat next to the bed and picked my hands. “Her daughter is fine and she will only be a few hours in the house, to make sure everything is done properly,” I opened my mouth to protest, but he didn’t give me a chance. “I didn’t call her. She saw the news on TV and rushed to the house. She wants to help, and I didn’t see the harm.”

“She’s so excited with her grandchild...” I muttered.

“I know, and she will be there with her daughter when the time comes. The doctors said it would take a couple more weeks, and her son-in-law took some time off from work to be there for his wife, so Susan was starting to feel like a third wheel,” he explained with a smile.

“I see...”

“She’s already looking for someone to replace her,” he added, and his words startled me.

I guess I should have been waiting for them since I had left the job, but somehow, I had thought things would go back to the way they were before this whole ordeal happened.

Obviously, I had been fooling myself.

I cleared my throat as I pushed away a lock of hair. “The news? This was on the news?” I focused on that specific point

of what he had just told me, desperate to change the subject before I made a fool of myself.

“Yes... national news, actually. Hudson’s lawyer did his best to keep it a secret, but my presence at the courthouse stirred things up, and the news reporters quickly found out the whole story,” he explained, not hiding his scorn for Daniel.

“I’m so sorry I dragged you into this,” I muttered, as heat colored my face, feeling ashamed, even though I knew I had no reason to feel so.

“You didn’t drag me into anything. I’ll do everything in my power to keep that bastard in prison for the rest of his life,” he assured me. A gentle knock at the door interrupted them. “That must be the food I ordered. I told the nurses I would bring your meals along with mine.”

I frowned. “You didn’t have to...”

“No... but I wanted to. Hospital food is terrible. The nutritionist gave me a list of the food you can eat, and I sent it to my favorite restaurant,” he explained, smiling, as he received the food from the delivery guy.

I shook my head, slightly amused with his extravagance.

“Thank you,” I accepted, as he laid out all the food on the rolling tray, the delicious scents making my mouth water.

He had spoiled me in the few weeks I’d lived with him. I had gone with just bread and cheese for more meals than I could count.

The doctor visited me a few minutes after lunch, and Jayden asked him when I could go home.

“If everything stays the same, she could go home tomorrow, but she shouldn’t be alone for long periods,” the doctor warned him. “Pulling out the stitches or displacing her ribs, could put her in danger.”

“She would never be alone,” he assured the doctor.

“Then, I see no harm,” he replied, with a stiff smirk on his face, as he checked nervously the tablet he was holding in his hands. “Mr. Wells, I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to step out

for a few minutes. I need to discuss a few things with my patient.”

The man’s words startled me, and I remembered the blood the nurses had taken from me that morning. I was terrified, and I sure as hell didn’t want Jayden listening to whatever the doctor had to tell me.

“Is that really necessary?” he asked, frowning.

“I’m afraid so,” the doctor insisted, looking at me.

“I’ll be fine, Jayden, it’s just protocol... nothing else,” I assured him, but my eyes never left the doctor’s face.

Jayden finally nodded and left the room.

The doctor waited until the door closed behind him before he looked directly at me.

“I wasn’t sure you would want to share this news with Mr. Wells...” he said, in a stern tone. “Considering all that happened, I felt it was better this way.”

I fisted my hands and hoped the man stopped mumbling and went straight to the point. “Yes... I understand... what seems to be the problem?” I asked, with my best fake smile on, as my heartbeat painfully in my chest, not sure how I would cope with bad news.

“Well... when you were admitted to the ER, they performed what we call the emergency blood test panel. It includes the basic tests and a few others that we might need to consider, in case of an emergency,” he explained.

Trying not to lose my patience, I nodded. “Yes, I understand.”

“One of those tests is a pregnancy test.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, gathering all the strength I had left, preparing myself for what would come.

“It came back positive, as you’ve probably guessed, but you were such bad shape, healing you was the doctors’ priority,” he continued. “So, they disregarded the results and proceeded with all the procedures needed to save your life.”

“Why are you telling me this now?” I asked him, frowning.

“When you were transferred here, the doctors told us to repeat the test, once you were stable enough. The chances were, it would come back negative, due to the ordeal you went through, so we ran a special test that would tell exactly what was happening: if you had really been pregnant and if you still were pregnant.”

“I guess it came back negative... I’m no longer pregnant,” I interrupted him, in a stern tone.

“That’s the thing... it didn’t,” he replied, playing nervously with the tablet. “We believe you didn’t miscarry because the assault happened so early in the pregnancy. The embryo was so small it wasn’t affected.”

I looked at the man as if he was speaking Mandarin. “What are you saying?” I managed to ask.

“You’re pregnant.”

His words echoed in the room, and for a moment, the world swirled around me at light speed. “I see...” I muttered, still in shock. “How old is it now?” I asked as a terrible thought crawled into my mind.

“It’s probably four weeks old, at the present moment,” the doctor explained. “Though some women can get a positive pregnancy test the day after conceiving, it’s very unlikely.”

I took a few deep breaths and nodded.

“We need to run a few more tests, but apparently, everything is quite well with the baby,” he continued, with a slight frown, clearly unsure of how to interpret my reaction. “I can send a counselor to discuss your options whenever you’re ready, of course,” he offered.

“My options?” I asked, still a bit off, having a lot of trouble to process the whole thing.

“Yes... but you don’t have to worry about that, right now,” he added. “Just focus on getting better, and we’ll talk about this when we get all the results back.”

I nodded. I heard his words as if from faraway, but I was definitely not listening to them.



*Pregnant. I'm pregnant.*

“Get some rest,” the doctor finally said, before he rushed out of the room.

I smiled, and I remember thinking the young doctor still had a lot to learn about bedside manners.

I was still smiling when Jayden got in. My smile slowly faded.

“Everything all right?” he asked, looking worried.

“Yes... all good... just, you know... girl stuff...” I mumbled, not sure what to tell him.

I sure as hell couldn't tell him the news, not when he still thought I had taken the morning after pill, as I should have.

This was my fault... my mistake, my responsibility. How was I supposed to tell him I was pregnant? I had no idea where I stood right now, and throwing this at him would only end in sheer disaster. I needed time to think things through.

He nodded, but I could tell he wasn't convinced. “I'll prepare everything to take you home tomorrow.”

I almost sighed with relief. “Yes, please... I can't wait to leave,” I said, with my brightest smile.

Jayden leaned over and kissed me. This time, his lips lingered a bit longer over mine, and I wished I could pull him closer and lose myself in the passion that had always burnt between us.

But it wasn't nor the place nor the moment.

The doctors confirmed the pregnancy and the wellbeing of the baby later that afternoon, but I was still having trouble believing it was real.

At first, when I was still dating Daniel, I used to picture myself as a mother, and I liked the idea. My mother had been a pitiful example of one, but back then, I was clear on what kind of mother I wanted to be. A supportive, always present, and loving mother. The kind that would do anything for her child, no matter what.

I still wanted those things, but after all I had been through, I wasn't sure I would be able to give my child the life he or she deserved. Especially, if I had to do the job alone.

Hell, I hadn't been able to take care of myself. How the hell was I supposed to take care of a child?

Doubts filled my mind, and I had a restless night. Fortunately, I had been able to convince Jayden to spend the night at home, so I hadn't had any witnesses.

I was getting ready to leave the hospital the following day when I received an unexpected visit.

"Officer Josh! What a surprise," I greeted him as he entered the room.

"Ms. Kekoa! It's great seeing you so well," the man replied with a wavery smile.

"Thank you," I said, resting my hand on my chest, a bad feeling creeping through me like the poisonous snake. "I wasn't expecting you today," I added, inviting him to tell me why he was there. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear it any more than he seemed to want to say it to me.

"I'm afraid I'm the bearer of bad news," he started, clasping his hands. "They were sending someone else to give you the news, but I thought it would be better to hear them from someone you already know."

“He escaped, didn’t he?” I mumbled as an icy wave washed over me.

“What? Oh, no... no...” he took a step closer and picked my hands in his. “Hudson is not going anywhere, ever again,” he calmed my fears. “He... he was found dead in his cell this morning.”

It took a few seconds for his words to make some sense in my troubled mind. “Dead? Daniel is dead?” I finally managed to utter the words.

“I’m afraid so. It seems he killed himself after he saw the news and realized he had no way out, that he would pay for all he did,” the officer explained, helping me to get a seat on the small couch near the bed. “Though I hate he took the coward’s way out of his own mess, I guess it must be a relief for you... knowing that he can’t hurt you again,” he added.

His words made little sense to me. My mind was swirling around the fact Daniel was dead. Really dead.

I sobbed, giving in. Stone by stone, the walls of fear and despair I had built around me ever since my wedding night came crumbling down, setting free all the tears I had welled up all over the years.

I couldn’t count how many times I had wished for him to die. In my darkest hours, while pain and despair clouded my judgment, imagining his death had been what had given me the strength to go on. I used to picture a million accidents, from the silliest ones to the bloodiest my mind could conjure.

But now it was real, and though a remnant of compassion flared in my mind, it was overwhelmed by the wildest wave of relief I ever experienced.

Jayden arrived at some point. I knew he was there; I could feel his arms around my shuddering body, but I couldn’t stop crying.

After a long while, my tears turned into quiet sobs, and soon, it was over. I felt drained, utterly exhausted. All I wanted was to cuddle up against Jayden’s warmth and close my eyes to the world.

He kissed my forehead.

“Are you all right?” he murmured, kissing me again.

I gave him a slight nod, too tired to speak.

“I’m assuming those were tears of happiness,” he said in a teasing tone.

A faint smile twisted my lips. “Is it wrong to feel so happy?” I murmured.

He chuckled and tightened his embrace around me. “I would be worried if you didn’t, after all, he did to you,” he assured me.

I sighed. “I’m mostly relieved. No more worrying, no more running...” I mumbled, having a hard time keeping my eyes open.

He picked me in his arms and carried me to the bed. “You’re exhausted. Get some sleep. I’ll come back later for you,” he suggested, kissing my cheeks.

“Is this real, Jayden? It’s not a dream, right?” I murmured as my body slowly fell under the spell of Morpheus.

“It’s real,” he assured me.

I have no idea how long I was asleep. The curtains were closed, and I hadn’t been disturbed by the nurses, so I had lost track of time.

Reality came crashing down on me as soon as I opened my eyes.

Daniel was dead. I was finally free.

But this also meant I had no real reason to stay in Seattle, nothing to keep me here. The fact that I was still alone in the hospital room seemed to emphasize this idea, and I whimpered.

What was I supposed to do? Take the hint and quietly disappear into the night? Wait and say goodbye to the owner of my heart and the father of my child?

I felt so lost, filled with doubts and questions, I was losing my mind.

A gentle knock on the door announced the nurse. “You’re up,” she said in a cheerful tone. “It’s time for your meds. Mr. Wells instructed us to bother you as little as possible, so I waited as long as I could,” she added as she handed me a couple of pills and a small glass of water.

“Is he here?” I asked, in a calm tone, as if her answer didn’t mean the world to me.

“No... he left right after you fell asleep. He asked us to call him as soon as you wake up,” she replied.

“There’s no need to bother him,” I told her with my best smile. “I can take a cab home.”

The nurse frowned. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she said. “You have been in bed for a few days, and you could get dizzy,” she warned me. “I’ll call him. Besides, he would ask for my head on a silver platter if I didn’t call him,” she said in a teasing tone.

Knowing it would be impossible to convince her otherwise, I let her make the call.

Jayden arrived a few minutes later, and though he acted, as usual, I could sense something was different. A shadow in his eyes I hadn’t seen before was there, and all my doubts came back with vicious strength.

We barely spoke on our way to his place, and the clouds around me were getting darker by the moment.

“Would you like to get some rest?” he asked, the moment we entered the house.

“No... I spent the whole day sleeping,” I protested, as I looked around.

The penthouse had been elegantly decorated for Christmas, and I realized we were only days away from the festivity. With everything happening around me, I had lost track of time. Not that it mattered to me. I hadn’t celebrated Christmas in years.

“Are you hungry? It’s still early, but I can order something for you if you want,” he asked again.

“I’m fine, thank you,” I assured him as I sat down on the couch.

“Mom called me this morning. She already has the first drafts of the foundation you discussed when you were together,” he informed me, as he stood a few steps away from me.

“That’s great,” I mumbled, but I really couldn’t care about that at that moment.

“She will come over tomorrow to go through them with you,” he added, in a forced tone, as if those weren’t the words he wanted to say.

I closed my eyes for a moment and took a deep breath, gathering my strength to face the new storm coming my way.

“I’m not sure I’ll still be here tomorrow,” I said in a low, sad tone.

“Right! I knew it!” he exploded. “You’re running away again, aren’t you? The nurse told me you didn’t want her to call me... what were you going to do? Run away? Without even saying goodbye? Was that it?” he ranted as he paced the room, oblivious of the astonishment on my face.

“I know you’ve been through a lot... I get that... I’ll never be able to erase that from your past, but I thought there was something special between us,” he continued, completely ignoring my attempts to interrupt him. “I know I screwed things up when I refused to listen to you, and I’ll never forgive myself for that, but don’t you think you could cut me some slack?”

He stopped for a moment and stared at me as I opened my mouth to answer his million questions, but he didn’t let me.

“This is new for me, you know?” he pushed his fingers through his dark hair, fussing with it in a way that always made me want to caress him. “Raised in a house where love was considered a dirty word, I never believed it existed. The more in love people looked, the more cynical I got. I used to

make bets with myself as to how long people would last in love,” he mocked himself.

“Oh...” I murmured, my heart aching for him.

“They never seemed to last long, and that only confirmed my theory that love was a myth, something people chose to believe in, to justify their stupid decisions in life,” he added.

“Do you still feel the same?” I asked, my heart thundering in my chest.

He scoffed. “You think? All I thought I knew crumbled at your feet,” he assured me as he closed the distance between us and knelt at my feet. He rested his hands on my knees. “One look at you, and I was lost,” he laughed mockingly. “You shook the floor under my feet so hard, the foundations my life was built on, cracked. It scared me so much, I tried to throw you out in the middle of a snowstorm.”

My chin almost hit the floor. This had to be a dream, right? It was too good to be true, too good to be real... but I would die if it wasn't.

Gently, he closed my mouth. “Why are you so surprised? Didn't you know?” he asked, in a soft tone, as if he was a bit embarrassed. “Everyone else knew...” he scowled. “After all, I broke my golden rule: I took a stranger home.”

“You had little choice,” I pointed out.

“The first night... perhaps. You do know my foundation runs most of the homeless people shelters in town, don't you?” he reminded me. “I could have sent you to one of those. They would never say no to me.”

“Why didn't you?” I asked, amazed I hadn't thought of it before.

“I couldn't. You had me from the first moment,” he assured me. “I even forced poor Susan to go on vacations, when she had just come back from them.”

“What?” he lost me at that. “But... her daughter...”

“Her daughter gave birth two months ago, and Susan was there,” he explained. “I needed a good reason to keep you with

me, and I knew it had to be a good one, so I lied,” he continued, showing no remorse at all.



I was astounded he had gone so far, just to make sure I stayed with him.

“Do you know why I live here? On the top floor of the company building?”

“Because of the view?” I mumbled, confused with the sudden change of subject.

He chuckled. “It is a great view, yes... but the main reason is, so I didn’t have to drive to work. This way, I only had to take my private elevator to my office. No hellos, no greetings, no meeting random people in the elevator... no socializing,” he scowled again. “I always felt out of place around people.”

I frowned. “You could have fooled me,” I admitted.

The man he was describing was not the man I met.

“I did fool you. I changed for you. After a week of trying to deny my feelings and stay away from you, I finally surrendered and decided to give you the world,” he confessed. “You didn’t want the world, so I tried to give you what I thought would get me faster into your heart.”

“It worked,” I murmured, in awe, but I don’t think he heard me.

“The first time we made love was overwhelming. I still had doubts, but finally, everything seemed to be working... until I saw you with Daniel, and he told me he was your husband.”

“You felt it proved all your theories right,” I concluded.

“Exactly... I was hurting so much I refused to listen to you, and we all know how that ended,” he said bitterly.

“None of what happened was your fault,” I assured him.

“You don’t know that,” he grumbled.

“Of course, I do. It was Daniel’s fault. He’s the only one to blame here, not you and not me,” I insisted.

“Perhaps...,” he sighed. “Before I could make things right, you were taken away, and I was sent to the pits of hell. Not

knowing where you were or what was happening was the most terrifying experience of my life,” he rubbed his eyes. “Seeing what he had done to you... I could have killed the bastard with my own hands. I’m sure I would have if the police weren’t there with me.”

“Why would you ruin your life for someone like him? A cowardly sadist that relished hurting those weaker than him,” I asked him. “He’s not worth your time, much less, your life.”

“I know you once loved him...”

I covered his lips with my fingers. “I never knew him. I fell in love with the heroic image he projected. He did his best not to let me know his true self before we were married because he knew I would run away,” I explained.

“Why did you stay for so long?” he asked as if this had been tormenting him for a while.

I sighed, sad. “I had never been with a man before him. My experience was summed up by cuddling in the back seat of a car or in a dark movie theater. When things went south on our wedding night, he blamed me, and I believed him,” I explained. “He was an experienced man, I had no reason to believe he was lying to me, especially when he kept telling me how much he loved me, despite my flaws.”

“Bastard!” he grumbled.

“It took me a while to wake up and see things couldn’t be just my fault. I tried talking to my mother about it, but she dismissed my concerns and told me to stop acting like a brat,” I continued. “By then, I had no friends of my own, no one I could confide in... he did a good job isolating me from the people I cared about.”

He caressed my cheek, and I leaned my head against his hand, closing my eyes for a moment, his touch comforting me more than anything ever had.

“Things never got better. No matter what I did, how hard I tried, nothing ever pleased him. When my mother died, I stopped trying and realized I had to escape,” I told him, my eyes clouded with tears. “I was foolish enough to tell him I

wanted the divorce, right after my mother's funeral. He beat me so badly I thought I would die that night. The following morning, he reminded me we were married, till death did us part, and that I should get used to it because he would never let me go."

"You must have been terrified," he pointed out, his eyes dark with the pain and rage he felt for me.

"I was... but that terror fueled me. I escaped that same day. I was long gone when he came back home that night," I explained. "And I never stopped running."

He cradled my face. "Will you stop now?"

I looked up at his gray eyes, clouded by his intense feelings. "Do you want me to?" I asked, in a low tone, still afraid of believing.

"Woman... I've spent hours telling you exactly how much I love you. Which part wasn't clear enough?" he asked in a firm tone.

I gasped, and my eyes filled with tears. "You never said the words," I pointed out, struggling with the huge knot on my throat to speak.

"I didn't?" he asked, surprised. "Well, yes, I guess I didn't. So, I'm doing it now – I love you."

I sobbed. "You don't believe in love," I reminded him, as the first tears rolled down my cheeks.

He wiped the tears with sweet kisses. "I didn't... not until you came along. Now, I know it's real and that I will follow you to the end of the world, just for a chance to be with you."

I sobbed louder. "I'm an emotional train wreck... with a lot of dark baggage," I warned him.

"I'm strong enough to carry that for you," he assured me, caressing my cheeks, his forehead resting on mine. "All I want in return is a chance to make you fall for me. I know you've been through a lot, and that might take time, but I'm willing to wait... if you let me."

I covered his hands with mine and looked him in the eyes. “You don’t have to wait. Your eyes captured my soul from day one,” I assured him.

He leaned forward and claimed a passionate kiss from my lips, showing me, this time with actions and not words, how much he loved me and that nothing would ever change that.

“I love you,” I said when he released my lips for a moment.

“Will you let me take care of you? Love you?”

“Just love me... I’m stronger than you think. No need to take care of me,” I assured him.

He chuckled. “Sweetie, you’re the strongest woman I’ve ever met,” he assured me before he kissed me again. “So... Christmas is coming. Did you write your list for Santa?” he teased me, combining his words with kisses.

“I don’t have to. I already have all I could possibly wish for,” I assured him, pulling him closer, deepening his kisses.

Someone cleared their throat behind them. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but Ailani needs to take her meds,” Susan said, in an amused tone. “You do remember she just came out of the hospital, right?” she added, in a scolding tone.

Jayden let himself sit on the floor and turned to look at the woman standing at the kitchen door. “Susan... what would we do without you?” he asked, in a teasing tone.

“Foolish things, I’m sure, that would put her back into a hospital bed,” she replied, without mincing words.

We chuckled, and Susan crossed the room to give me the pills and some water.

“You should get some rest. Those ribs need rest to heal,” she told me, and I nodded.

Jayden jumped up. “I’ll take her to bed,” he offered, picking me in his arms and carrying me to his bedroom. I hadn’t slept in mine ever since we made love.

And it was when it struck me. I hadn’t told him about the baby.

He placed me in bed as carefully as possible and kissed my forehead.

“Get some rest. I’ll call Phoebe and make sure things are going as expected,” he said as he straightened, but I pulled him back.

“Wait... there’s something I haven’t told you,” I said in a shaky tone.

He frowned. “Is it important?”

“I think so...”

He nodded. “Go ahead.”

“Remember our first night?”

“How could I forget it?”

“All of it?” I insisted, trying to find the words to explain it to him, unsure of his reaction.

“Please, get to the point.”

“I forgot to go to the pharmacy the following morning,” I stuttered. “Your mother came by, and it slipped my mind.”

He sat in bed next to me. “What exactly are you trying to tell me?” he asked, but I couldn’t read his mood from his words, and it scared me a bit.

I took a deep breath. “I’m pregnant. The doctors found out when I was taken to the ER, but they assumed I had miscarried with everything that happened...”

“But you didn’t,” he concluded.

“No... against all the odds. The embryo was so small, it wasn’t affected by the beating. They confirmed it a couple of days ago, and I have been trying to find the way to tell you about it,” I confessed.

“You were afraid.”

“I was...” I admitted. “Afraid you would blame me... you had been so distant, and I was so confused...”

“You’re still afraid, aren’t you?”

I let out a bitter laughter. “Dark baggage, remember? We never discussed these things, and I have no way of knowing how you feel about the whole idea.”

He pulled me into his arms. “I would have preferred some time with just you, to pamper you and make you the happiest woman in the world...,” he confessed. “It also scares the hell of me. Being a father was never in my plans... not with my family background.”

My heart ached, and I trembled. “You don’t want it,” I said, struggling to silence my sobs.

He forced me to look him in the eyes. “I never said that,” he pointed out. “I never considered the possibility, but I would never abandon my child. You probably think you’re not ready for this, but I’m sure we can pull it together.”

“I’m not ready... but I still want it.”

He kissed me. “Problem solved. We’re having a baby,” this time, joy and excitement laced his words, and I sobbed, happier than I ever thought possible.

“We’re having a baby,” I repeated.

“We have to get married. Soon, so you don’t have to worry about the pictures being anything but perfect,” he continued, still excited.

“I’m covered in bruises...” I pointed out, amused.

“Right... well, as soon as they fade away. Does it work for you?”

I chuckled and hugged him. “Today would work for me,” I assured him.

## Epilogue

### *Ailani*

We got married two months later. My father walked me down the aisle, and it was perfect, in ways I didn't think possible.

He had flown to Seattle to visit me a couple of days after I left the hospital. He had seen me in the news, and after years of looking for me, he had finally found me. He showed me all the letters he had sent me over the years that had never reached me because my mother made sure they were sent back to him. I knew she hated him, so I can't say it surprised me to find out she had kept me away from my father.

Jayden insisted on giving me a traditional Hawaiian marriage, so he flew in the guests, and we had the most fantastic wedding at a spectacular beach, with the sunset coloring the skies.

All I had ever dreamed of and more.

Jonathan and George were there, and I was ecstatic when they showed us their wedding gift – my painting.

“I shouldn't be giving you this, since you have the original, but I know you'll buy it anyway, so we decided to save you the trouble,” Jonathan said to Jayden as he showed us the painting.

The resemblance was breathtaking, and the way he handled light and shadows was amazing.

“Are you sure?” Jayden asked him, astounded. “This is definitely your best painting so far.”

“I know, right?” he smiled. “Just lend it to me for my next show in New York,” he asked.

“Of course,” Jayden promised, with a wide smile.

The painting was now in our living room, and though I loved it, sometimes I had trouble believing I was the girl portrayed.

I had changed a lot during the past few months, and not only physically. I was a new woman.



Tonight, four months later, we had the first fundraising for our new foundation called ‘Second Chances.’ Madeleine and I had worked very hard to see it come to life, and incredibly, we had found support from people all over the country.

“Ready for the show?” Jayden asked me as he walked into our bedroom.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I said, scowling.

“You look beautiful,” he assured me as he caressed my huge, round belly.

“I look and feel heavy,” I replied, smiling.

“You don’t have to do this, you know... mom can take care of everything,” he said, kissing my forehead.

“I know... but I want to be there. I can’t wait to meet Ronan and Gabriella Greystone. They have traveled a long way to be here tonight,” I reminded him, mentioning a couple I met when we started the foundation.

Gabriella went through a lot before she met her husband. She had asked to become a part of the foundation as soon as she heard about it.

We had talked a lot on the phone and video conferences, but we were only meeting tonight, and I couldn’t wait. Something told me we had a lot in common, and not only our dark past.

The fundraising was a huge success. All the tickets had been sold, and the ballroom was packed with people. Although most wouldn’t do much, other than spending some money, we met a lot of people interested in helping in more ways than that.

Meeting Ronan and Gabriella had been a real pleasure, and I felt I could entrust her to work closely with the foundation.

“This will work, I’m sure of it,” Gabriella told me, with a brilliant smile.

“I really hope so. We need to reach those women too afraid to leave and show them it’s possible; that we’ll be there to help them all the way until they find the new lives they deserve.”

“Yes... exactly. Though my case was slightly different, I could have used some help while I was running away,” Gabriella agreed.

“That’s why we’ll have information about the foundation, in every homeless shelter, church, and support group in the country. Not to mention all the information we’re planning to display in the most used social media,” I continued.

Gabriella chuckled. “Wow, girl... are you sure all that excitement is good for the baby?” she teased me.

Jayden wrapped his arm around me, smiling. “I’ve been trying to convince her to slow down, but nothing works.”

I patted my round belly. “This one here is a fighter. He can take mom’s excitement, anytime,” I assured them, smiling back.

It was an amazing night, and I had never felt happier in my life. Sometimes, I still find it hard to believe I’m not dreaming, that this is real, but I just needed a look or a caress from Jayden to know it is true.

I had managed to stay, permanently, in paradise.

*The end*