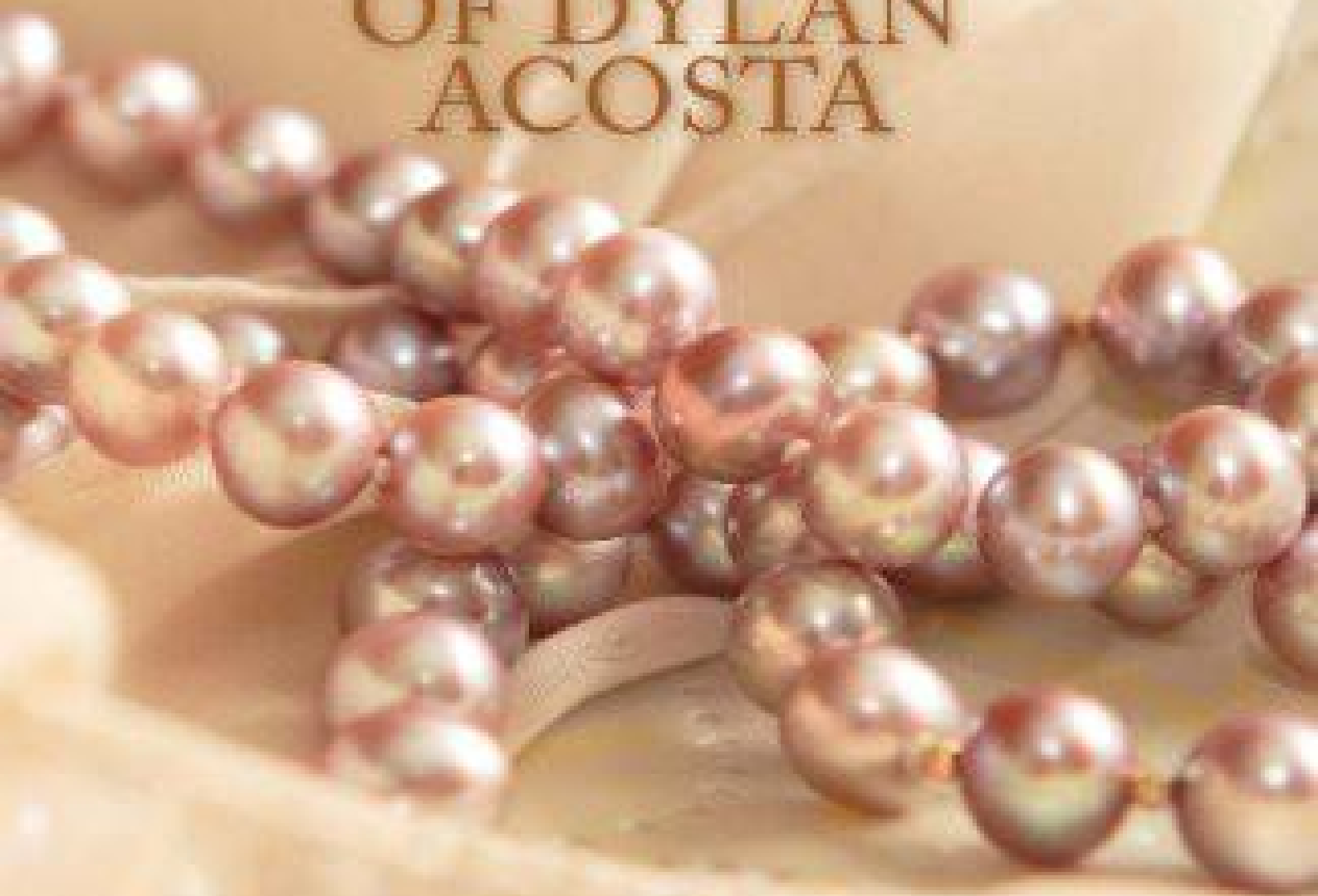


# THE SEDUCTION OF DYLAN ACOSTA



Nia Forrester

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# **The Seduction of Dylan Acosta**

**A Novel**

# **Nia Forrester**

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*For my patient reader*

# 1

New York parties were always like this. Especially the trendy downtown parties. The night would meander along with pretentious indies or retro music, a little weed and people hooking up on the rooftop until sooner or later some minor celebrity would show up—the friend of a friend who was on Broadway, or in some movie being filmed uptown. And there would be electricity in the air while everyone waited to see who the lucky person would be, who would bag themselves a star for one night.

This time, the news had spread like wildfire among the guests that a famous athlete was there so that by the time someone whispered the name into Dylan's ear, everyone else was already scoping out the room, hoping to get a glance of the short stop everyone said was going to bring the Mets back to their former glory.

After a few minutes of scanning the room, caught up in the hype like everyone else, Dylan lost interest and climbed out onto the fire-escape to light the joint someone slid into her palm earlier in the evening. It was chilly out, that time in the season when you could just begin to see your breath. Once the window was shut, Dylan could just make out the voices of a couple in one of the apartments below, arguing. She considered for a moment whether she might not be better off inside since listening to a domestic spat was no more her idea of a fun Friday night than this party had been.

The night promised to be a long one because Ava was with her sometimes-boyfriend Jacob and had made Dylan promise not to let her go home with him, no matter what. This usually meant that sometime around one a.m. she would have to intercede when a drunk Ava tried to make the case that she'd only been *kidding*, and that it was *fine* to let her leave with Jacob, because he'd promised things would be different this time.

As she looked at the joint in her hand, Dylan considered whether or not to light it. She didn't feel like getting high. She

felt like going home and getting into her pajamas and watching cable with a pint of ice cream. The skinny jeans she'd borrowed from Ava dug into her thighs and the shoes—platform pumps—were beginning to hurt her feet. If she'd followed her instincts, she would have gone straight home after work and done a few more practice LSAT tests. No way was she getting into NYU Law with the scores she was showing now.

She sighed and sent the joint sailing over the balcony and down into the alley below. “Good move,” someone said. She hadn't even heard the window reopen and was momentarily startled, believing herself to still

be alone on the fire-escape. He was standing at the window, wearing a white dress shirt and jeans with trendy black loafers and Dylan recognized him right away. Mark Acosta. His face had only been plastered all over the back sports page of the *Daily News* for the last three weeks or so. “The Rookie” was what they called him, even though he hadn't officially signed yet.

“Well, who needs it?” she said. “I'm already lightheaded enough standing on this fire-escape.”

He peered over the edge and down to the ground ten stories below, stepping out to join her and shutting the window behind him.

“If you're scared of heights, this might not be the best place to hang out,” he said.

“I'm even more scared of boring party conversation and bad nineties music,” Dylan said. “So I thought I'd be better off taking my chances out here.”

“I think we might be in the same boat,” he said. “Who dragged you here?”

Dylan's gaze shifted to the room just behind him. Through the glass pane, she could see about a dozen pairs of eyes watching them, including Ava's and Jacob's.

She smiled at him. “My friend, Ava. How about you?”

“My brothers,” he said, nodding in the direction of the apartment.

Dylan was still trying to wrap her mind around the fact that

she was standing on a fire-escape in a grubby downtown apartment making innocuous party chatter with Mark Acosta. He was all anyone in New York was talking about these days; the phenom who was being called up from the minors because he had out-performed everyone's wildest expectations at that level and was clearly meant for greater things. According to the news, he was in talks with the Mets for a contract that was rumored to be in the tens of millions. And here he was, in the flesh.

"I'm Mark," he said, extending a hand.

"Dylan," she said.

He had large hands that were calloused, in some places, and remarkably soft in others. His forearms, exposed because he'd partially rolled back his sleeves, were impressive. Dylan tried not to imagine what was beneath the white shirt, although you would have to be dead not to notice how well his chest filled it out.

"I think I might escape before you though," he said.

"Oh yeah? Why?"

"You're right, the music is bad. And my brothers like to dance, so I would say I have another twenty minutes or so before they find me and drag me to a nightclub or something."

"Not your scene," she asked. "Nightclubs?"

"No, it's not that. I just have to get up really early most mornings."

He had an uptown Dominican accent; that interesting mix of the Bronx and Santo Domingo. Dylan was tempted to ask him why he had to get up early, just to see whether he would let slip who he was, and that he was famous. But somehow even in these few brief moments, she got the impression that he wasn't that kind of guy.

Mark Acosta came closer, leaning next to her after peering over the edge once again as though checking to see just how high up they were. He smelled like citrus and ginger. She imagined for just a moment what it might be like to press her face into his chest and inhale.

"My brother's girlfriend is about to have a baby," he continued. "Their first. So this is his last chance to wild out."

"So you're taking one for the team," Dylan shrugged.

*Taking one for the team?*

“Does he know what he’s having?” Dylan asked, trying to hastily cover up the sports reference.

“A boy. He’s really excited. I think he’s planning on getting really drunk tonight.”

Dylan laughed.

“Honestly, I’m kind of excited too,” he admitted. “Can’t wait to meet our new little man.”

*Our* new little man. At that, Dylan looked at him full-on for the first time.

About six-foot-one or so, he was well-built but not beefy, and handsome, in that almost-but-notquite-pretty-boy way. He had a deep, dark caramel complexion and eyes that seemed as black as coal framed by long lashes and smooth, velvety eyebrows that made her want to reach out and touch them. His head was almost clean-shaven as was his face. In the papers he looked older, but in person he looked very much like the twenty-six year old he was.

“You like babies then, huh?”

“Other people’s,” he clarified. “But also, my baby brother is having a baby. Makes me feel a little ... nostalgic, y’know?”

Dylan smiled. “How old is he? Your brother?”

“He’s hardly a baby anymore. He’s twenty-one. I was six when he was born so I remember when he my mother came home with him from the hospital. With them, actually. He has a twin. My two baby *brothers*, I should have said.”

How cute was *he*, calling his twenty-something year old brothers ‘babies’?

“I don’t have any siblings, so I don’t have those kinds of memories,” Dylan said shrugging.

“No siblings?” Mark Acosta shook his head. “I can remember a time when that would have sounded like heaven to me.”

“Why, how many do you have exactly?” she laughed.

“I have my two brothers, Matt and Peter—they’re inside—and my sister, Miri.”

“Mark, Matthew and Peter,” Dylan said.

He laughed. “You picked up on that, huh? Devout Catholics, my family.”

“But Miri?” Dylan asked.

“Short for Miriam.”

“Ah.”



“Listen, I’m going to grab a beer,” he said. “You want me to bring you something?” “A beer as well would be great. Thanks,” Dylan said.

“Back in a sec.”

He lifted the window open once more and hopped back inside. The sound of TLC earnestly complaining about “scrubs” drifted out, and behind them came Ava. She was already somewhat beyond tipsy, and had a time of it, getting her long legs through the window. Ava was five-nine and thin as a rail with a heart-shaped face and fair, creamy complexion. She kept her hair short and spiky, which accentuated her long neck and waifish frame.

“Was that you-know-who?” she asked, her eyes wide. “Is he into you?”

“We’re just bonding over our mutual dislike of parties like this one.”

“Well, that’s good, right? So long as you bond over *something*.”

“Ava, it’s just a little friendly conversation. I’m still ready to leave whenever you are.”

“Well, I was going to talk to you about that. Jake and I ...”

“Please don’t do this to me tonight,” Dylan groaned. “I hate having to figure out whether it’s you or the rum and cokes talking. Do you want to go home with Jacob or not?”

“I kind of do,” Ava said grimacing. And before Dylan could protest held up a hand. “Now I’m not saying I’m taking him back or anything. Just that I want to spend the night with him.”

“Ava,” Dylan said. “Whenever you want to get off the merry-go-round, you just let me know.”

“Don’t be so judgmental, Dylan. Not everyone can lock it up like you. I actually *want* to have sex every once in awhile.”

Of course that would be the moment that Mark Acosta returned. He was carrying two bottles of beer and had a jacket draped over his arm. He looked from Dylan to Ava and then at the small space of the fire-escape.

“Here’s your beer,” he said, handing a bottle to Dylan.

Then he nodded at Ava who smiled.

“I’m going back in,” she said to Dylan. “And I am leaving with Jake. I’ll call you in the morning. If you want to take a cab, I’ll pay you back for it.”

Dylan rolled her eyes and let her go. Mark Acosta stepped back outside and set his beer at his feet, putting the jacket about her shoulders.

“Thank you,” said, surprised.

“Out here with no sleeves, I thought you might be a little cold,” he said. He picked up his beer and took a swig. “So that was the friend you came with?”

“Yup. That was Ava.”

“So she’s ditching you?” he asked.

“Pretty much. For a boyfriend who is so not worth it. That’s the story of our friendship in a nutshell.”

“So why do you put up with it?”

Dylan shrugged, feeling disloyal for her flip comment. “It’s not really like that,” she admitted. “We put up with each other. I put her through my share of crazy stuff as well. We’ve been friends since we were eleven years old, so ...”

“Great to have friends for that long, huh?”

“Yeah. She’s as close to a sibling as I’ve got. So not putting up with each other doesn’t even feel like an option anymore.”

Mark nodded. “I know what you mean. I come from that type of neighborhood. I think everyone there I’ve known my entire life.”

“So I guess I escaped before you after all,” Dylan said. “Now that Ava’s leaving, there’s really no reason I have to stay.” The last thing she wanted was to get into a prolonged conversation about her upbringing.

Mark looked at her. “Maybe there’s no reason you *have to* stay, but maybe there’s a reason you *want to* stay.”

Dylan returned his smile and tried to decide whether she was reading him wrong or whether he was saying he didn’t want her to leave.

“Okay,” she said briskly. “I can’t do this any longer.”

Mark looked at her curiously. “Do what?”

“Pretend I don’t know who you are,” she said.

For a moment, he looked disappointed, and Dylan realized that what he’d probably been enjoying about her company was just that—she didn’t seem to know who he was and didn’t care.

“It just seems dishonest to act like I don’t,” she hastened to add.

But still he said nothing. Instead he put his beer bottle to his

lips and tipped it back, taking a long swallow.

“Look, it doesn’t make any difference,” Dylan plodded on. “I just ...”

“No, that’s fine,” he said, sounding like it wasn’t fine at all. “I should get used to it, I guess.”

“Get used to what? Being recognized? Yes, I would say you should definitely get used to it.”

“Not that,” he said. “I mean, having people look at me and not knowing what they see. Me, or ‘The Rookie’ or whatever the hell they’re calling me this week.”

“I see you,” Dylan said quietly.

He looked at her. “Oh yeah?” he asked, his voice equally subdued. “What do you see?”

“I see a guy who doesn’t like loud house parties but who came out anyway, to be with his baby brothers to celebrate the birth of his nephew,” she said.

The barest hint of a smile teased the corner of his lips.

“I actually do like loud house parties,” he said, and Dylan could tell from his voice that she had succeeded in assuaging his fears somewhat. “Everything’s just been ... different lately.”

“I can imagine,” she said. “Okay, well no I can’t. But we won’t talk about that anymore if you don’t want to. I just thought I should come clean and not pretend I thought you were just some guy who wandered out here.”

“I didn’t wander,” Mark said. “I kind of followed you.”

Dylan stared at him.

“The look on your face when you climbed out here was like a perfect expression of how I was feeling. I thought we might be ... kindred.”

How often did guys say stuff like that to you at a party? Or use words like ‘kindred’. Maybe *never*? If it was a line, he sure sounded sincere saying it, and the way he was looking at her? Either she was deluding herself or there was a cloud of sexual tension between them so thick her vision was almost obscured by the haze.

“Turns out you were right,” she said, trying to lighten the mood. “Seeing as how we both hate the music.”

Mark’s hand, which was next to hers on the railing, slid a little closer and their fingertips barely made contact. He didn’t even

seem aware that it had happened, but for Dylan, it was as though he'd burned her with a match. Her fingertips became hyper-sensitive, as though straining to feel even more of his touch.

"But now that your friend is gone, you'll probably leave me here to the mercy of, what did you call it, bad nineties music? Bad nineties music and a roomful of people staring at me like I'm a lab specimen."

"I can hang out for a little," Dylan said. She raised her bottle. "At least 'til I finish my beer."

He nodded and leaned over the railing again, looking out into the night. "Drink slow."

"Always."

"So do you know these folks?" he asked. "The ones having the party."

"Nope. Ava's friends of friends or co-workers. Something like that."

"Same here. I don't know them either," he said smiling. "You think they actually know anyone who's in their apartment right now drinking all their beer?"

Mark smiled, just a slight parting of his lips and the barest glimpse of perfect white teeth. That natural charisma was probably part of what had the press acting like locusts.

The New York sports rags were overdue a new crop of attractive star athletes to torment with endless speculation about their personal and professional lives. And this guy's face would definitely sell a lot of papers. It wasn't often you saw this mixture of ruggedly handsome and adorable in the same package, but Mark Acosta had it in spades. Realizing that she was in danger of actually staring, Dylan turned to join him in looking over the railing at nothing at all.

The couple a few floors down who had been arguing earlier seemed to have reached a ceasefire and the night was punctuated only by the occasional sound of car horns and Friday night revelers. Dylan tried to remember the last time she had actually enjoyed a party, or met someone worth talking to at one. At least a year. Mark Acosta was a find. She turned to look at him again.

"So tell me all about this enormous family of yours," she said. By the time Dylan's beer was done, they both seemed to have

silently conspired to pretend not to notice and just kept talking. Mark liked talking about his family, and Dylan liked listening. But more than that, she liked the look in his eyes as he described how smart his sister was, or how funny his Dad was, how bossy his mother. He told stories about them with such a lack of self-consciousness that it was clear they were his entire life. Baseball never once came up.

And then after awhile he stopped, seemingly embarrassed that maybe he'd been doing too much talking and he blushed. He actually *blushed*, and asked her about her and Ava and their friendship, and about her family. Dylan was touched by the effort, but realized that she was sorry not to hear more about his family and get to read and marvel at the depth of emotion that crossed his face as he talked about them.

Still, she told him about her and Ava growing up together in Queens, six doors down from each other, and being each other's constant, even through different high schools and colleges, ups and downs. She didn't talk much about her parents and he seemed to sense that she didn't want to, and did not press her to say more than she did on her own.

Inside, the music changed from a dance tempo to something slow and soulful and Dylan felt inexplicably shy. It was like that moment at a party in junior high standing next to a cute boy when the slow jam comes on, and you ache as you wait for him to ask you to dance.

Mark bent at the waist and glanced inside.

"They're changing the pace," he said. "Maybe means the party's about to break up?"

He sounded almost regretful. But before Dylan could even fully examine the thought, the window was flung open again and two young men who could only be his brothers stuck their heads out. This was one genetically-gifted family. Both were dark and good-looking like Mark, but not as solidly built. And yes, clearly they were twins, though they seem to have gone out of their way to make sure they didn't look too much alike. One had a clean-shaven almost boyish face and the other had a moustache and goatee.

"¡*Vamanos, Marcos!*"

"*Segundito ...*" Mark held up a hand, Dylan thought a little impatiently.

“Well, it looks like it’s definitely breaking up for you,” she said.

She reluctantly shed his jacket and handed it to him. His scent lingered about her for a moment, and she wondered if she would still smell it on herself when she got home. She hoped so.

Satisfied that progress was being made, Mark’s brothers went back inside, but stood vigil at the window, waiting for him.

“Can I walk you down and get you a cab?” he asked. “Or we could share one so I could drop you off.”

Dylan shook her head. “No thanks. It’s early enough that I’ll still be okay jumping on the subway.”

“You sure?”

“Positive. I love the subway.”

Mark smiled at that, and looked at her curiously, as though it was a thought he wanted to explore further. Most people complained about the subway, after all. Though he seemed reluctant to leave, Dylan resisted the thought. Maybe she was flattering herself. If you could get past the body—and that would take some doing—there were those dark, sexy eyes. Women were probably constantly throwing themselves at him; and even more so now that he was famous.

Still, this had been ... nice. Really nice. And when was the last time she’d met a guy who she thought was “nice” without it being code for “boring” or “unattractive”? When was the last time she’d had an actual conversation with a man that had been unencumbered by the usual bullshit lines and lame pick-up attempts? It would sound corny to say out loud but meeting and talking to Mark gave her ... hope. Even though she’d likely never see him again, the fact of there being men like him out there, made her feel hopeful. It was that simple.

“I’m sure I’ll be fine,” she said, proud of how casual she sounded. “It was great talking to you.”

“You too,” he said, then as he turned to climb back in the window he smiled at her one last time. “Don’t stay out here too long.”

“Nope. Right behind you,” she said, holding up the long-empty beer bottle.

“Okay. G’night, Dylan.”

He hesitated a moment at the window before climbing back in

until one of his brothers said something to him in Spanish, clearly hurrying him along, and so he was gone.

Dylan turned and smiled out into the dark. For sure, she would replay this in her head a million times over. And it was going to be utterly impossible to see his picture in the papers or images of him on television without remembering his incredible man-scent, and the way he made her want to press her legs together. Oh well, a girl could dream.

Minutes later, Dylan climbed back inside and pushed through what remained of the crowd to get her jacket from the pile on the bed in one of the back rooms. Everything was beginning to get a little dicier now that folks had a few drinks under their belt. There was grinding passing itself off as dancing and a few couples making out like it was a high school party. Dylan shook her head and shrugged on her jacket, wondering how Mark Acosta had wound up here in the first place.

The West 4<sup>th</sup> subway was only three blocks away, so she would be home in less than forty-five minutes. Glancing at her cell phone, she saw that it was only just past midnight—still early enough to do a little LSAT practice before crashing. Nothing like a thrilling close encounter with a hot guy to wake you up.

“Dylan.”

She turned and stared. Mark Acosta was coming toward her, almost as though she’d conjured him up by thinking about him. Several paces behind him, his brothers waited, clearly impatient.

“Hey,” Dylan said.

He stopped in front of her and she looked up at him. On the fire-escape he’d been leaning on the railing most of the time, but standing upright like this, right in front of her, she got the full impact of his height. Her earlier estimate was wrong. He was more like six-two, and much more impressive than she thought. Imposing even. Mark was the kind of man who, even if not the handsomest in the room, would almost always command the most female attention. And with him so close, it was impossible to look anywhere but right at him.

“I thought you’d left,” Dylan said.

“I was about to. But then I thought I’d wait for you to come out.”

“Oh,” she said, shaking her head. “Seriously, don’t worry

about me. Hopping on the train is ...”

He let out a deep breath, his chest heaving before he spoke.

Was he was *nervous*?

“I want to call you,” he said in a rush. “If that’s ... something you would want ... too.”

Dylan smiled.

“Yes,” she said after a moment, trying to contain the foolish grin that threatened to spread across her face. “That’s something I would want.”

Dylan had been sitting on her sofa, reviewing her LSAT answers when the phone rang. She’d programmed Mark’s number into her phone with a special ringtone so she would always know when it was him, especially since he was so slammed with meetings that she never knew when he might call. Hearing it, she’d practically leapt across the room to answer.

“Just do it. Quick. It could be over any minute ...”

“Channel Four? Why? What’s going on?”

She reached for the remote, balancing the phone between her head and shoulder. “See me?”

Mark was standing on a dais a few feet behind beside his agent, Corey, who was speaking into the

microphone. There were a couple other men in suits nearby but her eyes had gone directly, instinctively to Mark. Dylan smiled. She could hear the echo of Corey speaking in the background of their call, as well as on television.

Wearing a brown suit with a periwinkle blue shirt underneath, Mark was without a tie but instead wore a white t-shirt peeking through at his neck-line. He was balancing his phone against his shoulder just as she now did.

“How can you be on the phone during a press conference?” she asked. “Can you even hear what

Corey’s saying?”

“He’s saying what he always says. That we haven’t reached an agreement and that there’s nothing to announce.”

“So you’re having a press conference to tell them there’s no



news.”

“Pretty much.” Then he looked up and smiled and Dylan smiled back as though he could see her.

“Apparently that’s how this ridiculous dance is done.”

This wasn’t the first time Dylan had heard Mark speak with such derision about the contract

negotiation process. Over the last few weeks, it had become abundantly clear to her that he was never

going to be one of those star athletes who savored and enjoyed the spotlight. He was going to be the

guy hiding from the camera, his face obscured by the brim of his baseball cap as he dodged reporters. “Still. Shouldn’t you at least *look* like you’re paying attention?”

“I don’t care about paying attention. Not while I’m listening to you smile at me.” “You can’t hear a smile,” Dylan said, smiling wider.

“I heard that one,” Mark said, and the tone of his voice sent a surge of heat directly to a very

specific spot between her legs as surely as if he’d touched her there with his fingers. They hadn’t had any real time together since the party; at least not time alone. Though it wasn’t for want of trying. Just a week ago he’d stopped by her job to take her for coffee and been mobbed as soon

as he got out of the cab so had to leave without seeing her.

Then there was the quiet lunch they attempted downtown.

That time they’d orchestrated it so she

would meet him outside and jump into a cab where he was already waiting. They were home-free for

awhile, until they got to the restaurant in Chinatown and a couple of Wall Street traders had stopped

by the table to debate the whole Mets versus Yankees thing.

Mark had politely entertained them in

conversation for a time, all the while looking apologetically across the table at her. By the time he was

able to get rid of them Dylan had only fifteen minutes to get back to the office.

Just as she was about to jump out of the cab, Mark leaned forward as though to kiss her when a car

behind them honked impatiently because their cab was double-parked. It was just enough of a

distraction to cause Mark to pause, and Dylan leapt out and waved from the curb, the bitter disappointment threatening to eat a hole through the pit of her stomach.

“Corey’s looking at you now,” Dylan warned him. “Maybe he’s about to ...”

As Dylan watched, Mark raised his eyes and his agent turned and extended an arm toward him, calling him up to the podium.

“I’ll call you later,” Mark said quickly, and ended the call.

Dylan watched as he put his phone in his jacket pocket and joined his agent.

He leaned in to answer a question she hadn’t heard.

“I just want to play some good ball. And of course, I would be honored to play for the Mets organization,” he said. “But I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

She turned off the television and picked up her LSAT books again, but after a few minutes, unable to resist the urge to just look at him, Dylan turned it on again, just in time to see Mark exit the stage ahead of his agent.

.

At first her sleep-clouded mind didn’t recognize it for what it was, wondering why someone in her building would be playing Maxwell’s ‘Get to Know Ya’ over and over again. Finally, it penetrated that the song was the ringtone Dylan had chosen for Mark and she reached over, unplugging her phone from the charger and answering it.

“Hey,” she said, her voice hoarse. She glanced at the clock. “Is everything okay?” “I signed with the Mets,” he said. “We reached a deal about an hour ago.”

Dylan sat up. “An hour ago? It’s after two in the morning. Negotiations go that late?” “When they’re close to a deal, yeah.”

“And it’s happened?” she confirmed. “It’s done? They signed you?”

“Yup.”

“Mark, that’s great! Are you excited?”

“Yeah,” he said, sounding strangely subdued.

She listened to the silence for a few moments and sat up, turning on her bedside lamp. "But it's a little scary too, I guess," she said finally.

"A little."

Dylan lowered her voice. "You're going to be amazing."

"How do you know?" he asked, a hint of teasing in his voice.

"You told me you don't even

understand baseball."

"I'm practically an expert now. I bought *Baseball for Dummies* and read the whole thing in one day." Mark laughed.

"Oh you did, huh?"

"I did. I even know what a short stop does. You're on defense, between second and third base." "Yeah, that's right ..."

"And d'you want to know what else I learned this week?"

"What's that?"

"That you're the best at it. And that people are already comparing you to Cal Ripken, Jr. and Ernie

Banks. Because you're *that* good, even though you haven't even played in the majors yet. So you have no reason to be scared, Mark," she said quietly.

"But that's what makes it scary," he said, his voice barely audible. "Those names you mentioned?"

Those are big shoes to fill."

"I've seen the size of your feet. You'll fill them just fine."

Mark laughed again. "You're pretty quick for someone who got woken up at two-thirteen in the

morning."

"I try," she said.

"Sorry I woke you," he said. "I just got this crazy idea in my head, that if I heard your voice I'd feel

better."

Dylan tried to ignore the little thread of pleasure she felt at his words. She knew exactly what he meant. She felt better when she heard his voice too. "You should be feeling great."

"I do," he said. "It's just that now, everything changes."

"For the better, though."

"Anyway," he seemed to want to change the subject. "You

better go back to sleep. Need to stay sharp to study for those LSATs. When are they again?"

"Next weekend."

"Then get back to sleep. What're you doing up so late?"

"There's this pesky guy that keeps calling me at weird hours of the day and night."

"Next week I might not have as much time," he said, his voice serious now. "So if I don't call you, I don't want you to think ..."

He broke off and said nothing more.

"Think what?"

"I don't know. That I'm going to fall off the radar or something."

It almost didn't surprise her that he would intuit her greatest fear about his signing his contract. Even during the negotiation process he'd been pulled in a million different directions, but now he was literally in the big leagues and the demands would be much greater and more numerous. And he would be exposed to all kinds of new experiences, opportunities ... and people. Things that she was not equipped to compete with. The Mark who sat on the other end of the line with her almost every night as they watched the same television shows and talked about nothing at all was gone, whether she liked it or not. He was huge now.

"I won't think that," she said finally.

"And don't you disappear either," he said.

He was trying to keep his tone light, but Dylan thought she detected real concern there. If there was, he needn't have worried; Dylan knew she was already more than a little infatuated with him and felt closer to him than she had to anyone in a long time. All those phone calls, without the benefit of seeing or touching each other had left them no recourse but to get to really know each other, undistracted.

"I'll be busy studying anyway."

"You're going to be amazing too, y'know? When you're finally a lawyer I mean."

"How do *you* know?" she said, mimicking the same question he'd asked her earlier.

"Because you completely talked me out of the funk I was in. Thank you."

“You’re welcome.”

“Sweet dreams, Dylan.”

The next morning, it was all over the news that the Mets had reached a deal with Mark Acosta for a figure in the tens of millions. Dylan sat at her kitchen table, momentarily staggered by the sum. After the exhilaration, she could only imagine the pressure that came along with that kind of money, and the expectations. The fear he felt suddenly made perfect sense, and Dylan was overcome by the urge to call him, just to let him know that it would be okay and that he was more than capable of handling it. She could only hope that he really had gotten reassurance from speaking to her the night before and would call her again soon if he needed to.

On the subway, as other commuters read the city papers, Dylan couldn’t help but see the Sports section on the back, announcing the deal between The Rookie and the Mets. The *New York Post* had a shot of Mark getting into a car with Corey. He was ducking his head and squinting, probably against the flash of cameras in his face. He didn’t look the way one might expect someone to look when they’d just been made a multi-millionaire.

.

“Dylan. Are you listening?”

She looked up at Grant’s face, realizing that she’d missed just about everything he’d said. “Are you not feeling well?” he asked. “You don’t look yourself today.”

“Probably nervous about the LSATs,” she said.

Grant smiled at her. “You’ll do fine. I’m sure of it. Hey, if you want I’ll sign off on you taking a few

days ...”

“No,” Dylan held up a hand. “No need. You’ve been so supportive already. And I think I’m all burned out on those practice tests honestly.”

“It’ll be done before you know it,” he said. “Hang in there a little longer and it’s going to pay off, I promise you.”

Grant was a partner at Greenbaum, Tate and McAffey, the firm where she’d worked for the last three of years, and the first person who’d suggested to her that she go to law school. After a relatively

short time working as a legal assistant, Dylan saw that it was a lot less challenging than she expected.

She'd taken the job right out of undergrad because it was the first one she was offered and she'd been thinking only of how she might support herself. Having never been particularly focused on school, it was a shock to discover that what she really wanted wasn't a job, but a career. And more shocking still was that Grant thought she was more than capable of going to a top tier law school. Over time, he had become a mentor and a friend.

Dylan wondered now whether she could impose on that friendship now and confide in him about Mark. But it wasn't as though there was anything to confide. After all, she and Mark weren't even really dating. Right now, all they were was telephone buddies. And if his life took off at the rocket speed it appeared to have assumed, they might not even be that much for long. Soon enough he would probably be going to the ESPYs with a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model. That thought alone caused her mood to sour even further.

"Go grab an early lunch," Grant suggested. "Have a cappuccino or something, and then come back prepared to work."

Dylan nodded. "Okay. I'll pull it together and come back around two or so?"

"Good," Grant said. "That'll be fine. And look, don't sweat the LSATs, okay?"

Dylan left his office and went to the ladies room. She looked in the mirror, taking herself apart critically; first of all, she was short—only five foot four inches tall; and while she kept in great shape by running and working the elliptical machine at the gym, she had no room for error to maintain her precarious hold on a size six. And then there was the hair; it was long and untamed, wiry, curly and constantly all over the place. She kept it out of the way with a variety of scarves and headbands but did little more than that.

Her complexion she was proud of however; it was smooth and flawless polished ochre,

unblemished probably because of her obsessive drinking of water. And she had high cheekbones and full lips which Ava kept trying to get her to accentuate. But there was no getting around the fact that she was more accurately described as “cute” than beautiful, or even pretty. There was nothing in this mirror that would hold the interest of someone about the live the life Mark was about to live. There were women out there who had made it their life’s mission to land a man like him, who knew just how to dress, talk, act just so they would be irresistible to men like Mark. If she never heard from him again, it should come as no surprise.

After lunch she managed to regain her focus and get the work done that Grant wanted and back in her office, she tried to ignore her phone, which sat silent on a stack of papers, within easy reach if it should ring.

But it didn’t. So Dylan buried herself in her task and even finished it early, and was able to make plans to meet up with Ava for dinner.

Ava didn’t have a doorman, so when she got to her building, Dylan went right up. It felt like going home whenever she visited; she was almost as comfortable in Ava’s apartment as her own. When Dylan banged on the door Ava opened it barefoot, wearing sweatpants and a white tank. She was on the phone, and had it cradled between her shoulder and head while she looked through a tattered delivery menu.

“... last time was spicier than even a native Thai person could stand, so easy on the pepper. And spring rolls. Oh, and Dylan, what do you want?”

“Just Shrimp pad thai,” she said, dumping her bags near the door.

“Shrimp pad thai,” Ava repeated. “For two. Great. Thirty minutes? Thanks.”

She hung up and hugged Dylan briefly before returning to her favored spot on the bed. Ava had a large studio apartment with a mini-fridge of the type usually found in hotels, so she rarely cooked. The floors were oak and the walls exposed brick. There were wonderful large windows through which you

could just spot the sunrise across the bridge each morning. The shabbiness of the building's exterior belied the fact that inside it had been newly renovated and cost a pretty penny to live there. Ava's job as a television producer meant so she could easily afford the \$2,500 monthly rent. She was thinking of buying it when it went co-op in the next few months.

The most dominant piece in the room was an immense bed which, like a futon was low to the ground. Ava kept it covered with pillows of all sizes, in lush greens and gold and it doubled as a place to sit when she had people over. It was Dylan's favorite place in the apartment, apart from the breakfast bar where, sitting on the tall art deco stools, she'd consumed many a glass of wine and cup of coffee while trying to figure her life out.

"I thought we were going out for dinner," she said.

"I got too hungry," Ava explained. "Why? Did you have your heart set on going someplace?" And then a non-sequitur: "Did you see how much *money* they're paying him? How crazy is that? You have a rich boyfriend, Dylan."

"He's not my boyfriend. We've never even been on a date."

"He calls you three hundred times a day. I'd say that makes you a little more than friends."

"No, all we are is friends."

"For now. I don't know a guy who would call you every single day, for three weeks without being romantically interested. And besides, he already has a sister. So we know that's not what this is."

"I don't want to talk about it," Dylan said, testily.

Ava looked at her. "Why? What happened? Did you two have a fight or something?"

"No, he's been exactly the same."

"Then what're you so cranky about?"

"Well," Dylan sat at the breakfast bar. "Let's face it, he can have anyone now ..."

Ava groaned. "Let's not have this conversation again, please. You are so insecure, and I mean, look at you! You have a body most women would kill for. The legs of a dancer, the tits and ass of a lingerie model and the cutest face."

"Yeah. Cute." Dylan said.

"Dylan, he chose you. Out of all the women at that party, he



decided he would stand out on that cold-ass fire escape and talk to you. That has to count for something. And he calls you so often, he's practically a stalker."

Dylan laughed in spite of herself.

"Settle down, will you? Just let it happen. He likes you."

Dylan shrugged. "I haven't heard from him today."

"Are you going through Mark withdrawal?" Ava came over to grab her by the shoulders and shake her. "I'd imagine he's a little busy today," she said, "wouldn't you?"

But Mark still hadn't called two days later, and Dylan had just begun trying to resign herself to not hearing from him again when she heard the welcome sound of his ringtone. It was muffled because her phone was in her purse as she was sitting in an early morning staff meeting. She considered, but only for a fraction of a second, not answering but couldn't do it and finally grabbed her bag, dashing out of the conference room, followed by the disapproving stare of the legal assistant coordinator.

"Hello?" she said, walking quickly toward the privacy of her office.

"Hey."

He sounded so casual, it almost made her angry at him, but in fairness, he had warned her that he

was going to be busy. She had no reason to be annoyed, but she honestly hadn't anticipated just how agitated it would make her to not hear from him for so long.

"How are you?" she asked, shutting the door to her office.

"I'm good," he said, sounding rushed. "But I have to go in a second. I know it's not cool to ask you to go out with me at the last minute," he said. "But I swear I didn't have a spare moment to myself this entire week."

Dylan admitted to herself grudgingly that it was probably true. He was all over TV, sitting through countless interviews as sports reporters rehashed his road to signing with a major league baseball team. She'd been trying not to pay attention to the details, but only because it made her stomach twist with longing when she saw him on television. She swallowed pointless envy for every single person who'd gotten to be with

him this week.

“There’s this thing I have to go to tonight. I want you to come with me. If you’re free,” he said.

“I can’t. It’s the night before the LSATs, Mark,” she reminded him. “Can we have a rain check?”

She couldn’t believe she was turning him down, but it was true—she was going to need to be wellrested for the marathon exam on Saturday.

“What if I promise to get you home before midnight?”

“Even midnight is kind of late. I don’t think I ...”

“Eleven?”

Dylan sighed. She did want to see him. And not talking to him had definitely disrupted her concentration. Seeing him would set her right again, she rationalized. It would put her in a positive headspace for the exam on Saturday.

“Okay, but for sure, you have to get me home by eleven. No later.”

“Text me your address. I’ll pick you up at seven. Wear something really nice.”

“What kind of nice? Like cocktail party nice?”

“Fancy dinner nice, I guess? Look, I have to go, okay? Don’t forget to text me your address.”

When he hung up Dylan was left looking at the phone wondering whether she’d imagined the entire conversation.

Promptly at seven that evening, Mark was standing at her apartment door, dressed in a pale gray suit and blue tie, and even better looking than she’d remembered. Dylan was glad she’d chosen her best little black dress and tamed her wild hair into a chignon. Mark’s only guidance that it would be “someplace really nice” didn’t give her too much to work with, so she decided that the classic look was probably the best option. She’d even bothered to dig out her jeweled clutch and put on make-up for the occasion.

“You look beautiful,” he said, looking her over.

“Thank you. D’you want to come in for a little bit?”

The apartment was a mess, so she was relieved when he said he would rather do that some other evening if the invitation was still open.

“There’s kind of a time crunch for this thing,” he explained.

“Don’t want to be late. And I only have you till eleven, so we

should probably go.”

When she locked her apartment door, she turned to find Mark holding out a hand to her. She didn't hesitate for a second before taking it. This was only the third time they'd laid eyes on each other, and yet it felt so natural for him to extend his hand, and even more natural for her to take it.

Downstairs a car was waiting and they got in. During the drive, Dylan didn't think to ask where they were going and it was only when they pulled up in front of the Waldorf Astoria and she saw the cameras, banners and Mets colors that she realized where they were. The “thing” Mark mentioned was his signing ceremony and dinner.

She turned in her seat to look at him with raised eyebrows as the car came to a stop.

“Are you *kidding*?” she laughed. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“I didn't want you to over-think it and say no,” he admitted, smiling.

“Of *course* I would've said no,” Dylan said. “Isn't this something you should be doing with your family?”

“Oh, they'll be here too,” he nodded. “My brothers, my sister, my Mom and Dad, my uncles and a couple cousins. Everyone should be inside by now.”

“Mark,” Dylan leaned back in the seat. “That's a lot of pressure for a first date.”

“I feel like this is our second date,” he said. “Since that party I haven't been able to stop thinking about you.”

Dylan looked at him and couldn't come up with a single coherent thing to say. She was overwhelmed by this man, in just about every sense of the word.

The driver got out of the car and was walking around to open their door. Outside, the camera flashes were blinding, photographers going wild in anticipation of The Rookie's emergence from the car but Mark didn't seem to care.

“Have you been thinking about me?” he asked, lowering his voice. His willingness to put himself out there and say things as frank as that got her, every single time. Dylan was pretty damn sure she had never met anyone like Mark Acosta before, and may never again.

Of course she had been thinking about him—the way everything between them so seemed to fit together so

effortlessly. She'd been hoping she wasn't imagining it, this mutual pull she felt between them, this strange connection as though they'd known each other for years. She'd also been thinking about the way he'd smelled that night at the party, the way he looked at her, and the way he'd once slid his hand toward hers on the railing, the tips of his fingers just barely brushing hers, she'd thought accidentally at the time, but now was no longer certain hadn't been on purpose. So yes, she had been thinking about him and didn't mind if he knew it.

Dylan nodded.

"Good," he said.

Then he leaned in to kiss her, and it was perfect.

## 2

Dylan opened her eyes without sitting up in bed, testing how she felt. Last night had been intense. Being at the signing ceremony, sitting at the table with both Mark's parents, his brothers and his sister, watching as he was handed his team numbers and colors, getting his picture taken with the owners and general manager and Corey, his agent; it had all been surreal. Even more so because now she had to get the heck out of bed and get ready to take the subway uptown to sit her LSATs. Talk about parallel universes. She rubbed her eyes and stretched. As much as she wanted to spend the next twenty minutes thinking about last night, she didn't have time. She had to focus for this exam.

As she left the apartment, she realized she'd left behind her cell phone, but there was no time to go back and get it; she had to be seated no later than eight a.m. and it was already seven-fifteen. Dylan took the stairs instead of waiting for the elevator and dashed the five blocks to the subway. On the ride she tried to calm down, clearing her mind of everything except her goal of getting into NYU. But despite her best efforts, her thoughts drifted to the previous evening and the way Mark had kissed her. There had only been the one kiss, when they got to the dinner. But god, what an amazing kiss. Still it felt like he was restraining himself, trying to be respectful, but at the same time, the way he'd pressed his mouth against hers, his tongue ...

"*Stop it,*" she scolded herself out loud.

No one even looked up. People were always talking to themselves on the New York City subway. When she got to the testing location and signed in, looking around at all the other nervous testtakers, Dylan actually felt a wave of calm. She had worked hard, studied and practiced for months. There was no reason to be afraid of this: she was ready.

It was early afternoon when she was done, and all she had energy to do was take the train back home and crash. The anticipation and tension of the last few months seemed to have

bled right out of her onto the page and now all that was left was a sense of depletion. She crawled under the covers and slept with her clothes on, and when she awoke it was dark outside, her apartment was chilly and she was incredibly hungry.

As Dylan pulled on her tennis shoes, she caught sight of her phone and unplugged it. She'd missed five calls and hadn't even heard it ring. Her mother had called from Arizona to wish her luck, Ava had called twice, once in the morning and then again in the afternoon, as had Mark. In his second message, he asked her to call her back. As she was listening to his voice, smiling at just the sound of him, a call came through and she answered.

"Hey there! How was it?"

"Grant," Dylan said surprised. "Hi! It was fine. I feel okay about it."

"I knew you would. I told Jenn you were taking it today and she said I should call you." "Thank you for checking in, Grant. And thank Jenn as well."

Jenn was Grant's wife, who was herself an attorney at another firm. Every once in awhile when

Grant and Dylan had to work late on something Jenn would stop by with dinner for them both, and even help out a little with collating and copying documents they had to produce to opposing counsel. Like Grant, she'd been a huge cheerleader for Dylan's plans to apply to law school.

"We were talking about how stressful we remember it being, taking that damned test," Grant went on. "So she told me to make sure you took Monday off."

"Oh, Grant you don't have to ..."

"Not taking no for an answer. I'll clear it. I don't want to see you until Tuesday, I mean it."

Dylan's phone beeped and she glanced at the console.

"Thank you, Grant. I appreciate it."

"Alright, kiddo, go get some rest."

"Thank ..."

"And stop thanking me. G'bye."

Dylan smiled and clicked over to her other call.

“Hey there,” she said, still smiling.

“Is that smile for me?” Mark asked.

“I was talking to Grant,” she explained.

“Your boss calls you on your cell phone on a Saturday? And makes you smile?”

“He wanted to see how the test went. And he gave me Monday off. Hence the smile.”

There was a long pause, long enough for Dylan to look at the face of her phone to see whether they’d been disconnected.

“I called you this morning,” Mark said finally. “But I guess I missed you.”

“I left my phone. But I got your message when I got back. Thank you for the good wishes. It went well, I think.”

“Great. How’re you feeling? Are you tired?”

“No. I had a long nap. I feel like I slept for the first time in six months.”

“You hungry?”

“As a matter of fact I’m starving. I was about to go grab something when Grant called.”

“Don’t. I’m coming to get you,” Mark said. “There’s this thing I want to take you to. Wear comfortable shoes.”

“The last time you said you wanted to take me to a ‘thing’ we wound up at the Waldorf Astoria. So you’re going to have to be more specific.”

“No.”

“Mark.”

“Jeans and a t-shirt and sneakers are fine, that’s all I’m saying. I’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

“Wait, Mark ...”

But he’d already hung up.

Dylan shook her head.

Was this what all competitive athletes were like? There was no denying any longer that he was interested in her as more than a phone pal—his attention, when he had time to give it, was so overwhelming, like he didn’t want to permit her a moment to consider and possibly develop doubt. Yet when they were together, he was a little quiet, almost shy. But despite that, he was clearly a man who went after what he wanted and for reasons she still didn’t get, he seemed to want her. For now.

She returned Ava’s calls but got voicemail so decided to jump

back into the shower to freshen up for whatever Mark's "thing" was this time. And no matter what he said, she wasn't taking any chances by wearing a freaking t-shirt.

Once again he was exactly on time, and Dylan was waiting for him wearing a pretty white off-the-shoulder blouse, her favorite jeans and black high-heeled sandals. Mark had on well-worn jeans and an orange shirt that looked amazing against his complexion. He took one look at her footwear and laughed.

"Dylan, I'm serious," he said. "Wear something comfortable." "Are you sure you're not taking me to George Steinbrenner's house or something?"

"First of all, Steinbrenner is Yankees, not Mets. And second, I told you, it's not that big a deal. Where's your closet?"

He walked past her and back into her apartment, finding the bedroom and looking around. After a moment, he returned carrying her Nikes and a sweater.

"Okay, now let's go."

Dylan locked the apartment door behind them and followed him to the elevator. When she was with him, and even talking on the phone, it was easy to forget that they had met just weeks ago. Apart from the fact that she felt like wrestling him to the ground and having her way with him when he was anywhere within ten feet, it felt like they had history. In the elevator, Mark tied the laces of her sneakers together and draped them across his shoulders.

"Are you planning to tell me where we're headed?"

"Some people just don't like surprises," he said shaking his head. "My parents' house. Happy now?"

"You sure aren't a believer in working up to things," she said.

"My parents loved you," he said looking puzzled. "And Miri most especially. So why should I 'work up to' bringing you over?"

Dylan couldn't help but be pleased at *that* news. She'd been curious about whether his family would be suspicious of this new woman who had shown up just as Mark was being made into a very wealthy man.

"So my brothers have been telling everyone in the neighborhood," he warned. "So it'll be crowded."

"Oh, so now the truth comes out," Dylan laughed. "Will there be like a thousand people there?"



“I’ll always tell you the truth,” Mark said, serious for a moment, his brows furrowed.

The party at his parents’ house in Washington Heights, five blocks south of 115<sup>th</sup> Street was the *real* celebration of Mark’s contract with the Mets. The house was a three-story white clapboard, one of the few in the neighborhood with its own backyard. When they pulled up, Dylan saw that the Acostas had decorated the front and back of the house with strings of white lights and opened the entire ground floor to people from the block who had closed off the street to traffic, pulled out lawn chairs and set up enormous speakers to make a party. Mark parked a block away and held Dylan’s hand as he led her down toward and then into the house.

In the Acostas’ kitchen a feast was being prepared—gargantuan pots with rice and beans, fried plantains, bacalao, pollo guisado and countless other dishes Dylan could not identify. Mark’s mother and two of his aunts were cooking, their dark hair pulled back and away from their faces. His mother, a stout woman with satiny dark skin and the heavy eyebrows that Mark had inherited, smiled at her and kissed her on the cheek calling her “azúcar” which Dylan recognized from her rudimentary knowledge of the language as Spanish for “sugar.”

The Acostas’ niceness and ease with her was something she almost didn’t know if she should trust. She had never been welcomed so easily by a boyfriend’s family before, and Mark wasn’t even her boyfriend. Mark’s aunts also beamed at her from over the pots of food they were preparing, and then gently shoved them both out of the kitchen.

Mark kept his hold on her hand, leading her toward the rear of the house and out the back door where for a moment they stood on the steps, surveying the already crowded backyard. Someone spotted him and a cheer went up, then he was surrounded by well-wishers, patting him on the back, shaking his hand and kissing him on both cheeks. Dylan tried to keep up with what was being said to him, most of it in rapid-fire Spanish or “Spanglish” but could not understand most of it.

Mark responded in kind, often shaking his head modestly and even blushing at times. *Gracias, por favor*, he said over and over. Then he was putting an arm about her shoulder and

steering Dylan down into the yard and towards a huge barrel filled with ice and beer. It was a little chilly out, so someone had lit fires in three steel drums in the center of the yard. They radiated a comfortable heat and people stood nearby, nursing their drinks and soaking in the warmth.

Mark grabbed them both a beer and led her to the rear of the yard where they leaned on a chain link fence overlooking an empty lot next door.

“I hope you won’t get sick of all this and give up on me,” he said, handing her one of the bottles of beer.

“What d’you mean?”

“I keep bringing you to these things where it’s loud and crazy and crowded.”

“Well,” Dylan shrugged. “This is your life right now.”

“But it won’t always be,” he said, looking at her. “This’ll die down and then I can do what I really want to do.”

“Which is what?”

“Play ball. Spend some time alone with you,” he said simply.

He smiled at her and Dylan could swear her heart literally skipped a beat. When she met him, he had been shaved almost bald but now she could see his jet black hair growing in. It looked both velvety soft and prickly at the same time. Before she could stop herself, she reached out and smoothed a hand over the crown of his head. Mark looked surprised, but his lips turned up at the corners in a slight smile and he bowed slightly to allow her easier access. It was as soft as a baby’s brush. When she removed her hand, he was looking at her with such unmasked wanting that Dylan’s breath caught in her throat. Mark leaned in closer and she exhaled softly, preparing herself for his kiss.

“¡El novato!” someone said from close behind them.

Mark turned toward the voice, and their connection was broken. It was an older man, tall and with a shock of gray hair and a beard to match. He hugged Mark tightly and kissed him on both cheeks. The two men exchanged a few words in Spanish then Mark turned to Dylan.

“This is Wilfredo,” he told her. “My first coach. My first coach after my father, anyway. Wilfredo, esta es mi ... es Dylan.”

“¿Como estas?”

“She doesn’t speak Spanish,” Mark said.

“¿Dominicana?”

“No.”

“Ah. How are you?” Wilfredo addressed Dylan directly. “I apologize. I thought you were Dominican also.”

“No problem,” Dylan said. “Nice to meet you.”

“And you as well,” Wilfredo said. “I just came to congratulate my friend here, my student. We are all very proud of him.”

“With good reason,” Dylan said.

“Well, I will leave you. I smell plátanos fritos, so I must follow my nose. And my stomach.” Wilfredo kissed Mark again and was gone.

“C’mon,” Mark said taking her hand.

Dylan followed him to the far corner of the fence where he pulled back a section that had been separated from the frame and helped her through so they were in the empty lot next door. He led her into the dark and Dylan followed him willingly and without question. Soon they were standing next to a shed and it was so dark she could barely make out his features. Mark took her beer bottle and put it on the ground with his. Her back was pressed against a corrugated metal door and Dylan looked up. She couldn’t remember ever wanting to be kissed as badly as she wanted Mark to kiss her right now. Her breathing was shallow and fast as Mark braced himself with his elbows on either side of her and lowered his face to hers.

At first, he kissed her just on her cheek, then at the corner of her mouth, his lips soft and so light, that goose bumps tickled her arms, and a delicate tingling traveled down her throat, and directly down between her legs. When he moved to her jaw and her neck, his breath warmed her. Dylan turned her head so he would kiss her on the mouth, but still he teased her, touching his lips to hers only briefly then pulling away.

And when he finally kissed her, really kissed her, it was better than she remembered. Mark’s kisses were teasing, seductive promises of greater pleasures to come. He drove her crazy by taking her tongue between his lips, then pulled back; or he nipped her lower lip with his teeth almost hard enough to be painful then exhaled a cool breath to soothe it. It was possible she could altogether lose her head just kissing him but she wanted more. She wanted so much more. It seemed unfair that

she was the one left desperate and yearning, so the next time Mark's tongue slipped between her lips, Dylan pulled away. It was her turn to tease.

"I'm not sure why we're back here in the dark when you've gotten more than your share of kisses already tonight," she breathed against his jaw, referring to the exuberant greetings he'd gotten from just about everyone since they arrived.

"But yours are the only ones I want," he said, aggressively taking her mouth once again.

Almost against her will, Dylan's hips pressed against him and Mark pressed himself against her in response, but just as she felt his excitement, he pulled back, his pelvis no longer in contact with her stomach.

Just twenty feet away was a crowd of people, all there for him. And yet he wanted to be alone with her. The excitement of it reminded her of high school and being kissed under the bleachers by a boy you liked—it was the same heady, dizzy, giddy feeling like falling and falling and falling; the same and yet so much better.

"I thought it best we get this out of the way right now," he said, lifting his head for a moment. "Because we're going to get interrupted all night. And Dominican parties do go *all* night."

The party did go all night. They ate and danced and Dylan enjoyed watching Mark with his friends and family, and got a little annoyed when other women approached him and even more so when he seemed to like it.

But still, they couldn't seem to get the kissing part "out of the way." Every chance he got, Mark cornered her somewhere, tilting her chin upward and leaning in toward her. Finally, frustrated at constant crush of well-wishers, he held her hand and walked with her, he *said* to get her running shoes from his car when her feet started to hurt, but they were gone almost an hour because they were all over each other in the back seat and only stopped when the windows began to fog and Mark said he wasn't sure he could be trusted to keep his hands to himself. Dylan didn't bother telling him that she wished he wouldn't.

Sometime after three-thirty when the party was still in full swing and her eyelids began to grow heavy, Mark told his

mother he would be right back and drove her home. It took him fifteen minutes to find a parking spot but he insisted on walking her directly to her door and they kissed even more, standing in her entryway, and his hands, pressing into her hips made her want to beg him to stay, so she could feel those large, warm hands against her skin, rather than through the fabric of her sweater and blouse.

When he pulled away he exhaled audibly, looking every bit as unsteady as she felt.

“Call you tomorrow?” he said.

“Yes.”

Mark glanced at his watch. “I mean, today. Later. I’ll call you later.”

Dylan nodded.

When she shut the door behind him and locked it she stood there for a moment, wanting to go after him and ask him to stay. And she knew somehow that on the other side of the door, he was standing there and hadn’t moved because he was hoping she would. Her hand was poised on the doorknob but she pulled it away. It was delicious, this waiting.

### 3

“So what *are* you two, exactly?” Ava asked. “I mean, what does he call this ...” she waved her hand vaguely, “... this thing you two are doing. Going to his signing dinner, his family’s house. I’m confused.”

“*You’re* confused?” Dylan said. “Think how I feel.”

They were stretched out on Ava’s futon, watching her TiVo’ed episodes of some show on the *Oprah Winfrey Network*. Ava was obsessed with Oprah, though for very different reasons than most. Her dream was to move to Chicago and work there. She’d once met some guy in a bar who turned out to be one of the network’s associate producers who was in New York on vacation. After a few drinks the guy had complained about his paltry salary which was, to Ava’s dismay almost fifty grand more than she made as a senior staffer at Channel Seven. She decided that as a matter of principle, she needed to make at least as much as a junior production staff on *OWN* and asked her boss for a raise. She got one—her five percent cost of living increase was accelerated so that she got it six months early. Of course, this was not nearly what Ava had in mind and her obsession with the *Oprah* show began.

“These are not particularly incisive comments,” she said under her breath as she listened to an expert talking about earlier initiation of sexual intercourse among teens. “I would have found her someone a lot more interesting than this guy.”

“Of course you would have,” Dylan said loyally.

“Where is he now?” Ava asked, switching easily back to the topic of Mark.

“At the ballpark. They have some kind of charity event going on there.”

“See what I mean? You even know where he is at any given moment. I think he’s your boyfriend

whether you realize it or not. I don’t even know where Jake is.”

Ava and Jake had reconciled yet again, unsurprisingly. Dylan thought she secretly enjoyed the drama that went along with

dating him. Jacob was only twenty, four years younger chronologically, but everyone knew that in maturity, twenty-year old guys may as well be sixteen. Everyone that was, except for Ava.

“He’s probably out cheating on you again,” Dylan said before she could stop herself.

Ava looked at her. “You promised me you would stop saying stuff like that. He’s really trying this time.”

Dylan looked at her friend and touched her hand. “Sorry. I just ... okay, I’ll stop saying stuff like that.”

Ever since they’d met in middle school, Dylan and Ava had been as thick as thieves, and even then, Ava had been a magnet for drama. Her household was noisy and chaotic while her mother went in and out of rehab and counseling, and her father improvised with his childrearing responsibilities, largely by passing his kids off to various and sundry neighbors, friends and family. Ava had a brother, Jon, two years older, who had been in and out of scrapes all through his teen years and now was only just beginning to get things on track and was working on finishing his degree in Pittsburgh.

Ava had been the kid who seemed okay on the outside, but beneath it all had exhibited a whole slew of troubling behaviors. Dylan had been her support through an eating disorder, an inappropriate relationship with a much older man while she was a junior in high school, a reckless few months of doing ecstasy every night with a dodgy new boyfriend; and assorted other break-ups, flare-ups and questionable relationships.

Even so, Ava had gone to and finished college *cumma sum laude*, scored an amazing job and maintained the appearance of having her act together. Dylan was sure she was just about the only person Ava allowed to see her messy underbelly. Jacob was the latest wart on that underbelly. He was just the type of good-looking scoundrel Ava always seemed to be drawn to. His ambitions had not progressed beyond being a bike messenger and Ava seemed content to subsidize him for just about every single date they went on.

“I’m just happy *you’ve* moved on,” Ava said now, changing the subject. “You know. From the last guy.”

*The last guy*, was how they referred to Dylan's ex-boyfriend. She'd dated Eric the last couple of years at Fordham, until he announced a couple weeks before graduation that he thought it was better to "keep things casual" since he would be all the way at U. Penn for business school. Until that moment, Dylan hadn't been aware that it *was* casual. Needless to say, they hadn't lasted after that.

Eric still occasionally breezed into town and called her up for dinner, but whenever she accepted, Dylan realized the odds were she would wind up in bed with him, so for the past year she'd declined the invitations. Since him there had been a couple short stints of dating, but no one who maintained her interest. Until now.

In the week since he'd taken her to his parents' house, they'd talked on the phone as usual and he texted her, but hadn't asked her out again. She knew he was busy, but Dylan still wondered why he hadn't gone out of his way to see her. He knew where she lived now, and could ask to stop by. She would have said yes without a second thought no matter what time, day or night. All she could think about whenever she heard his voice was their marathon make-out sessions at the party. He was so patient and attentive just kissing her, she couldn't help but eagerly anticipate the kind of lover he would be. Dylan had no intention of playing hard to get. At the first opportunity, she intended to find out.

In the papers, there were beginning to be pictures of him going to different Mets and MLB events. Most of the time he was pictured with one or both of his brothers and Corey; but once he was photographed talking to a young woman that the paper called an "unidentified companion." The day the picture ran, Mark called her as usual and Dylan tried not to behave differently, but had anyway. Just the idea of some other woman being kissed by Mark the way she had been made her want to throw herself on the floor and have a tantrum like a three-year old. So she answered his questions with monosyllables, and didn't volunteer any information about what she'd been up to, the way she might usually have done.

*I'm trying to get out of some stuff so I can see you*, Mark said, and she thought she detected a note of caution, wariness in his tone.



He needn't have been cautious. Even though she was giving him a little bit of attitude, Dylan was very clear that she had no right to ask him who the woman in the picture was. And honestly, he seemed not to be inclined to volunteer the information. Still, by the end of the call and purely because of Mark's persistence in drawing her out, they had resumed their easy and comfortable manner with each other and Dylan was able to hang up feeling better about him than she had upon answering the call.

But Ava was right; he was remarkably forthcoming about his schedule, texting her to let her know where he was at different times and giving her an idea of when he might call. She didn't say much when she responded to his texts. Generally just something along the lines of: *okay, talk to you later*. Because she didn't know what to make of it, honestly. Ava's question was the one she'd been secretly asking herself lately: *what were they?*

"Let's go out," she said to Ava now. "Go dancing, or to listen to some music. We're way too young to spend our Saturday night watching TiVo'ed shows from *OWN*."

Ava perked up. "Okay, where d'you want to go?"

They went to Liquid, a club on the West side where Ava knew the guys who manned the door. Dylan had allowed Ava to have her way with her hair, so it was wild and springing away from her head in a massive curly 'fro that had the benefit of making her about five inches taller, along with the three-inch heels she was wearing. Ava had smoothed her hair back and was wearing a sequined tank that was so flimsy it was almost non-existent with black leather pants and skinny black heels. Not nearly as adventurous, Dylan was wearing snug jeans and a cute lacy white one-shouldered top.

Inside, the music was deafening and Ava dragged Dylan onto the dance-floor right away where they danced with each other and random guys who happened by. Dylan began to relax right away. This felt right; she'd taken the LSATs and was young and carefree—this was what she was supposed to be doing, not obsessing about her ambiguous relationship with a guy who would probably forget all about her just as soon as it sunk into his head what a hot commodity he was.

About a half hour in, she was beginning to sweat a little so she

left Ava on the dance floor and headed for the bar, pushing her way to the front and leaning forward, hoping to catch the attention of the bartender. She reached back and lifted her hair off her neck and fanned it with a hand, smiling at how energized she felt. Maybe she should do this every weekend now that the LSATs were behind her.

“What’re you drinking?” someone next to her asked.

Dylan looked up and into the eyes of a guy in a blue shirt next to her. He was the color of dark coffee and had a head shaved bald, and the kind of smile that made you feel like you were greeting an old friend.

“Nothing at the moment,” she said. “Since it seems I’m way too short to get the bartender’s attention.”

“Let me work that out for you,” he offered. “Beer, or wine? Or something stronger?”

“Chardonnay would be great. Thank you.”

“Dude! Hey!” he put his fingers in his mouth and let out a screeching whistle that immediately got the attention of one of the bartenders. He placed an order for her wine and a beer for himself.

Dylan smiled and reached into her pocket.

“No,” he said, putting a hand on hers. “Happy to buy a glass of wine for a pretty lady. My name’s Giancarlo. You?”

“Giancarlo?” she repeated smiling at him.

“Why? A brother can’t have an Italian name?”

Dylan laughed and took a sip of her wine. “No. You can have any name your parents want. But you want to explain how it happened?”

“Not till you tell me your name first.”

“Dylan.”

“Oh. And yet you want to rag on me? Where I come from, that’s a boy’s name. Or the name of singer with shaggy hair who plays a guitar.”

“A comedian,” Dylan said, cocking her head to one side and smiling at him.

“Only when it’s necessary to impress the ladies.”

“Well, I *am* impressed. But you still haven’t told me how you got a name like Giancarlo.”

“My parents are Ethiopian. Italy occupied Ethiopia. So every once in awhile, you may run into little Black kids in my

parents' home country with names like Santino and ...”

“Giancarlo,” Dylan finished for him.

“Yes.”

“Well it’s a beautiful name,” Dylan said.

“Thank you.”

They stood there smiling at each other for a moment and Dylan took a sip of her wine, meeting a familiar gaze in the mirror over the bar. For a split second she thought it was Mark but on closer inspection, she realized it was his brother, Matt. She waved at him in the mirror and he waved back, beginning to make his way toward her.

“Someone you know?” Giancarlo asked.

“Yes,” she said as Matt approached.

“Someone who would object if I wanted to dance with you?” he asked.

“He shouldn’t, no,” she said.

Matt leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, glancing at Giancarlo and acknowledging him with a curt nod.

“What’re you doing here?” he asked, without greeting.

Dylan, momentarily taken aback by his tone and by how much he sounded like Mark, hesitated before answering.

“Hanging out with my friend Ava. Letting off a little steam. What’re you doing here?”

“I’m single,” Matt said shrugging and looking again at Giancarlo.

“So am I,” Dylan said looking him in the eye. Then she turned to Giancarlo. “Still interested in that dance?”

She emptied her wineglass and Giancarlo took a swallow of his beer, holding her hand and leading her onto the dance floor. As they danced, she couldn’t help but glance back over to the bar where Matt had ordered his own drink and was watching her as he drank it. He’d been joined by another guy Dylan didn’t recognize who was also watching her like a hawk. After a couple of songs, Giancarlo grabbed her hand and pulled her closer.

“Look,” he said. “Your situation seems a little complicated. That guy who came over? He’s been scoping us out this whole time. Are you sure he’s not your boyfriend or something?”

Dylan shook her head emphatically. “No. Believe me, he’s not.”

“Okay, I take your word for it, but I’m not so sure he doesn’t want to be. And I’m not trying to get into it with anyone tonight, so ...”

Dylan’s shoulders sagged. “Well it was nice meeting you,” she said, turning to walk away.

“Wait a minute. Not so fast, Bob Dylan. Look, let me give you my information. And maybe if you sort whatever this is out, you can call me sometime.”

Dylan smiled at him.

“You have your phone? I’ll program my number in there in case you want to use it.”

“I left it. No point taking it to a club. You can’t hear anything anyway.”

“Well, but what if you want to program in the number of a nice Ethiopian guy with an Italian name?”

“You’re a charming one, aren’t you?” she grinned at him.

“Okay. Let’s do this old school then.” Giancarlo stopped a passing waitress and grabbed one of her napkins, borrowing her pen to scribble his name and number on it. He folded it and reached down to shove it into the front pocket of Dylan’s jeans.

“You have fun tonight, pretty lady.”

And then he danced away from her. Dylan watched him go then turned back to the bar where Matt and his friend were still watching. She went toward him, not even sure what she was going to say, but knowing that she was annoyed. Giancarlo approaching her had been a pleasant reminder of how much fun it was just to flirt. No expectations, just flirtation.

Matt looked at her impassively and took another sip of his drink.

“Dylan this is Roberto,” he said, introducing his friend.

“Hi,” Dylan said, her voice terse.

“When you’re done here, I can take you home,” Matt offered casually.

“When I’m done here, I can take myself home,” she said.

“And as a matter of fact, I’m not going home. I’m staying over at my friend Ava’s.”

“Oh yeah?” Matt asked. “Where is she?” He looked around as though he would know how to identify her.

“She’s around here somewhere.”

It was only a few minutes later when Ava herself showed up, flushed and a little breathless.

“Hey!” she said. “I saw you from across the dance floor and knew right away you must be Mark’s brother.”

Matt looked at her and gave her a half-smile. “Yes. I’m Mateo. Matt.”

“My god, you look so much like him! That must be kind of annoying these days, huh? People stop you on the street much?”

Matt looked amused by her. “Not too much.”

He introduced his friend Roberto to Ava and then offered her a drink and soon they were all chatting it up like old friends. Dylan sighed. She’d wanted a night out to forget for a moment about how confusing things were with her ambiguous and undefined relationship with Mark, and she had to run into his brother.

Finally, after fifteen minutes of sulking, she decided to give in to it, and she and Ava spent the rest of the night hanging out and dancing with Matt and Roberto until around four a.m. when they walked them out to flag down a cab.

“How strange was *that*?” Ava said as they pulled off. “There’s just no escaping Mark, is there?”

And no escaping the fact that she didn’t want to, either.

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The sun was not yet up but Dylan was wide awake and dressed for a run. She stretched with one leg extended and elevated on her sofa and made a circle with her neck. She could have used another four hours of sleep but after three more aborted attempts at full-fledged dates in the past week, Mark had called on Friday evening with an ingenious idea.

“You like working out?” he asked.

“Ahm, yes?”

“I was thinking you might want to come with me for a run in the Park. Tomorrow. Maybe then we

can have a full conversation—not on the phone—before something else comes up.”

“Sure. But I’m not convinced it’s going to turn out any better than the other times.” “It’ll be different,” he promised. “We’d run at five a.m. Only serious runners are out at that hour.

They couldn't care less who else is running.”

“Five a.m., huh?”

“Then we'll go to my parents' house for breakfast.”

“I think I'd like that. Not the running at five a.m. part, the breakfast with your family part.” “Even the running won't be so bad,” he said. “I'll go easy on you.”

When he buzzed from downstairs, Dylan grabbed her bag and headed down to meet him, getting

all the yawns out of her system on the elevator. He was waiting at the front desk, dressed in Adidas sweats and a baseball cap, looking very much awake despite the hour.

“Hey,” he hugged her, taking her bag and slinging it over his shoulder. “Let's go, I'm doubleparked. Ready for the run?”

“Depends on which trail we're taking.”

“Oh, so you know a little something about running in the park. You made me think you were a complete novice. Upper five-mile?”

“I was thinking Reservoir,” Dylan said as they headed out to his car.

“That's only a mile. We can do better than that. And afterwards I want to show you something before we go to my parents' place.”

“Okay, we'll do the upper-five,” Dylan groaned. “But extra helpings at your Mom's house.”

“Deal,” he said holding out a hand for them to shake on it.

Since he'd picked her up last time, Mark still hadn't replaced his car, a five-year old Jeep Cherokee, a completely unpretentious ride for a newly-minted millionaire. For a moment Dylan considered commenting on that fact but Mark didn't talk about his money and if she did, it might create the impression she was more interested in it than she was. Not that she as a saint or anything; extreme wealth was alluring but unless you saw evidence of it, it wasn't real, it was just a concept. Mark on the other hand was very real. His hands on the steering wheel, dusted in fine, smooth dark hair, the musculature of his thighs, obvious even under the baggy sweats and the dark, downy hair growing out just above his nape—all too real. She still couldn't look at him without wanting to touch.

They found parking near the 72<sup>nd</sup> Street entrance and warmed up before heading into the park. It was still a little dark out but the park was well-lit and there were already several other runners there, stretching in preparation for hitting the trail. Mark let Dylan run ahead of him for awhile until she heard the rhythm of his strides beginning to match hers. He ran alongside her and sometimes a little behind, but never ahead. They didn't talk for the first fifteen minutes and Dylan began to feel a pleasant burn in her hamstrings and calves. This early, the air was clean and crisp and the beauty of Central Park was apparent in ways that it were easy to overlook during a hot and crowded afternoon. Dylan would never have come this early to run her by herself. The sound and feel of her feet hitting the ground had a calming effect and she felt as though she could run for a dozen miles without noticing the distance.

"So before we got interrupted you were telling me why you want to go to law school," Mark said. He was not breathless at all and Dylan realized that the pace was probably far slower than he was accustomed to.

"Which time?" Dylan asked.

"Yeah, we do get interrupted a lot. Thanks for hanging in there."

"I'm not 'hanging in there'. I'm enjoying getting to know you."

"So, law school?"

"Oh yeah ..."

As they ran, Dylan described how her job helped her make up her mind to get a law degree, in between taking deep breaths. Their pace slowed as they got to the hilly section of the trail and Dylan finally gave up and strolled instead. As she talked, he listened— really listened—stopping her only to ask questions and often turning to look at her. It was beginning to get light out and the birds chirping provided a calming soundtrack as Dylan spoke.

"What kind of law do you want to practice?" he asked.

"Well, Grant—you know, the partner I've been telling you about—says he sees me doing what he calls 'real law' like criminal defense or civil rights stuff. But I don't know yet."

"You work with just him or a bunch of other lawyers?"

"A bunch. It depends on the case. The legal assistants are

assigned to cases, not to lawyers but I lucked out and got one of the best trial lawyers at the firm for most of my assignments.”

“Grant.”

“Yeah.”

And then because he said nothing in reply, Dylan looked at him. By now they were both sweating, but while he looked like a commercial for a sports drink she almost certainly did not. She could feel her braid beginning to stick to the back of her neck and lifted it for a moment, reveling in the cool breeze. Still, Mark said nothing but there was tightness about his mouth.

“Wait a second,” she said, incredulous. “Are you *jealous*?”

“I’m not jealous,” he said too quickly. “But he’s the only person you’ve mentioned by name and you just said you work with a bunch of other lawyers so I wondered, y’know ...”

“No, I don’t know. You wondered what?”

“I bet he’s cracking on you, right?”

“No, as a matter of fact. He has a wife and three-year-old daughter.”

They were just approaching the crest of the hill. Dylan stretched her arms above her head, forgetting to be self-conscious about the sweat stains that had undoubtedly begun to form at her armpits.

“You work with all these hotshot lawyers and you’re telling me none of them tried something with you.”

“First of all, I didn’t say *none* of them tried anything with me, I said *Grant* didn’t try anything with me. Second, I’m not as irresistible as you seem to think I am. And third, any one of those ‘hotshot lawyers’ would give his right arm to be you for even a single day.”

“Well, if he’s going to be me, he’ll need his right arm. It’s kind of essential for the job,” Mark said.

Despite his joke, her response didn’t seem to have a discernible impact on his mood—clearly he was bothered by her talking about Grant. It had to be because he hadn’t been famous for more than a minute. He was on the cusp of becoming something truly huge and still hadn’t grasped its enormity—he still believed he was a regular guy.

In a year or two, she wondered, would he be the same? Maybe



by then he would be dating models and movie stars and wondering why he'd ever tripped out on Dylan Sanger's dating history. That's if he even remembered her name.

They got to the top of the hill and picked up the pace a little, resuming a slow run.

"This is frustrating," Mark said after a moment.

"What is? The fact that I'm matching your pace on one of Central Park's most challenging trails?"

"No. This," he said indicating them both. "Matt told me he saw you in the club."

Dylan said nothing. She didn't owe him an explanation, just as he hadn't owed her one when she saw him in the paper with that woman.

"He said you were with some guy. And that you were dancing and that you looked ... beautiful."

"I couldn't get rid of him for the rest of the night," Dylan said. Then she looked at Mark and smiled, but he wasn't smiling.

"I'm kidding! I mean, it's true that I couldn't get rid of him but he was great company. We had fun."

They ran in silence for awhile, the only sounds their panting and the soles of their running shoes on the trail.

"Everything I ever wanted is happening to me right now," Mark said suddenly. "I dreamed about playing in the majors since I was like six years old. And now it's going to happen. You know what that's going to mean for my family?"

Dylan said nothing.

He was getting a little breathless from talking as he ran, but continued nevertheless. "I can send my sister to college. Any college she wants to go to. My father can retire and my parents can go to the DR anytime they want instead of scraping together pennies to go every three years. Hell, they can buy a house there. Or even build one."

Dylan waited for it, but he didn't mention a single thing he wanted for himself.

"And all I have to do is show up at a few events, a few meetings, take some pictures and play ball when the time comes. And I can't *wait* to play."

"Then what's so frustrating?"

"I met someone I really like and ... but I don't have the time I wish I had. So she's off dancing in nightclubs with other guys,

and dating lawyers.”

Dylan looked at him, not knowing how to address the last part of what he said. All she knew was that she wasn't about to make any promises not to go out, or not to dance with guys who wanted to dance with her; because Mark, despite all his attention, had made no promises to her.

“Okay, let's burn it out,” she said. “Sprint the last hundred yards back to the car?”

“No,” Mark said.

“No? Don't tell me you're tapped out already, Mr. Superstar Shortstop,” she teased.

“I want to know first. Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“Hanging out with any of those guys you work with. Or dating anyone.”

“No.”

Mark nodded. “Okay.” Then he smiled at her and unexpectedly broke away into a full-speed sprint.

“Cheater!”

Dylan went chasing after him.

By the time they got to the car, they were both soaking wet with perspiration. Mark draped their towels over the backs of their seats and they got in, pulling away from the curb.

“So remember I said I want to show you something?”

“Now? How about we get cleaned up first?”

“It'll be fine. There's no dress code involved.”

They headed back downtown and Mark pulled into an underground parking garage, leading Dylan into a building she recognized but had never given much notice to before. Like many New York buildings, it was fairly nondescript outside and offered absolutely no clue as to what awaited you inside.

The condo was on the third floor, a beautiful, newly renovated unit near Washington Square Park. Boasting pristine dark oak floors, wonderful light and airy, modern rooms, it was fully furnished and looked like something out of *Architectural Digest*. There were three enormous picture windows overlooking Washington Square flanked by low-slung sand-colored sofas. On the opposite wall was a modern polished marble fireplace that would be beautiful when lit. The dining room and kitchen were separated from the living space by a

solid red brick wall that stood in stark contrast to the modernism of the rest of the condo.

“I almost bought it,” Mark said. “Then I choked at the last minute. So it’s just a rental, but I wanted you to see it, see if you like it.”

“I *love* it,” Dylan said spinning around and taking it all in. “What’s not to like?”

“Maybe you’ll spend some time here,” Mark said, coming toward her.

“I’d like that.”

She looked up at him and he leaned in to kiss her which she wanted. Badly. So, so badly. Then he was running his hands down her sides, and this time she *was* self-conscious, because she was damp and sweaty and maybe even a little ripe as well. But Mark didn’t seem to notice or care and the next thing Dylan knew, he was pulling her running tights down and over her hips and she was too excited and too surprised to object. She held her breath as he got to her feet and peeled it off one leg at a time, removing her sneakers and socks as he did. This was one hell of a turnaround for a guy who not too long ago was pulling back as he kissed her, just so she wouldn’t feel his erection.

Standing barefoot and in her underwear and t-shirt in the middle of Mark’s brand-new living room Dylan reached out to raise his shirt, over his rippled stomach, over his chest, helping as he shrugged it completely off. His chest was covered in a light layer of the same silky dark hair on his arms, and Dylan couldn’t help but reach out and touch him. And he actually quivered, as though just her touch was pleasure to him. In his face, she saw a mirror-image of the wanting she felt. She slipped her fingers into the waistband of his sweatpants and pulled them down, crouching as she did. When she was face to face with his pelvis, she stopped and blinked. *Whoa*. Mark pulled her up and kissed her as he stepped out of the clothes she’d removed. Without speaking, he led her to the rear of the condo.

The walls and the floor of the shower were sandstone and built to look like the rocks on a waterfall. Mark turned on the water and jets came alive from all directions. He adjusted the temperature then turned to Dylan again. She remained

perfectly still while he stripped her naked, slowly removing her shirt, her sports bra and her underwear and tossing them aside.

For awhile he just looked at her, for so long that she was almost self-conscious. He trailed his fingers over her stomach, down and then up again, finally cupping her breasts in both hands and bending to kiss them, his tongue moving over her nipples and around them, tasting her. They were both breathing audibly now, almost as though they were still on the Central Park trail, just before they hit the crest of the hill. Then Mark raised his head to look at her.

“Is this moving too fast for you?” he asked. But there was a plea in his eyes, as though he was begging her to say ‘no’.

Dylan shook her head.

If anything, it wasn't moving fast enough. She considered for a second—but only a second—that she should probably play a little harder to get; maybe he would lose interest after this if she was too easy. But in the moment, it was difficult to care. She wanted him as badly as he obviously wanted her. And there was every likelihood that he'd lose interest anyway. She would be foolish to assume that this would change anything. When all was said and done, he would still disappear into his new life, and she would become a distant memory. But for now, she would take what he could give.

When they stepped into the shower, Dylan was immediately drenched from all sides. The water temperature was perfect, and she thought only fleetingly about her hair. Thankfully it was securely braided—she wasn't sure how she would have felt about him seeing her massive, tangled ‘fro once they got out. But all thoughts of hair or anything besides him were eradicated when Mark touched her once again. His hands were slippery with soap now and he ran them all over her, bathing her, stroking her, feeling her. Dylan submitted, completely transfixed by the look of utter and complete focus on his face. She took the soap and did the same for him, running her hands over his arms, his firm stomach, his sides, his back, his buttocks.

When she took him in her hands feeling him grow harder in her fist, she moved her hand back and forth, watching as his face changed. He allowed her to caress him this way only for a

little while but when his eyes closed, and his mouth opened slightly, a low guttural sound emitting from between his lips, Mark pulled out of her reach.

He lowered his head, kissing her as though he couldn't get enough, his hands rinsing the soap from her body and moving over every part of her, as though he wanted to leave not an inch of her untouched. The cool water, the warmth of his hands, and the lack of friction as their skin made contact was almost too much. *But god, there was more ...* Before Dylan knew what was happening, he was kneeling in front of her, the water falling over him in sheets, and spreading her thighs once again. A girl could be forgiven if she passed out at a time like this.

"No," she said, "No, no ..."

But she meant exactly the opposite.

Mark draped her leg over his shoulder, his hands grasping her buttocks to hold her in place and help her maintain her balance. Then his tongue was on her and inside her, hot and nimble, searching, probing, bringing her to the brink of crazy. Dylan gripped his shoulders and looked down, watching as he angled his head for better access. The sight of him, knelt before her, pressing his face into her made her tremble, her legs barely supporting her weight. Mark resisted at first when she tried to pull away, holding her against him until she put her hands on his head. He looked up at her and his eyes ... *god*, that look her made her feel as though no one had ever wanted her before this moment. Not really. Not like this.

Mark stood and gently shoved her against the shower wall and out of the stream of the jets. He pressed himself against her and Dylan reached down, feeling how hard he was. She wanted to taste him as he had her, which was surprising because she never *wanted* to before. She'd done it because it was only fair, and because they expected it, but she couldn't remember craving it like she did now.

But just as she was about to sink to her knees, Mark lifted her and carried her, soaking wet to the bedroom where they tumbled onto the enormous bed. The sheets clung to them and he batted them aside impatiently. He was poised between her thighs when he stopped, his eyes searching hers, asking for permission. He had beautiful, silky, jet-black eyelashes and his

eyes, soulful eyes that could make you weep just staring into them.

Dylan pulled him forward and arched her back so that he sank into her. One inch, and then another and another. Then because she couldn't wait, she grabbed him and pushed upward so she enveloped him as much as she could from that angle. Mark's chest was heaving against hers and for a moment, she just held him there until neither of them could stand it anymore and he rocked forward until he was buried inside her up to the hilt. There was a moment of indescribable tingling, where Dylan felt her body settle around him and hold him in, fusing them together as though he belonged there.

Mark felt it too, and shuddered, breathing deeply as though trying to catch a breath then moving against her, his mouth covering her own. When his fingers dug into her buttocks as though to lift her, Dylan wrapped her arms tightly about him and Mark reared back, sitting on his heels, holding her up so she was astride him. Gradually, Dylan released her grip about his neck and looked at him. His eyes were heavy-lidded like someone awaking from, or about to fall into a deep sleep. A slow, dreamlike smile spread across his face.

"You feel ... so good," he breathed.

Dylan clenched her thighs about his hips and lowered her head, gently tugging his earlobe with her teeth. Mark literally shivered and pulled away.

"Don't do that," he said shaking his head. "Not if you want me to last more than two minutes."

"I can't help it," she said. She kissed the side of his neck and his shoulder. "I just want to bite into you ... your color is like ... a caramel apple."

"Then bite me," he said giving her a sharp thrust.

Dylan gasped and licked his earlobe opening her mouth against his neck, wanting to bite him somewhere where everyone would see her mark. Then she remembered they were going to his parents house and she forced herself not to do anything foolish that would embarrass them both later.

"Ai, *dios mío* ..." he said, leaning into her, closing his eyes.

Dylan laughed softly against his mouth. "Speaking Spanish, huh?" Her tongue snaked out to lick his lower lip. "I must be making quite an impression."

Mark opened his eyes once again, unwrapping her arms from his neck. Placing his hands on her hips, he lifted her up and pulled her back almost in a rowing motion, effortlessly raising and lowering her, at the same time rocking his hips back and forth. The sensation was so overwhelming that Dylan wasn't laughing anymore; hell, she wasn't even *thinking*. Her breath became more labored and she was moaning and panting so loudly, it would be a miracle if the neighbors didn't hear her. But she didn't care, and even if she did, she wouldn't have been able to make herself stop.

Just as she felt herself about to come apart, Mark suddenly pulled her off him and she gasped, her body protesting the sudden void where moments before he had filled her. Then just as suddenly, he had flipped her onto her stomach and with one arm under her abdomen, pulled her toward him again entering her from behind. The pressure, the depth, and friction hit her in a different, more sensitive spot, and she cried out even louder until he slowed and leaned against her back.

"You okay?" he asked, his breath warm against her ear.

"Yes ... what're you doing?" she demanded.

"I thought I was hurting you."

"No. Don't *stop* ..."

So he kept moving against her, reaching around to put his fingers between her legs, spreading the moisture he found there, making slow circles until she felt the pressure building. Mark felt it too and pulled away yet again. Dylan grabbed him, trying to pull him back. The throbbing emptiness was torture.

"*Mark!*"

"I need to see your face," he said, turning her onto her back and sinking between her thighs once again.

That slowed her, and Dylan looked at him then, right into his eyes.

God, who was this *man*?

To work her over in six different ways and then stop because he wanted to *look into her eyes*? How was it possible that he was out there, undiscovered by some other woman? Dylan pulled him into her and held his face between her hands, kissing him slowly, sweetly, to let him know how much it meant that even in the middle of his pleasure, he remembered to *see* her.

And this time they moved slowly, almost carefully and in complete synchronicity, their eyes never leaving the other's. Within moments, Dylan was brought to the brink again, and just as she felt Mark begin to tense and jerk, flooding inside her, she let go, fell over the edge and into oblivion.



## 4

She had never seen him angry before, and certainly not angry with her. But there was no doubt that he was. And she couldn't actually see it, so much as sense it. He was *pissed*.

It had taken Dylan a moment to even remember where she'd gotten the number, but once she did, she didn't see the point in lying. She'd gotten it that night at Liquid when she'd run into Matt. Giancarlo, the handsome Ethiopian had written it on a napkin and shoved it into the front pocket of her jeans, where it had remained for weeks now. She hadn't washed the jeans and so the number and his name were as clearly legible as the night he'd written them.

She and Mark were packing for Christmas in the Dominican Republic with his family. After figuring out that they could fit all their stuff into his large suitcase, he'd helped her unpack her smaller one and it was then that the napkin had come fluttering out of the pocket of her jeans. It landed face up with the blue Liquid logo visible and underneath, Giancarlo's scrawl.

Mark picked it up, looked at it for a moment and then without a word handed it to her. He might have stewed on it privately, but Dylan had been dumb enough to begin an explanation he hadn't even asked for.

"I didn't ask for the number," she said. "He just gave it to me. And besides, it isn't as though we were ... you know."

That was all the opening he needed.

"It isn't as though we were ... what?" he asked, almost too casually.

"Dating," she said meekly.

Mark seemed to consider this for a moment.

"But you'd met my family by then, right?"

"Yes, but ..."

"And come to my parents' house?"

"Right. But we weren't ... I mean, as far as I knew... and I hadn't even heard from you for almost a week at that poin ..."

"But I'd told you, when I signed that I wouldn't be able to call as much. That I would be busy." "Yes, Mark. But we'd never even had an actual conversation about what we were, or

whether ...”

“So when I called you every day, and talked to you just about every night, what was going on there as far as you knew?”

“Stop interrogating me! We’d only just met a few weeks before that,” she said, exasperated. “And you knew I was at the club. Matt told you. You told me he did.”

“I knew you were *dancing* at the club. I didn’t know you were picking up men at the club.”

“Okay, so I wasn’t ‘picking up men’ at the club,” she said slowly. “I was ...” She stopped, trying to think of the most benign way to characterize what she’d been doing that night.

“I was hanging out. That’s all. And ...”

“Hanging out, and taking numbers.” He shook his head and walked back into the closet, continuing to take things out to pack.

“Should I have given it back?” Dylan asked, her voice rising a little. “Not taken it in the first place?”

“Oh, *por supuesto que no!* That would be impolite.”

“I’m not apologizing for this,” she said with finality. “I was not *with you* then. And he was just a guy in a bar who thought I was cute. This is not worth arguing over.”

Dylan turned determinedly away and continued folding her clothes. She’d slept over at his place because they had an eight a.m. flight to Santo Domingo. It was still dark out, and they were going to have to get in a car pretty soon if they wanted to be at the airport the required two hours before flight time.

Mark’s entire family was going on the trip, which he had paid for. It was the first time in years that they had gone as a family, and the fact that she was going along was a big deal. She wasn’t going to ruin it with this non-issue; and she wasn’t going to let him ruin it either.

“Before I get involved in anything, I like to know the rules,” Mark said, continuing to toss clothing into the suitcase. “So maybe we need to talk about our rules.”

“What *rules?*” Dylan snapped. She turned to the suitcase and began straightening the clothes he’d haphazardly added moments before.

“One rule, actually,” Mark said. He stopped rifling through his clothes. “*Look* at me, Dylan,” he said. His tone was one he had never used with her before. Commanding, rather than asking.

Dylan stopped fussing with the packing and looked at him.

“I’ll never do anything that puts you in a position where you have to doubt me,” he said. “I want that same promise from you.”

It was a simple enough request. And frankly she’d made variations of that same request with different guys she was dating. Usually, they equivocated on their responses, and she remembered only too well how that felt.

“Done,” she said, now. “I promise.”

That should have ended it, but for the remainder of their time in the condo, they packed silently and didn’t speak even for the entire drive to the airport. Once they got there, they met the Acostas at the gate—Matt, Peter, his girlfriend Xiomara and the baby, Mr. and Mrs. Acosta and Miri, who was jumping out of her skin with excitement.

Miriam was small and delicate where her brothers were tall and solid. She stood about five-footfour and had fine features and a creamy *dulce de leche* complexion. She didn’t resemble Mark, Matt and Peter at all and had reddish brown hair while theirs was the darkest of black; her eyes hazel while theirs were dark brown. But like her brothers, her eyes were ringed by improbably long lashes. When she smiled as she was doing now, dimples appeared in her cheeks. Mark had one on his chin. When she’d met Miri at Mark’s signing ceremony and spent just half an hour in her company, Dylan had loved her, which was saying something since even Mark she had not loved that quickly.

“I’m so excited you’re coming with us,” Miri said hugging Dylan. “I just wish your mother could have made it.”

At that, Dylan glanced at Mark, hoping he hadn’t heard the comment. Another sore spot. When she’d mentioned that she usually spent Christmas in Arizona with her mother, he’d insisted that Dylan instead invite her to the DR. And when she told him it wasn’t a great idea, he’d taken that as a sign that she wasn’t ready to introduce him to her family. So Dylan implied that she’d asked and that her mother hadn’t been able to change her plans.

What Mark didn’t know, and what she couldn’t find the words to explain was that Leslie Sanger was not like other mothers. When she thought of her childhood, all Dylan could remember

was a sense of longing. Longing for her mother to come home from one of her jobs and pick her up from the babysitter's, longing for her to hug her, longing for her to offer a word of praise, a word of warmth. Something. Anything. And yet, for some reason she'd never doubted that her mother loved her. It was just that she didn't know how to express it.

When she was five, Dylan's father, a New York City police officer was killed in the line of duty. A sixteen-year-old crackhead had grabbed his gun while he was taking her in for possession and shot him in the chest. Sometimes, Dylan thought she could remember him, but mostly she remembered his picture on the mantle, flanked by candles that remained lit always, replaced when they burned out. She tried to remember a time when her mother may not have been so sad but she couldn't. It seemed as though she had always been this way. She went about the business of raising Dylan with a sense of focus and diligence that no one could fault—she did all the right things except openly display her affection. A few months into Dylan's sophomore year at Fordham, her mother had announced that she was moving to Arizona with a boyfriend Dylan had never even met.

Now, their relationship wasn't a bad one exactly, but it was distant. Watching the way Mark and his siblings, especially Miri, were with their mother aroused all the old feelings of loneliness and longing that Dylan remembered from her childhood. She hadn't quite wrapped her mind around how to bring together the two lives—the passionate expressive one she had with Mark and the quiet, reserved one she had with her mother.

It would have been too difficult to have her along for this trip, and honestly, it might have ruined the whole thing. Dylan was beginning to get used to being with the Acostas, basking in their warmth, feeling like one of their clan. To have her mother there would have made her self-conscious, and she was afraid that the Acostas—and most especially Mark—would be put off by her mother's quiet, standoffish demeanor. But Dylan had spared Mark all those details, and so instead he believed her reluctance was an indication that she wasn't sure about him, about them.

"We're going to have the *best* time," Miri said. "I'm kind of

glad to have a girlfriend to hang out with. We can go to some of the clubs and flirt with cute island boys.”

Dylan closed her eyes, inwardly wincing. Of course, Miri could have no idea about her and Mark’s little talk this morning, but it seemed as though at every turn she was making it worse.

“Hey, how many bags are we checking in?” Peter broke in on their conversation. “¿Cuántas tienes, Miri?”

“Just the one over there,” Miri pointed out her suitcase and Peter, Matt and Mark began the task of moving them all up to the check-in desk.

Mark wasn’t talking much, but Dylan sensed his tension. She turned away from him, focusing instead on Peter and Xiomara’s baby boy, Pedrito. He was a beautiful, chubby nut-brown boy with a head full of curly black hair and the liquid gray eyes. So precious. She leaned in and cooed at him, and he blinked at her. At six weeks old, he was still too tiny to do much more than gurgle and smile.

Xiomara, Peter’s girlfriend, even though she’d recently given birth was model-beautiful. Tall and lithe with dark brown hair and a narrow, aristocratic face to go along with her formidable name. Of the entire Acosta household Peter and his girlfriend had been the least warm, the least welcoming, treating Dylan cordially but clearly withholding judgment until they knew her better. She didn’t fault them for that—she was still a virtual stranger who showed up just as Mark was being made rich, after all.

Checking in for the flight seemed to take a really long time while everyone searched for and produced passports, figured out how many pieces of hand luggage they had and affixed tags to everything. Dylan watched, amused as people behind them in line fidgeted impatiently, waiting for the large noisy family to get their act together. She had been one of the fidgeting, impatient people in the past, but never a member of the large noisy family. She liked this side of the fence much better.

When finally they were done, and ready to head for the gate, Mark found her and took her hand. He remained moody and quiet, and yet he still naturally reached for her hand. *God, she was falling harder and harder for this man.*

With him, there was none of the game-playing and power moves. He wanted her and he let her know it in word and deed. And that didn't change just because they'd had a fight. Sometimes Dylan wondered whether she'd *ever* had a boyfriend before. Maybe she only thought she had. Mark's attention to her, and need for attention *from* her was like no other relationship she'd had in the past.

Within a week after they started sleeping together, she'd overheard him talking to his agent on the phone about an evening event Corey wanted him to go to.

*I'll call you back*, he said. *I have to ask Dylan.*

At first she was puzzled. *What on earth did he have to check with her for?*

But then he'd actually asked her whether she had something planned for them. As far as Mark was concerned, it went without saying that if she needed him for something else that evening, it would take precedence over Corey's event, whatever it may be. She hadn't imagined that having sex would accelerate their relationship in the way it had.

Suddenly, she was folded into this new life, and this enormous family—dinners at his parents' house, day-trips with him and his sister to look at colleges and even to Mass with his mother twice. With other men, sex produced doubt—they became less accessible, more ambivalent about whether they wanted to “move so fast.” But Mark had none of those misgivings, and that was both refreshing and frightening. For him, sex produced certainty. He had given himself to her in more ways than one, and wanted her to do the same.

Immediately after that first time, he became much more publicly expressive with her, even around his family. He pulled her to sit on his lap, kissed her on the neck or slid a hand into the back pocket of her jeans. Without speaking the words, he announced to the world: *she's with me.*

Now, Mark let go of her hand only when they had to remove their shoes and load their stuff onto the conveyer to pass through the x-ray machine. On the other side, Miri looped an arm through Dylan's and pulled her away to browse the gift shops while they waited for boarding time. When Dylan looked back, Mark was holding his nephew, nuzzling him and kissing him. Watching him cup the baby's head in his large

hand, she found herself wondering how he would be with a baby of his own.

“Let’s go to Bijoux Turner,” Miri said, yanking her arm. “All that cool stuff for only ten dollars.”

As she always did on long flights, Dylan fell asleep almost immediately after take-off, waking once when Mark got up to go to the restroom and had to move her head from his shoulder. The next time she opened her eyes, they were landing. She looked at Mark through sleepy eyes and he smiled at her, but his eyes were distant and distracted.

Making their way through the airport, Mr. and Mrs. Acosta seemed to be energized, and stand a little taller. It was only when strangers began reaching out to greet Mark that Dylan realized why. Mark was the latest native son to make good. The Dominican Republic had more than its fair share of outstanding baseball players, so much so, they seemed to be minting new stars practically every year. But they didn’t all sign multi-million dollar contracts, or get on the front *and* back covers of the New York daily newspapers. So Mark was something of a local celebrity in his parents’ home country as well.

He smiled and thanked people, nodding and shaking hands as they went through the airport, one arm holding Dylan at his side. Even though his parents were clearly proud enough to burst, he seemed embarrassed by all the fuss and by the time everyone gathered at baggage claim, was holding his head down as though hoping not to be noticed.

Matt came and put his arm about her while Mark focused on the carousel. Like Miri, he seemed genuinely excited she was there, and Dylan relaxed enough to put an arm about his waist as well.

“Why didn’t you bring your girlfriend?” she asked.

“I need to be free when I’m in the DR,” Matt said. “Too many cute women to stick to just one. Except my brother doesn’t seem to have that problem ...” he inclined his head in Mark’s direction. “I swear you have his balls in your back pocket or something.”

“That’s not a nice thing to say,” Dylan pretended to be

annoyed but was secretly pleased.

“Mateo, help your brother with those bags!” Mrs. Acosta called to him.

Matt immediately released Dylan and went to help Mark drag the luggage off the carousel. Mrs. Acosta joined her, watching her three sons with barely concealed pride in her eyes.

“You’re going to love my country,” she promised Dylan. “I am so happy you’re here. But for your mother, I think, Christmas without you cannot be so happy.”

Dylan smiled.

There was no way she was going to tell Mrs. Acosta that her mother didn’t celebrate Christmas. When Dylan visited her in Arizona around this time of year, not only was the weather not reminiscent of the season, neither was the mood in her mother’s house. Leslie Sanger lived a quiet life with her boyfriend, Stuart. In their free time they hiked and practiced yoga. Once in awhile they went on spiritual retreats. When Dylan visited, their routine remained precisely the same and she fit herself into it as best she could. They probably wouldn’t miss her at all.

Mark had booked them all into the best resort in La Romana, in a five-bedroom villa that had an infinity pool and was surrounded by lush tropical vegetation. The villa boasted an enormous chef’s kitchen and open-style living area with stark white marble floors and teak pillars supporting a beautiful craftsman ceiling. All the furniture was white, and Indian cotton curtains that looked as delicate as spider webs fluttered in the breeze. Out past the pool, there were the soft rolling hills of the resort’s champion golf course, and just beyond that the cerulean Caribbean Sea.

Mr. Acosta put a hand over his heart when he saw the view and Dylan watched with a lump in her throat as tears rolled silently down his cheeks. Mark walked over to his father and pulled him into a rough embrace, and the Mr. Acosta grabbed him, holding him tight and kissing both his cheeks. Just then Matt walked in, and spotting the pool let out a loud whoop, dropped his luggage and took a running dive in, fully clothed.

This broke the heavy mood in the room as Mrs. Acosta laughed and Miri followed Matt, jumping in with her sundress. When she surfaced, she squealed and beckoned to Dylan.



“C’mon!” she yelled. “You know you want to!”

Dylan hesitated for only a moment then kicked off her Keds, running and jumping in cannonball style. As soon as she hit the water, she felt the weight of the New York winter and her uncertainty about Mark’s mood wash away. Her only niggling worry was how Ava was doing. Like Dylan, Ava did not see Christmas as a happy time. Dylan made a mental note to call her later, but for now, just floated on her back and enjoyed the water.

Because Mrs. Acosta was not particularly keen on Mark and Dylan sharing a room, Dylan roomed with Miri, while Mark and Matt each had their own; Peter of course had Xiomara and the baby with him in one room and the Acostas took the enormous master. When he’d unpacked his stuff, Mark brought the suitcase with only Dylan’s clothes remaining over to her and Miri’s room. When he dropped it off, he had almost nothing to say, and went back to his own room immediately.

“Did you two have a fight or something?” Miri asked, sprawling across her bed.

“I wouldn’t call it a fight,” Dylan said, beginning to pull her clothes out of the suitcase. “A misunderstanding. I thought we’d settled it but I guess not.”

“He’s very sensitive,” Miri said matter-of-factly. “But you probably noticed that by now.”

“No,” Dylan said honestly, looking at Miri. “I hadn’t noticed that. But of course we haven’t known each other for that long. I’m still figuring him out.”

“What you see is what you get with Mark. He says what he means, and he means what he says,” Miri shrugged.

“Well, it’s what he doesn’t say that I’m concerned about,” Dylan muttered.

“I wouldn’t worry about it if I were you. He’s obviously into you. You’re the first woman we’ve met since ...” she stopped.

“Since?”

Miri looked embarrassed. “Just in a long time.”

There was obviously something more, but Dylan decided not to press it. It would only make her upset, she was sure of it. So no point going there. At least not with Miri.

“So Mark got a cook for us for the week,” Miri said in a transparent attempt to change the subject. “What do you want to

bet my mother chases her out of the kitchen?”

Dylan smiled and continued unpacking, making a mental note to ask Mark about his last relationship. If the look on Miri’s face was any indication, it had been serious, and so come hell or high water, she was going find out all about it.

Once the unpacking was done, everyone seemed to drift off, napping in their separate rooms, exhausted from the early morning traveling. Dylan, having slept on the plane, instead went to sit by the pool, taking her cell phone with her to call Ava. She answered right away, and let out a scream when she heard her Dylan’s voice.

“I was hoping you’d call!” she said. “How is it? Beautiful?”

“Amazing. You should see the view, Ava. And there was the sweetest thing. When we got here Mr. Acosta looked at where we’re staying and he cried. And then Mark hugged him and it was all I could do not to start blubbering myself.”

“Oh my god, I am so happy for you. You get to have an actual Christmas. When was the last time that ever happened, huh?”

Underneath, Dylan could hear the wistfulness in Ava’s voice and her heart broke a little for her friend. They’d been soldiers together, battling through their unenviable childhoods and loneliness and disappointments in love. Dylan felt a little like a deserter. She was here, in this beautiful place, among these wonderful people and Ava was back in New York, probably nursing a bottle of pinot grigio as they spoke.

“Maybe you could come down for New Year’s Eve,” Dylan suggested. “We would have the best time.”

“No. Not this time. I think you need to get to know his family. I’m not going to intrude on that.”

“It wouldn’t be an intrusion; it would be so much fun for you to ...”

“No,” Ava said firmly. “This is your time with Mark.”

There were tears in her voice, but because she knew her so well, Dylan believed, no, she *knew* that they were tears of joy.

“Ava ...”

“Stop,” she said. “I am just boozy and weepy and wishing there wasn’t a foot of dirty snow outside. Just bring me back a t-shirt or something. Or a hot Dominican man.”

“I’ll do my best to fit one into my suitcase.”

“Good. Call me in a couple days, okay?”

‘A couple days’ was Christmas. Dylan knew she didn’t want to say it, but that day in particular was probably going to be a tough one for her. She would go spend it with her brother and father. Her mother may or may not be there. There would be few gifts, if any, someone would get drunk, and there would be an argument. Ava would leave early, taking Metro North back to the city early. It was what she did every year, and every year she tried again hoping it would be different.

“Okay. I love you,” Dylan said. She hung up and wiped the tears from her own face.

In the absence of a real family, she was Ava’s family and Ava was hers. And even though they’d never spent the Christmas holidays together, their shared misery on that day was one of many things that bound them together.

“What’s wrong?”

Dylan looked up. Mark was behind her, his face concerned. He was wearing just his jeans and no shirt, his chest distracting her for a moment. Her man was *so* sexy.

“What’s the matter?”

“I was talking to Ava. She’s alone for the holidays. Or she may as well be.”

Mark shrugged. “Tell her to come here.”

“I did,” Dylan admitted. “She turned me down. She’s going upstate to see her father and brother. But it never turns out quite the way she hopes it will.”

“Well, if she changes her mind, tell her she’s welcome to come. She could room with Miri and you could come stay with me. Instead of this stupid set-up with you all the way down the hall and around a dozen corners in this huge house.”

Dylan laughed. “Whose idea was that anyway?”

“My mother. She thinks it would be disrespectful.”

“Oh,” Dylan said sobering up. “Well, I wouldn’t want her to feel like ...”

Mark held up a hand. “No. Not to her. She thinks I would be disrespecting *you* if I expected you to sleep with me.”

Dylan spluttered. “Seriously? Does she think I’m ... a virgin?”

Mark shook his head. “It’s not that. It’s just that since we’re not married, not engaged, she thinks of it as ... unchivalrous for me to expect it, y’know what I mean?”

“But what about Peter and Xiomara?”

“Well, the way my parents see it, they’re already married. Just not married in church.”

“Huh.” Dylan puzzled over that for a moment.

“And with the baby and all, I’d say that cow’s out of the barn.”

“Well if your mother knew what you did to me last night,” Dylan said moving closer, “she would see that *that* cow pretty much got away as well.”

Mark smiled and leaned in to kiss her softly on the lips, then brushed her nose with his.

“You want to tell me what was bothering you all morning? Was it that phone number?” Dylan asked quietly, taking advantage of his sudden tenderness.

“I was thinking about spring training. I report in mid-February. That’s six weeks. And then the season. I’ll be away a lot.”

Dylan nodded and waited for him to continue.

“I was wondering how we’re going work that out.”

Dylan shrugged. “We’ll take it as it comes.”

“Same rule applies?” Mark tested.

“Yeah. If that’s what you want.”

If she sounded noncommittal, it was only because she didn’t want to pressure him. Once he started playing his star would rise even higher. She wasn’t about to be the clingy girlfriend back home if what he really needed was some latitude to explore other options. As much as it would pain her, she would relinquish her expectations. Because Lord knew, the chances that he would remain this committed once he saw the other fish in the sea were slim to none.

“I want to know what *you* want,” Mark said, his eyes penetrating hers. “While I’m gone, do you want to ... see other guys, or . . . ?”

Dylan thought for a moment. What was the right answer? The *honest* answer was ‘no’. She didn’t want to see anyone else. But if she said that, was she boxing him in? And did he *want* to be boxed in? It was all so confusing. Mark was not like any other man she’d been involved with, so she had no idea. If she went by the way he treated her, the way he looked at her, the way he touched her ... she would say yes, he wanted to be boxed in. But look at him, he was fucking gorgeous, and he was talented and now famous and rich as well. Why would he even be this into *her*?

“That wasn’t a trick question,” Mark said, his voice quiet. Dylan looked at him again. He looked unsure of himself, almost apprehensive.

“No, *I* don’t, but ...”

Mark sighed, obviously relieved. Then he looked at her, his eyes questioning. “Wait, why’d you say it like that? You said *you* don’t but ...”

Dylan swallowed. Okay, so this was it. She would give him his out. And if he took it, it would hurt, but she wouldn’t be surprised.

“Maybe *you* want to see other people. I mean, on the road you’ll meet a lot of ... It’s not like we’ve known each other for that long.”

Mark shook his head and looked down, palms on his thighs. He sighed and looked up at her once again, his eyes fixed on hers as though trying to figure something out. Dylan watched him watch her.

“I was fucking jealous about some guy you met in passing in a nightclub. A guy I know you haven’t seen or spoken to since,” he said. “I was jealous just knowing that some other guy wanted you, even if you didn’t want him. And still you think I would be interested in *seeing other people?*” He sounded incredulous.

“You might think you don’t want to now, but ...”

“But what? Some Mets fan in tight jeans might change my mind?”

Dylan shrugged.

Mark moved closer to her on the chaise, tilting her chin upward so she was looking at him. “Dylan, all I think about every day, all day, are two things: playing ball, and you. And not in that order.”

The tension in her shoulders dissipated and she really looked at him this time.

“So let me ask you again,” Mark said, his eyes searching hers.

“Do you want to see other people while I’m gone? Or does our rule still apply?”

“Our rule still applies,” she said.

“Good,” Mark exhaled. He nodded as though he’d put something to rest. “Good.”

## 5

The villa was quiet and dark. Dylan could hear the sound of the surf in the distance and the wind in the palm and banana trees. It was soothing, but she couldn't sleep. Mark was just on the other side of the house and she wanted to be with him, but she didn't know if she could find her way through the unfamiliar hallways, and she was afraid of upsetting something, waking the whole house and having an embarrassing scene where she tried to explain to the Acostas why she was stealing out of her room to go have her way with their son.

She took a deep breath, tried again to slow her breathing, and concentrate on summoning sleep. Tonight, Mrs. Acosta had cooked for everyone, shoving aside the chef just as Miri had predicted. He'd been relegated to chopping onions and washing rice, demoted to the rank of *sous* chef for the evening. They had eaten by the pool everyone speaking loudly over one another, laughing and teasing, making plans for the next day.

Dylan and Miri were going shopping for gifts; Mark and his father and brothers were going to play a couple rounds of golf and in search of a Christmas tree and decorations and Mrs. Acosta and Xiomara were going to prepare for Christmas dinner. The chef was being dispatched to buy a whole pig because the Acostas' extended family from a town about a dozen miles away were coming to the villa for Christmas eve dinner.

All through the meal, Mark kept his hand on Dylan's leg, idly running it up and down her thigh as he talked, not realizing how much he was exciting her. Or maybe he did. She had inched forward in her seat, hoping to hint to him that if he slipped his hand all the way up and into the leg of her shorts, she would not stop him. He had big hands which when open could easily grip her thigh, something he often did when they were in bed, one hand on each, holding them like levers, parting her legs. But tonight Mark seemed oblivious to what he was doing to her and she grew more frustrated as the evening wore on. After dinner the men had gone to explore the

resorts' bars and Dylan was stuck helping with the washing up. Dominicans took their gender roles seriously.

Though she tried to wait for Mark in the great room, Miri had lured her back to their bedroom for girl talk and Dylan had gone along with it, because Miri was so cute with her obvious enthusiasm about having another woman to gossip with. When she finally drifted to sleep, Dylan still lay awake, her senses attuned to every little sound, waiting for Mark to come home. She heard the men return, she was not sure at what time, loud and probably drunk. She waited for Mark to open the door to the suite to check on her but he never did.

For what seemed like forever, she lay there, wide awake, horny and hyper-aware, finally turning her back and staring out the window instead, where she could just make out the breakers in the distance. The sound and sight of them finally lulled her into a light sleep, vaguely aware of the persistent aching need to feel Mark next to her.

“*Hey.*”

Dylan almost jumped out of her skin at the sound of a voice so close to her ear. She made a noise but a hand clamped over her mouth.

“C'mon,” Mark said, his voice low. “You know how long it took me to find you?”

He still smelled like he'd been drinking, so evidently hadn't waited long before coming to find her. *Oh thank god.*

He pulled her sheet back and groped until he found her hand, and together they crept out of the room and down the hall. Dylan couldn't see her hand in front of her face, so it was a good thing he seemed to know where he was going. When they made it to his suite he slowly shoved his door shut until it clicked and it then it sounded as though he turned a key; and finally Dylan could exhale. She opened her mouth to tell him how long she'd been hoping he would come get her but before she could get a word out, he was all over her, his mouth on hers, his hands under her nightshirt.

“Get rid of this,” he said impatiently, when he couldn't maneuver it quickly enough.

Dylan obediently shrugged the shirt over her head and then he

was tugging at the waist of her panties.

“This too,” he said.

She shoved them down over her hips, let them slide to her feet and stepped away from them. She felt, rather than saw Mark directly in front of her. There seemed to be no moon; the room was an inky black and she could just barely make out his figure in front of her.

Then Dylan felt his hands on her, running down her sides, his thumbs pausing to stroke her nipples until they stood firm and hard. He leaned in to kiss her breasts and her neck, trailing a path down the center of her body, until he was too low to bend, and had to fall to his knees. Dylan felt her breath quicken as he put one hand on each of her legs inside at the knees, spreading them. He ran his palms down to her feet, pushing them apart so she had a wide stance.

“Hold on to me,” he said, and his breath was right there, at the apex of her thighs. His mouth was on her, his tongue parting her and closing about her, gently sucking and then licking, sucking and licking ... Dylan held on tight to his shoulders because her legs were quivering and she seriously doubted she would be able to stand if he continued. Because it felt so good, she rested her hands atop his head, pushing him away and then pulling him in again, feeling alternately that she couldn't stand for him to continue, and then that she would die if he stopped. She tried to keep her voice down, but she couldn't. She never could when they were making love; he unraveled her, spun her out, drove her close to insane reading her responses so precisely, intuiting what she liked and how much she could take.

Dylan could just make out his figure kneeled before her, his head moving back and forth and that posture alone, the sight—obscure as it was—of Mark on his knees before her like that, did her in and she was crying out, buckling from the force of her orgasm.

Then Mark was pulling away and standing to clamp a hand over her mouth, and he was laughing, trying to keep it down. He picked her up effortlessly and moved her; she couldn't even see where but the next thing she knew, she was on a bed, recovering her equilibrium, or trying to.

He laughed against her stomach. “You could've woken my



parents up. Or the whole resort.”

“Don’t laugh at me,” she said, stifling a laugh of her own. “I couldn’t help it.”

He kissed her stomach, moving lower. “I love it that I make you feel like that. Should I go for round two?”

“*No!*” Dylan grabbed him by the only thing she could reach, his ear. “I’m too sensitive right now. I think it might literally kill me.”

Mark chuckled again.

“But I could return the favor,” she suggested.

“It’s not a *favor*,” Mark said kissing her. “I love how you taste.”

“But I want you to feel good too.” She pushed him on his back and climbed over him, sliding down until she was face to face with his erection.

This was something she had never enjoyed with boyfriends before, even boyfriends smaller than Mark was. Taking them in her mouth had always felt demeaning, her jaw stretched wide felt like something they were doing to her, rather than something she was doing for them. With Mark it was different. With him, it felt like a gift; one she was happy to be able to give and that gave her pleasure as well. She grasped him in her fist and hummed softly in the back of her throat when she tasted small doses of his slippery saltiness on her tongue. That, and the smooth feel of him gliding between her lips, caused her to clench, anticipating what he would feel like when he was inside her. She loved the way his fingers laced in her hair, urging but never pushing her. She loved the sounds he made, and when she could see him, the look on his face, like she had slain him, like he was helpless.

Now, as Dylan listened to his groaning and felt him bucking beneath her, she moved faster, her cheeks hollowed, her tongue lashing back and forth. She could vaguely hear him talking to her, grunting, and muttering words in Spanish that she didn’t understand. She placed her hands lightly his hips, allowing him to control the movement as he got closer and closer to his release. Still, Dylan didn’t know how far he was gone until she felt him explode into her mouth, warm, vaguely salty and viscous. After a moment of surprised gagging, swallowed and kept swallowing, feeling greedy for him,

instinctively pulling him in and stroking him with her tongue until he was clean. Even when he was empty, she kept him in her mouth until he grew hard again.

Mark reached down to her and Dylan grabbed his hands, allowing him to pull her up so she was on his chest, her head just beneath his chin. She could feel him against her thigh, getting hard once again.

“Get on top of me,” he ordered.

Dylan followed his command, getting up, standing above him on the bed, a leg on either side of his hips. A sliver of lamplight from the pool made it so she could just see a little of his face. He looked in awe of her. She felt powerful; it made her want to tease him. She squatted slowly, lowering herself onto him, holding his hands for balance, feeling him fill her inch by inch, and straining to make out his face.

When he arched his back, she pulled herself up a little until he remembered that she was in charge and would go only at her own pace, not his. But to torture him was to torture herself, so she gave in to the urge to push down hard against him. When finally he was completely buried in her, she remained still for a moment, soaking in the feeling of Mark throbbing deep inside her, so deep it was almost painful. Dylan reached out to touch Mark’s face since she could no longer see it and he caught two of her fingers in his mouth sucking on them. The sensation shot right to her core and she clenched him inside her, holding him tight.

Mark groaned something unintelligible and held her hips as she rolled back and forth, grinding against him until he was panting, his fingers biting into her. Her fingers were still in his mouth and he clenched his teeth, biting them.

“Naughty ...” Dylan said, moving as though to raise herself off him.

“Don’t,” Mark said, sounding desperate.

That sound in his voice emboldened her, so whenever he tried to control her movement she slowed and stopped.

“Dylan ... *Dylan* ...”

Mark saying, no *groaning* her name like a plea was quite possibly the most arousing thing she had ever heard. She felt the convulsions begin, the soul-wrenching, sweet descent into nothingness. And just as she was crying out again, Mark did as

well. *Loud.*

Dylan collapsed against him, catching her breath.

“Who’s the big mouth now?” she managed.

“Shit, was that *me*?” he said.

Dylan giggled and Mark covered her mouth with his own to shut her up.

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On Christmas Eve morning, Miri woke early and came to get her in Mark’s room, not remarking on the fact that she wasn’t where she was supposed to be.

“We have to help my Mom with the cooking,” she explained.

“It’s a tradition.”

Tradition. Just the sound of the word was alluring. It spoke of constancy, predictability and certainty Dylan had never had in her own small family. In any part of her life, for that matter. She wished Ava were there to experience it with her as well—the odd comfort of being surrounded by a large group of people bound by blood and shared experiences. Tradition.

Dylan rubbed her eyes so she could focus and glanced over at Mark who face down and still dead to the world, one arm hanging over the edge of the bed, the other resting heavily across her abdomen. The evening before they had all gone to a nightclub, dancing and drinking way too much. Some of Mark’s cousins met them there and Dylan had been overwhelmed. There were so many of them, it was impossible to keep the names straight. By the time everyone had arrived, they were more than twenty strong and had taken over an entire corner of the club.

Miri, Dylan, Xiomara and two of the female cousins had taken their own table from which they watched the antics of the men, and cautiously accepted invitations to dance from guys who were brave enough to ask. Dylan danced a few of times, all the while conscious of Mark’s eyes on her. To his credit, only once did he come to reclaim her from a dance partner when he had held both her hands and thread his fingers through hers, trying to pull her closer, Mark had simply walked onto the dance floor and stepped between them, causing Dylan to blush, and her dance partner to pull back immediately, apologetically. Once he had her safely back at her table he’d leaned in so she could hear him.

*That's enough dancing,* he said.

Dylan considered this for a moment then nodded.

There was no question that Mark had become much more assertive now that he was sure he understood the “rules” of their relationship. He left absolutely no ambiguity about who wore the pants. Maybe as a modern, liberated woman she was supposed to be put off by that, but the opposite was true—this new side of him was sexy beyond belief. When you trusted your man as she was beginning to trust him, letting him be in the driver’s seat was way easier than she would have imagined.

“Hurry,” Miri said now. “Let’s go get dressed. I promise you, as soon as the cock crows, we’ll be expected in the kitchen.”

Dylan yawned and slid out of bed before remembering that she was naked. Miri discreetly averted her eyes while she grabbed the closest item of clothing—Mark’s t-shirt—and pulled it on. Together, they headed back to their room where Dylan washed her face, brushed her teeth and pulled on a pair of jeans. Miri, who was already dressed, came to stand behind her while she was putting on her Keds, and Dylan felt her hands in her hair.

“You’re so lucky to have such thick hair,” she said. And then, while Dylan sat still, Miri expertly combed her fingers through it and twisted it into a French braid, tucking the end underneath.

“There,” she said. “Now you look like you weren’t spending the night rolling around in the sack with your boyfriend.”

Dylan said nothing and Miri laughed, walking ahead of her out of the room. Dylan smiled to herself. Apart from Ava, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d had such an easy relationship with another female.

*God, not only was Mark irresistible, his family was too.*

When she got to the kitchen, Mrs. Acosta had already put Miri to work slicing tomatoes and shredding lettuce. As soon as Dylan appeared, she handed her a knife and steered her in the direction of the ham that had been baking all the previous evening, filling the villa with a sweet and savory aroma.

“Slices,” she ordered. “Not too thick.”

Dylan nodded and stifled a yawn, beginning the task of cutting into the succulent meat. Across the great room and out by the pool she could see Xiomara and Peter. Xiomara was

breastfeeding the baby and Peter was sitting with his legs in the water. Behind them the sun was rising, splashing brilliant reds, orange and purple streaks across the sky. Pausing to enjoy the moment, Dylan smiled.

Later, before the Acostas' extended family arrived, Mark and Dylan escaped everyone to spend some time alone out into La Romana and to see some of the surrounding attractions. She suffered through the cigar factory tour without complaint, enjoying just holding his hand as the tour guide droned on about tobacco preparation techniques. The dozens of boxes of cigars that Mark bought and arranged to have shipped back to the States for gifts to his teammates were the first things Dylan had ever seen him spend money on. But after the tour when they walked among the shops and street vendors in the shopping district, he quickly grew bored of looking at sarongs and bathing suits, so he handed her his credit card and pointed across the street from a row of boutiques to a small café.

"Get whatever you want," he said. "I'll be over there having a drink. When you're done come get me and we'll have lunch."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Dylan teased waving the credit card in front of his face. "I might get carried away."

Mark shrugged. "I just don't think I can offer any more opinions about sashes and sandals." He kissed her on the forehead and was gone.

Dylan browsed for trinkets and found a few souvenirs for Ava, and a couple of t-shirts to use as gifts for the those few people who were always brazen enough to ask whether you brought them something just because you let slip that you'd been overseas. With each purchase, she grew a little bolder, but by the time she was done an hour later, the most expensive thing she'd gotten was just a forty-dollar maxi-dress that she could wear in the evening if they wound up going to a nice restaurant.

Mark was waiting in the café, drinking a beer and watching the small television set above the bar when she walked in carrying her shopping bags. He looked up and smiled when he saw her.

"Is that all you got?" he asked, taking them from her. "I thought for sure you'd have found lots of cool stuff once you didn't have an impatient man hanging over your shoulder."

“I didn’t want to go overboard,” she said falling into the seat next to him. “Can we eat here or should we go someplace else?”

“We can eat here,” he said. “I saw some stuff coming out of the kitchen that looked pretty good.”

So they ate lunch while Mark talked about remembering his childhood trips with his parents before his siblings were born. They had only emigrated from the Dominican Republic when he was five but he had solid memories of waking early and riding in the backseat of his uncle’s car with all his cousins to the beach where his large extended family would gather to spend the day.

Mark couldn’t remember how long they would stay, he said; only that it would be dark by the time they got home and the adults would put all the kids to sleep together by laying out blankets on the floor in the living room. He told Dylan that his strongest memory of being a kid was of being surrounded by the arms and legs of his cousins, listening to their even breathing as they slept, and he too began to drift off. In the other room, the laughter of his parents, aunts and uncles would give him a sense of safety that stayed with him even into adulthood.

“One day I want to give that to my kids,” he said looking at her, a nostalgic smile on his face. “Memories of being safe like that, y’know?”

Dylan nodded, even though she didn’t know. At least not from experience. But what she did know was that she would be lucky, oh so lucky, if one day the man she started a family with was anything like Mark Acosta.

“Anyway,” he said, beckoning for the waiter to bring them their check. “That’s heavy stuff for a Christmas Eve afternoon. We’d better get back before my mother sends out a search party. The night before Christmas is more important than Christmas Day here.”

“Okay, let’s go then,” Dylan said, beginning to gather her bags.

“Except I want to do one more thing,” Mark said.

“What’s that?”

“I want to take you shopping,” he said.

“Mark, I already did ...” she said indicating the bags.

Mark scoffed. "I'm pretty sure we can do better than that," he said. "You were holding back."

For the next hour, he led her through many of the same boutiques he'd complained about earlier, encouraging her to try things she liked, and buying them if she had anything resembling a positive reaction to how she looked in them. After awhile Dylan stopped doing a running tally in her head, and stopped worrying about how much things cost, and it was only when they entered a jewelry store that she grew tense once again.

"Mark," she said tugging his hand. "No ... I don't need ..."

"Help me find something for my sister then," he said. "If you won't let me spoil you, I'll spoil her."

"I don't mind you spoiling me," Dylan said. "I just don't like the idea that you might think that ..."

He stopped and looked at her. "Think that what?"

"That this is what's important to me."

Mark smiled and leaned in to kiss her. "I don't think that."

"Because stuff like this is nice to have," Dylan said indicating the shopping bags. "But it's being here with you ... that's what matters to me most."

"So no jewelry?" Mark said.

"Yes jewelry," Dylan said. "For Miri."

Back at the villa, the rest of the day was like the food Olympics. Once all of Mr. and Mrs. Acosta's extended family showed up, Dylan, Xiomara and Miri were relieved from kitchen duty as the older women took over. The whole pig had been roasted at someone's house and was brought in as the centerpiece of the table, and from noon onwards, food came out in waves—fish, rice and beans fried plantains, pasteles en hojas, pan talera, and assorted other seasonal favorites. And if you weren't in the kitchen the only thing you were expected to do was eat.

Dylan spent much of the evening sitting on Mark's lap, his arms wrapped tightly about her waist while he laughed and talked with his family, sometimes in English, sometimes in Spanish and sometimes a mixture of the two. Later she sat in the grass just beyond the pool with Xiomara and played with the baby, watching Mark's younger cousins running and playing, squealing and jumping on the lawn about them. When

Xiomara took the baby in to change him, Miri came over and collapsed next to her, resting her head unselfconsciously on Dylan's lap.

Dylan stiffened for a moment then relaxed into the closeness. One day, she promised herself, she would become comfortable with this. Watching the kids running and laughing as the sun set behind them in the distance, she thought about Mark's memories of his own childhood and thanked him for helping her make her own memories, these memories; of this time, these people and this place. When she glanced over at him he turned, and a small smile fleetingly crossed his lips as though he'd heard her thoughts.

By tradition everyone bought gifts only for the person whose name they picked out of a hat in the lead up to Christmas Day. Xiomara bought Dylan a pretty yellow pashmina, Miri bought her father a shirt that she and Dylan had spotted in town and Mark bought his brother Peter a car. Well, he didn't actually buy it, but promised to buy it when they got back to New York.

"Well shit," Matt said in response to that news. "The rest of us may as well pack it in. All I got you was a tie, bro," he shrugged, looking at Mark.

Everyone laughed.

But the gifts were obviously not the point. And as it turned out everyone had broken the rules and bought gifts for Mr. and Mrs. Acosta anyway. Miri, too, had made out like a bandit—none of her brothers seemed to be able to *not* buy her something. She had a pile of clothing, a pair of boots and the necklace from the store in town that Mark and Dylan had chosen by the time the gift-exchange was done.

Later, when the cousins had all scooped up their children and only the immediate family remained, Mr. and Mrs. Acosta, exhausted from the events of the day had turned in right away and Miri had gone to try on her new outfits. Peter and Xiomara also went to bed and Matt took off for one of the resort bars, so Mark and Dylan were alone to enjoy the sounds of the tropical evening. They sat by the pool, Mark reclining on a chaise and Dylan resting between his legs, her cheek pressed against his chest.



“I got you something,” he said quietly.

Dylan sat up. “I thought we said we wouldn’t ...”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “It’s probably more for me than it is for you anyway.”

She wrinkled her brow, confused.

He raised his hips and pulled a box out of his back pocket. It was square, but too flat to be a ring box. Dylan laughed inwardly at herself. Of course, it wasn’t a *ring*—they’d only known each other a couple months and been together officially for even less time than that.

The box was untidily wrapped in simple white paper, unembellished by patterns or ribbon. Clearly Mark had done it himself, which made it so sweet. Dylan tore it open and lifted the lid. All she saw was a tuft of cotton.

“Look underneath,” Mark said.

She lifted it and stared, looking back up at Mark.

“It’s a key to the condo,” Mark explained. He was shy, uncertain of himself again. “I want you to move in.”

Dylan’s eyes opened wide. *Wow*. This she did not expect.

“See?” he said sheepishly. “It’s not a gift for you at all. It’s really for me.”

“You want me to move in?” she said. “It’s so soon.”

“I know what I want,” Mark said, his voice more forceful now.

“When I leave in a few weeks, and I call home, I want you there. Not someplace else, but in my home. In *our* home.”

Dylan turned and straddled him, wrapping her arms about his neck.

“Yes,” she said.

“Yes?” He actually looked surprised.

“Did you think it was a shot in the dark?” she asked, amused.

“If you thought there was a chance I would say ‘no’, then you really haven’t been paying attention.”

It was Mark’s turn to look amused. “What are you talking about?”

“Nothing,” she said, squeezing him tighter.

## 6

It was over too soon.

They left on January 7<sup>th</sup>, the day after el Día de los Tres Reyes, Three Kings Day. For obvious reasons, the entire family was more subdued at the prospect of returning to the gray and grime of New York than they'd all been on the trip down to the DR. On the flight back, Dylan didn't sleep. She was apprehensive for reasons she couldn't pinpoint. But rather than dwell on it, she decided that it was just that being in the Dominican Republic had been like being in a dream world, a world where the most important thing to Mark was her and his family. No one was pulling him in a million different directions, or calling him The Rookie, or trying to take his picture. It had been as close to perfect a vacation as she'd ever had so the pessimist in her was having a hard time with it and that was all.

Mark was quiet as well. He had the window seat and soon after take-off raised the armrest that separated them and lifted her leg so that it was draped over his, and held her hand, staring out the window. Spring training was now just a little less than five weeks away. Lost in their own private thoughts, they probably exchanged less than a dozen words until they landed and were at the baggage carousel. Almost immediately after clearing immigration, Mark put on his sunglasses and Dylan sighed; now that they were back in the New York, things would start getting crazy again.

Mark kept his head down until all the bags were off the carousel and then put in his ear buds. Dylan watched as he turned the volume up on his iPod and she felt a surge of irrational animosity toward every single baseball fan on the planet, wishing they would leave him alone, even though so far today, no one had approached him yet. The Acostas left together in a shuttle van and Mark and Dylan retrieved his car from long-term parking. Only once they were in the Jeep did he seem to relax.

"Where are we going?" he asked. "Your place, or *our* place?"

Dylan grinned at him. "Depends on which one's cleaner."

"The condo," Mark said without hesitation.

It was true. He was a little bit of a neat freak and she most definitely was not. It would be interesting to see how *that* played out when they moved in together.

“So how much time do you have left on your lease? I could just go ahead and pay it off and move you out this weekend,” Mark said.

Dylan stiffened. “I was thinking of maybe subletting it,” she said. “I mean, it’s so cheap and such a good location, what would be the point of getting rid of it?”

Mark was maneuvering out of the parking space but paused to look at her.

“The point is that you wouldn’t live there anymore. So why hold onto it?”

“Because if we don’t work out, I would be without a place to live, that’s why.”

“If we don’t work out?” Mark shook his head. “I don’t think like that.”

“Because you don’t have to,” Dylan said.

“So you’re betting against us, basically,” Mark said. “Betting against me.”

“No, I’m being realistic. We’ve known each other for all of two minutes, Mark, and now we’re moving in together. And a month from now you’re going away. Those don’t sound like great odds to me.”

“Everything I do, I plan to succeed, Dylan.”

“Well life isn’t a baseball game,” she snapped. “And relationships aren’t plays that you memorize.”

“Okay let’s stop this,” Mark said. “I’m tired, you’re wound up for some reason, and I don’t want to fight with you.”

“Fine.” She turned and looked out the window, leaning on the glass and shivering at the cold.

She closed her eyes and tried to remember the warmth of the Dominican Republic, and how different Mark was there. Already she could feel the shift in him, like he was closing off some part of himself, erecting armor—not against her, but against the less forgiving worlds of New York City and Major League Baseball. In the DR, something about being around his brothers and his gruff, masculine cousins transformed him into an almost entirely different, more relaxed man. And his core Alpha male nature was unleashed. He’d wandered about the

villa without a shirt or shoes looking like he'd just rolled out of bed, and if Dylan was anywhere within reach, he grabbed her.

One morning their second week there, some of the cousins had stopped by unexpectedly. Almost all were young men around Mark's age, and almost all with the same dark brown skin, jet black hair and that frank way of showing their appreciation for women. She remembered them, taking her in from head to toe when she was introduced, grinning at her or nudging Mark in the side to let him know they approved of his choice.

Later when it grew hot, they shed their shirts and jumped into the pool, then sat poolside, soaking wet and playing dominoes, drinking beer, talking over each other and joking around. Dylan wanted to swim but avoided going outside, finding them overwhelmingly masculine and intimidating when they were all together in a group. Mark sat among them, as loud as they were, laughing and slamming his dominoes on the table they'd pulled outside from the great room for the game.

*Ava would have loved this*, Dylan remembered thinking, as she peered out at them. Then Mark had spotted her and excused himself abruptly. Peter sat down to take over his hand at dominoes. He'd walked up to her, his chest almost touching hers, and Dylan swallowed hard.

*Did you want me for something?*

His voice—lower, huskier than usual—and the look in his eyes had literally rendered her speechless. She looked up at him and he smirked at her, like he could read her mind. Raising one dark eyebrow he held her hand, pulling her along with him into his bedroom suite, shutting the door and putting his hand at her back.

With one swift motion he'd loosened the knot on her halter top and lowered his head to her breasts. Dylan's chest heaved as she tried to catch her breath. Just as she'd begun to enjoy that, to bask in it, Mark suddenly turned her around again so her back was to him. He walked her forward and bent her over the bed, running his hand up her spine, pressing her face against a pillow as he did.

He reached around to her front and unfastened the waist of her shorts, pulling them down and spreading her legs. His hands cupped her, his fingers spread her, massaging her until she was

slick and squirming against him.

He leaned over her, arms braced on either side of her on the bed, holding up his weight.

*This is going to be quick*, he said. *We have maybe five minutes before one of my cousins or my brothers come barging in here.*

*You ... you didn't lock the door?* Dylan asked, panicked and excited at the same time. She tried to look over her shoulder but was distracted by the feeling of Mark's fingers, working between her legs. She closed her eyes.

*No*, he said. *I didn't.*

*Well, let's ...*

She made as though to pull away and Mark gripped her about the waist with a forearm which felt like solid rock against her abdomen.

*Too late for that*, he breathed.

And that was when she felt him, hard and pressing between her legs. With his free hand he continued to rub and stroke her as he pushed into her, exhaling deeply once he did. He was still for a long while, and she could feel his heartbeat against her back, and pulsating deep inside her. She had never been more aware of her body and the marvel of how it was made as she was in that moment, feeling as she began to soften about him, accommodating him, encouraging him, making way for him.

Mark moved his hips back and forth and in circles, and she groaned and pushed backward, no longer caring who might come barging in. Within moments, Mark doubled the speed of his movements, stimulating her with his fingers, moving in and out of her and gripping her tightly about the waist all at once. It didn't take long before Dylan was whimpering with the pleasure that was its own pain. Even with her release, he didn't stop so she rode the wave of feeling until with a deep moan, muffled by her hair, Mark emptied himself inside her.

He rested against her for a minute, kissing the back of her neck then slowly pulling out. Dylan was still recovering when she heard him close the zipper of his jeans. Crouching, he pulled her shorts back up and with unsteady hands refastened her halter top. She had barely caught her breath before he had her completely dressed again, as though nothing had happened. But when he turned her to face him again, his eyes were warm,

like melted dark chocolate. He cupped her face in his hands and leaned in to kiss her. The sweet gentleness of his kiss was a stark contrast to the raw and excitingly animalistic way in which he had just taken her.

*Don't wash up*, he said against her ear. *I like knowing some of me is still inside you.*

And then he was gone. Dylan was still pulling herself together, feeling the slickness and savoring the pleasant throb between her thighs, when she heard him rejoin his brothers and cousins by the pool, ordering Peter out of his seat.

The entire time in the DR had been that way—sex always furtively, urgently whether because they had to sneak to Mark's room while everyone was asleep or because his family was somewhere just feet away. Dylan walked around swollen and with a sweet soreness that was like a secret between them. One evening at dinner, when she'd winced slightly as she sat, Dylan saw out of the corner of her eye a slight amused upturning at the corners of Mark's mouth.

On the day Dylan moved into the condo, one of the Mets players was having a party at his house out on Long Island so she spent the morning moving boxes with Mark, the afternoon shopping with Ava and the evening getting dressed to go meet Mark's teammates for the first time. She tried five outfits before finally picking an orange Nicole Miller ruffled dress and gold sandals.

Ava hung around to help her with the hair, so that she had defined curls rather than her usual blowsy, frizzy mess, and to do her make-up. Dylan sat at the mirror while her friend fussed with her eyelids and cheeks and tried to calm her nerves.

“Relax, would you? It's just a party,” Ava said picking up on her nervousness. “Like a million other parties you've been to in your life.”

“Not quite,” Dylan said. “This party is probably going to be a little different from the one where I met Mark. About to smoke a joint on the fire-escape.”

“He was about to *smoke a joint* when you met him? I thought professional athletes couldn't do that shit.”

“No, stupid. *I* was about to smoke the joint.”

“Oh. Well that’s alright then, I guess.”

“You could come with me, y’know?” Dylan suggested.

“Maybe some other time,” Ava said. “You guys just barely moved in. I don’t want to be a freeloader. At least not yet.” She looked up and grinned.

So far Ava seemed to be taking it in stride how fast things were moving with Mark but Dylan knew her well enough to know that she was probably holding a lot in. It was hard to explain to people on the outside, but with her and Ava, there was always the underlying understanding that they were in it together. Whatever “it” was—crappy family lives, crappy boyfriends, jobs that didn’t quite fulfill them.

Except now, for Dylan things appeared to be turning around. Moving in with Mark was only part of it. She’d gotten her LSAT score back and it was much higher than she’d expected, or hoped for, and would get her into almost any school she wanted; it would almost certainly get her into NYU. And meanwhile, Ava had broken up with Jake for what was now the fourth time.

“Not getting any younger out here!” Mark called from the living room.

Ava laughed. “Okay, let’s speed it up.”

Dylan took one last look at her reflection and grabbed her clutch from the bed, heading out to the living room with Ava following. Mark was sitting on the edge of the sofa, fidgeting with the remote control for the fireplace, which they hadn’t figured out yet. He was wearing a snug grey vest with a crisp white shirt and dark grey pants, and looked incredible considering he’d pulled the whole thing together like an afterthought. He looked up when Dylan walked in and smiled, standing and tossing the remote control aside.

“Well?” she asked, exasperated. “How do I look?”

“Beautiful. Always,” he said. “Let’s go.”

He extended a hand and Dylan took it, turning to roll her eyes at Ava. Clearly he was going to be no future help in the what-to-wear department.

They drove out to the Island in Mark’s Jeep and Dylan wondered whether it was a little premature for her to suggest that he consider buying something new. After all, he’d bought

his brother a new car; why would it be wrong for him to get himself something as well? But knowing Mark, he hadn't even thought of it. He probably wouldn't even begin to even think of a new car until this one stopped on the side of the road and didn't start again.

"Whose house are we going to again?"

"Pedro Lima. Our pitcher. He gets all the Dominicans on the team together once a month," Mark said.

Dylan laughed. "That's just about everybody, isn't it?"

"Almost." And then, after a pause, "you'll get to meet Ray Hernandez."

Ray Hernandez was the Mets' marquee player. Mr. Mets himself, though he had gone on to transcend the team and even the game of baseball. His movie star good looks, complete with chiseled features and greenish-grey eyes made him an endorsement gold-mine for the franchise and individually. Dylan had always thought he was good-looking but in an impossible to stand kind of way, almost *too* good-looking. Making eye contact with him would be like looking directly into the noonday sun. She wondered vaguely whether she would manage it without making a complete idiot out of herself.

"You like him?" Mark asked after a moment.

Dylan laughed. "Oh my god. I *knew* there was a reason you brought him up. Are you going to be jealous if I start drooling all over Ray Hernandez?"

Mark put a hand on her leg and laughed along with her. "Yes. Definitely. So don't do it."

"I'm not sure that's something I can control," Dylan teased. "I am a heterosexual female after all. And have you *seen* his Nike commercial? The one where he's comes out of the dug-out and takes off his shirt?" She groaned.

Stop it," Mark said, lowering his voice. "If I see you look at him for more than five seconds I'm going to drag you to the bathroom and have my way with you so you remember who your man is."

"If that's supposed to be a deterrent, it's not working," Dylan said.

Pedro Lima's house was an old Victorian on a cul-de-sac, beautiful, imposing and stately. Out front, several luxury cars



were parked and the front door was open, revealing a foyer lit by a chandelier that twinkled and welcomed you in. As Mark helped Dylan out of the car, she took a deep breath, already intimidated by her surroundings. The grounds were pristine, the hedges trimmed with surgical precision, and the flagstone path leading to the front door lit on either side by gaslight torches.

Dylan gripped Mark's hand tightly as they entered and almost immediately, a large man emerged from another room, and clapped Mark on the back. He had a booming voice and a spoke in entirely in Spanish. Dylan smiled even though she didn't understand a word.

"Pedro, this is Dylan."

"This is your girlfriend?" Pedro said in heavily-accented English, looking incredulous. "No. She is too beautiful for you." Then he kissed Dylan on the cheek and looked her over once again. "Way too beautiful."

Dylan blushed.

"Come with me," Pedro took her by the hand. "I have to show you to everyone. They won't believe it either."

Dylan allowed herself to be pulled away from Mark and into a sitting room where about a dozen people were already having drinks. Pedro, announced her to the room, an arm firmly about her shoulders. And then he turned and looked over his shoulder.

"Oh yes. And there's this ugly guy here," he said pointing at Mark. "Passing himself off as her boyfriend."

Dylan was relieved that she'd had Christmas with the Acostas to prepare her for the boisterousness of Dominican gatherings. Everyone seemed to be talking to her and to Mark at once, and she was just short of overwhelmed when a woman with auburn hair, wearing a winter white chiffon dress came and took her hand.

"Hello Dylan," she said, smiling. "I'm Vanessa Lima. Welcome to my home. Let me get you something to drink."

"Thank you," Dylan said, relieved to be rescued from the men. Over her shoulder she watched as they all greeted Mark, clearly having great time ribbing and teasing him. He was a rookie after all.

"They're like big kids," Vanessa said dismissively as she led

her over to the bar. “I try to stay clear of them when they’re in groups like that. You would do well to do the same.”

Dylan nodded, not knowing what to say.

“What would you like?” Vanessa asked.

“A white wine for now, thank you,” Dylan said. Her voice sounded like a squeak.

Vanessa poured her drink and handed it to her, indicating the rear of the house. “Come meet some of the other wives,” she said.

“Mark and I aren’t married,” Dylan said.

“Oh,” Vanessa said.

Dylan thought she detected the tiniest of hesitations, as though Vanessa wanted to say more but decided not to. She followed her out to the rear of the house where a dinner table had been set up under the terrace and nearby groups of women stood, nursing drinks in clusters of two or three.

“Everyone, this is Dylan,” Vanessa announced, in a voice loud enough to be heard but thankfully, less amplified than her husband’s. “Dylan is Mark Acosta’s ... girlfriend.”

There it was again; the hesitation.

The women turned, almost in unison and Dylan could feel them sizing her up. As a group, they were rather imposing, in their designer dresses and large jewelry. They seemed to favor vivid colors and jewel tones, and hair that was either pin straight or very big, nothing in between. Even ten feet away, their diamonds were apparent, enormous rings twinkling in the dim light.

Dylan took a deep breath and stepped forward, pretending to be more at ease than she felt. One of the women, the only blonde, the only one who didn’t appear to be Latina came to meet her.

“Dylan,” she said. “I’m Lauren Morales. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you as well,” Dylan took her hand.

Following Lauren, the other women came over one by one and introduced themselves, but none of them other than Lauren stayed to chat. And the hostess seemed to have left to see about dinner.

“Are you Dominican?” Lauren asked when they were alone. She had wide cornflower blue eyes, and the palest of pale skin, and was pretty in a Nordic kind of way.

“No,” Dylan shook her head.

“Oh. Well hang on then, honey. They do *not* like it when women who are not Dominican swoop in and take men as eligible as your boyfriend,” Lauren said taking a sip of her wine. “But at least you’re not a white girl. Then they’d really let you have it.”

Dylan sipped her own wine, not knowing what to say. But Lauren didn’t seem to need much encouragement to go on.

“When I married my husband, it took them about a year to speak to me. And now they do, it’s just barely. A vicious bunch, let me tell you.”

Dylan swallowed, and realizing that she couldn’t very well say *nothing* the entire evening, finally thought of something neutral to say.

“Which is Ray Hernandez’ wife?”

“Oh Cindy never comes to these things,” Lauren said, lowering her voice. “Ray will show up just in time to eat. But Cindy *never* comes. I can’t figure out whether it’s because her husband is such a horndog and hits on all the other wives, or because she’s above it all. He likes his Dominican roots, but from what I hear, she’s pushing him to be less ... ethnic so he can have broader appeal.”

“So Dylan,” one of the other women said from a few feet away. “What do you do?”

Dylan tried to remember the woman’s name but couldn’t.

“I’m a legal assistant,” Dylan said, clearing her throat.

“Hopefully I’ll be a law student in the fall.”

“Oh, interesting,” she said, coming to join her and Lauren.

“How did you and Mark meet, if I may ask?”

Her manicure was a disturbing dark purple that made her long nails look like talons. And she had blood-red lips. Dylan tried not to dislike her based on her appearance alone. She flipped her long dark hair over her shoulder while she waited for Dylan’s response.

“We met at a party,” Dylan said.

“How very nice. And how long have you been together?” her inquisitor continued.

Next to Dylan, Lauren shifted uncomfortably.

“A couple months. A little more than a couple months,” Dylan said, cursing herself that she sounded so timid.

“And you met José like three weeks after he signed with the Mets, didn’t you Yoselin?” Lauren broke in. “Like at some fan event or something?”

Yoselin Cruz. *That* was who she was. Her husband was the third baseman, if Dylan remembered correctly. Yoselin shot Lauren a cold stare.

“My mother knew his family for years,” Yoselin said. “We were hardly complete strangers.”

Dylan looked desperately in the direction of the house, wishing there were some way that Mark could come and rescue her. Something told her she’d been caught in the crossfire of some internecine warfare among the wives, and it appeared Lauren was a bomb-thrower.

“Ladies, our last guest has arrived,” Vanessa Lima re-emerged, and with her in the flesh was Ray Hernandez.

He was wearing a white, long-sleeved t-shirt, faded jeans and stark white tennis shoes. Apparently he did not feel bound by anything as pedestrian as a dress-code. Smiling at no one in particular, he entered, clearly used to commanding attention when he walked into a room.

Dylan had to make herself keep her jaw from dropping, because Ray Hernandez was everything she had feared he would be—drop-dead fucking gorgeous in a way that was almost not humanly possible. From the perfectly-proportioned body, complete with V-shaped torso and amazing ass, to the creamy milk-and-coffee complexion and mesmerizing eyes. He was the kind of specimen that made you believe with all your heart that there had to be a God, because something like Ray Hernandez did not happen by accident, and could only be the product of divine intervention.

“Good evening, ladies. Apologies for delaying our meal. I didn’t know we were doing a sit-down thing.”

Even his voice was delectable. Dylan took a strong gulp of her wine, and when she looked up again, Ray Hernandez was coming directly toward her. She only hoped she wouldn’t swoon.

“Hi,” he said, holding out a hand. “You’re the only face I don’t recognize, so you must be Dylan.”

She took his hand, and dropped it after a very brief shake because she wasn’t sure she could be trusted not to raise it to

her lips and lick it.

“Yes. Nice to meet you.”

For the first time all evening, her voice sounded like her own. Weird. It must be her female animal instinct kicking in, wanting to show herself off in her best light to the virile male of the species.

Ray smiled. “We’re excited to have Mark on board,” he said. “He’s going to help us win that pennant, I can feel it.”

“That’s certainly his plan,” Dylan nodded.

Ray grinned at her. “Vanessa, I want Dylan to sit by me,” he said. “I like it when I have someone new to impress. And by now everyone else has heard all my stories.”

He didn’t take his eyes off her as he spoke and if Dylan hadn’t heard Lauren’s description of him as a “horn-dog” she would have flattered herself that he actually found her particularly attractive.

“Of course, you can have whoever you like sit next to you,” Vanessa said. “Let me get the rest of the men so we can start.”

Ray Hernandez did sit next to Dylan and true to his word, spoke almost exclusively to her throughout the entire meal. Feeling herself the center of his attention was heady stuff; there was no getting around that. Though she wasn’t flirting with him, and made sure to keep her conversation balanced between him and Manny Morales, Lauren’s husband who was sitting on her other side, Dylan noticed that Ray seemed to be trying especially hard to retain her interest. He regaled her with stories of interesting places he’d been to, spending particular time describing his visits with the President, as well as the hero’s welcome he received whenever he went to the Dominican Republic.

The truth, Dylan had to admit after the entrée was served, was that Ray Hernandez was spectacularly good-looking but a fraction less attractive once you talked to him at length. He had been famous for too long, fawned over too often, and now seemed to have fully bought into his own PR— that he was the greatest thing since sliced bread. But still, Dylan smiled and maintained friendly conversation with him, noting that across the table, catty-corner from her seat, Mark was becoming increasingly restless.

Surely he had to know that even if she spent all night talking

to Ray Hernandez, it meant absolutely nothing? Dylan watched as he held the arm of a server who walked by him and asked for a refill of his wine. She tried to make eye contact with him to reassure him, but he would not look at her.

“So Marcos,” Pedro Lima’s booming voice rose above everyone else’s. “How is Wilfredo? I haven’t seen the old man in years.”

“He’s good,” Mark said, looking up. “I forgot he was your coach as well.”

“Many years before you,” Pedro said. “But yes. Patricia was just a kid then. Beautiful still, but just a kid. But of course, by the time Wilfredo coached you, she was just old enough, eh?”

Pedro laughed his boisterous laugh. Dylan noticed a look pass across Mark’s face and Pedro quickly stopped laughing, taking a gulp of his water and turning to talk to someone else.

After dinner there was coffee and desert, and then more drinks inside. Dylan stood with a wineglass in hand, but didn’t drink any more. She was already feeling lightheaded and full and a little tired. After all, she’d spent most of the day moving and most of the evening anxious among a new group of people. She was exhausted and wished that Mark would look at her so she could signal that she was ready to go. It was unlike him to keep his distance like this and she only hoped that what she suspected was bothering him was not the case. Still, since he did not—or *would* not—she decided to go to the powder room instead to splash some cold water on her face and hopefully make herself feel a little more alert, when Ray Hernandez stepped into her path.

“I’m going to tell my wife to call you,” he said. “I think we should hang out, me and Mark and you and Cindy. We can go to our place upstate and do some skiing.”

“That would be great,” Dylan said distractedly.

She had long since lost any interest in talking to Ray Hernandez, being too tired at this point to be impressed by anything he said.

“Good. I’ll get your information before I leave.”

“Ahm. Get it from Mark,” she suggested, smiling at him.

“Excuse me, I need to ...” Dylan didn’t bother finishing her sentence, but headed in the direction she’d seen several of the other ladies go.

The powder room door was ajar, and she was about to push it open when she heard two voices, one of which she recognized as Vanessa Lima's. It was her use of Mark's name that made Dylan pause and listen.

"... getting to know them anymore. I mean, why bother, right? They never last once the guys go on the road."

"But she seems nice enough," the second voice said. This voice Dylan could not place. "Poor thing has no idea what's in for her."

"The long kiss goodbye," Vanessa said, with a delicate laugh. "My god, you'd think they would learn. Get the ring. No matter what he tells you, *get the ring*."

"And not Dominican either?" the second voice said. "Not a chance. And did you see when Pedro brought up Patricia? She had no idea, I could tell."

"They were engaged at one point, weren't they? I think that's what she said when I met her at that press junket when she was with Mark that time. Engaged when he was in the minors, and then I guess she left for the DR and that's what ended it."

"I bet she's sorry she let him go."

"Well, she may get him back," Vanessa said. "I don't know why I didn't put it together that they aren't actually married, since he was with Patricia that time. Not that being married stops some of them. But him and this Dylan girl? I mean, some random American girl doesn't stand a chance against the mafia of Dominican mothers. And that Bronx network is so tight. That's how Pedro knew Mark ..."

Dylan turned on her heel, having heard enough. Her heart was racing and her head was spinning; only she wasn't sure what from. Learning that Mark had been engaged to someone, that he was likely to dump her, or was it just all the wine? She was walking with her head down, when she slammed into someone, who grabbed her elbow.

"Whoa there!" It was Lauren.

"I was looking for another bathroom," she mumbled. "That one's occupied."

"Oh, let's see." Lauren steadied her and led her through the kitchen and just off the terrace where another powder room was tucked under the eaves. "Here we go."

Dylan offered her a dim smile. "Thank you."

“You okay?”

“A little too much to drink,” she said.

Lauren nodded. “I understand. It’s a lot to take in your first time at one of these. Why don’t I just go whisper to Mark that you’re ready to go?”

Dylan nodded gratefully. “Thank you. I’d appreciate that.”

“No worries. Happy to do it,” Lauren said.

And before Dylan turned to go into the bathroom Lauren held her shoulder. “Listen,” she said. “I just wanted to say something. And I don’t want to offend you, but I think you should know.”

Dylan sagged. She wasn’t sure she was up for any additional revelations tonight. “Yes?”

“It’s about Ray,” Lauren began. “I know his attention can be ... intoxicating. He is ... well, you know. But that’s his thing, okay? So don’t take it seriously. He uses wives to get to their husbands, if he feels threatened by them. And Mark is the next best thing, y’know?”

“A lot of people are already saying that he’s going to blow Ray out of the water in terms of popularity, endorsements ... he has a subtlety that Ray doesn’t have. So Ray may be threatened by that. And if he is, he isn’t above using you to get into Mark’s head, to throw him off his game.”

“Don’t worry,” she said smiling at Lauren. “I’m not interested in anyone but Mark.”

Lauren smiled back at her as though that was the quaintest thing she had ever heard. “You aren’t, are you?” she said. Then she turned and headed back to the party.

Dylan shut the bathroom door behind her and looked at her reflection in the mirror. She was relieved to see that she looked no worse for the wear. On the outside, she looked just as well puttogether as she had been when Ava got done with her. She looked composed though she felt anything but.

Mark had been *engaged* to a woman named Patricia, who was probably the daughter of his old coach Wilfredo, whom she’d met at the party at Mark’s parents’ house. And what was more, Mark had taken Patricia to an event even after he met her. She knew right away who Patricia was—the woman Mark had been photographed with. The one she’d decided not to ask him about; the one he didn’t explain. The one who made him get



that tense, guilty sound in his voice when he called her after the picture ran.

And now Patricia was back from the DR? Living in New York, maybe? Dylan took a deep breath, trying to quell her fears. Mark was not like other men she'd been with, she reminded herself. He liked to have clarity, and he told her, unprompted, that he would never give her any reason to doubt him. That had to count for something, surely.

But then again, everyone knew that some Latin men were Lotharios. Look at Matt for instance; Mark's own brother was single when he felt like it, and committed to his girlfriend when it suited him; and apparently not at all plagued by any sense of having done something wrong. Maybe Mark ...

Someone knocked on the door and she knew without asking that it wasn't another of the women. The knock was too loud, too insistent and determined. She wondered for one panicked moment whether it was Ray Hernandez.

"Just a moment," she said, trying to sound breezy.

She turned on the water and rinsed her hands, drying them and then reaching for the lotion that was next to the sink, quickly slathering some on and then taking one last breath, composing herself again before unlocking the door.

Mark was standing there and looking none too pleased, either. He crowded her into the bathroom and shut the door behind him, leaning against it. In the small space, he towered over her. "Did Lauren talk to you?" she asked. "I'm really getting tired, Mark, I'd like to ..."

"What was going on with you and Ray Hernandez?" he interrupted.

She knew he was drunk because his accent was thicker, and she could see that he was much more bent out of shape than she'd realized at dinner.

"Mark ..." she began.

"¿Te gusta lo?"

"You're speaking Spanish," she said, wearily.

"I said, do you like him? Are you attracted to him?"

"You're being silly. He was sitting next to me at dinner. There was no way to avoid talking to him."

"It didn't seem like you wanted to avoid it."

"No, I *didn't* want to avoid it. Why would I?"

“Because you knew I wouldn’t like it,” he said.

Dylan studied his face. *Was he serious?*

“He’s your teammate, Mark. We’d never met. Of course I’d talk to him.” And because he had no reasonable response to that—because there *was* no reasonable response—she continued. “Look, let’s not have this argument standing in the bathroom, okay? In fact, let’s not have this argument at all. You’re overreacting.”

“*Coño ...*” he ran a hand over his face and seemed to have a moment of clarity, pulling himself together. “Let’s go home.”

“I don’t think you’re okay to drive,” Dylan said shaking her head.

“How about you?” he asked.

She shook her head. She’d been drinking too much as well, and was too shaken up by the revelation about Patricia and by what had just happened here. No way could she drive either. For one sober moment, she had the image of her and Mark swimming surrounded by sharks. Tonight they’d both been knocked off the comfortable equilibrium they’d built during their vacation. That was all it took; one party.

“*Fuck.*”

“Mark,” she said, her voice quieter, calming him though she didn’t feel calm herself. “It’s not a big deal. We can call a cab.”

“*No me gusto ...* I don’t like it. When you spend that much time with other men, I don’t like it,” he said, shrugging.

“There. That’s it.”

She nodded and looked him in the eyes. “I get it. Okay.”

Mark became visibly more relaxed. “Let’s go home,” he said.

He took her by the hand and opened the door. When they returned to the party, more than a few pairs of eyes were on them. Clearly their absence had been noted. Pedro came over, looking at Mark.

“*¿Ta to ‘mano?*”

“Everything’s fine,” Mark said. “*Pero, estoy borracho.*”

Pedro laughed and clapped Mark on the back. “You’re drunk? Well, we can take care of you. I have my driver here, for just this situation. He’ll take you home and tomorrow I’ll have someone bring you back your *chacarra.*”

Mark handed over his keys and he and Dylan said their

goodbyes. As they were leaving, Dylan glanced over her shoulder and Ray Hernandez smiled at her from his place near the bar, where he was placidly sipping a drink. She wondered whether his entire evening's mission had been to get under Mark's skin. If so, he had clearly succeeded. And Dylan had unwittingly helped him do it.

# 7

*Sports Illustrated* was doing a shoot of Mark at the ballpark; a fact that was apparently not interesting enough for him to share beforehand. Dylan was in the middle of making pasta for dinner when the doorbell rang and Mark came out of the bedroom, shirtless and barefoot as always.

“It’s just the *Sports Illustrated* guy,” he said, as though it was no big deal.

But for him it really was no big deal. Not because he had already grown accustomed to being famous, but because he didn’t care about being famous. All of Dylan’s predictions about what would happen once Mark finally realized his fame had thus far not come to pass. He *did* realize it; he just didn’t care. So while she was a little in awe of things like a “*Sports Illustrated* guy” showing up at their front door, Mark didn’t even think it was an occasion that merited putting on a shirt.

“Shouldn’t we have cleaned up or something?” she asked, looking down at her marinara saucsplattered t-shirt and putting a hand up to check her hair.

“No,” Mark said. “I’m trying to get them out of here in fifteen minutes.”

He opened the door and Dylan heard as he greeted a woman and a man, inviting them to sit and offering them something to drink, which they both refused.

“I’m excited about this shoot,” Dylan heard the woman say. Her voice was familiar, and made Dylan stop to listen further as she tried to place it. “I think it’s going to be a lot of fun.”

“So should we go over the concept?” the male voice said.

“Sure,” Mark said.

“So what I’m thinking is that we’ll do some shots of you in the locker room, you’ll be a little dirty, like it’s after a game. Maybe we’ll have you without your shirt, like you are now,” the man laughed a little. “And we’ll have Paige dressed as she does when she’s doing her reports, leaning in with a microphone as if she’s interviewing you.”

At the mention of the name Paige, Dylan stiffened.

*Oh.* Now she knew who the voice was. *Paige Allen.*

She was a sportscaster for New York 1 news channel. She was notorious for barging into locker rooms and interviewing half-naked—and sometimes fully nude—male athletes as though it didn't faze her at all. No one would have cared if she was male, and no one would have cared if she was unattractive. But Paige Allen was far from unattractive; she was a knockout who had been a finalist in the Miss Universe competition before starting her career in broadcasting.

*That* was who Mark would be spending twelve hours working with tomorrow? Dylan reached for the bottle of red wine she'd planned for them to have with dinner and opened it, pouring herself a glass. Then she slipped into the bedroom and changed her sauce-stained shirt for a snug tank top. Paige Allen may have been a Miss Universe contestant, but Dylan was comfortable that her own physique could go up against the best of them. Sure, she was probably several inches shorter than Ms. Allen, but in terms of fitness, she was definitely a contender.

She checked her hair in the mirror and stopped in the kitchen to retrieve her glass of red before wandering, oh-so-casually into the living room. As she walked in, Mark did a double-take, probably noticing right away that she was braless and wearing something completely different than when he'd seen her just minutes earlier.

"Hello," she said, as though she'd happened across them by accident.

"Hey," Mark said. He extended an arm to her and Dylan went to him. He was sitting on the arm of the sofa and pulled her to him so she was perched on his knee. "Dylan this is Paige and Vince."

Paige Allen smiled and Dylan noted sourly that she was way better looking in person than she appeared on television, and wearing blue jeans and a pale blue shirt, she looked effortlessly chic. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and looked lustrous and beautiful like something out of a shampoo commercial.

"Nice to meet you, Dylan," she said, warmly.

"Good to meet you," Vince nodded. "We were just going over with your ..."

"... boyfriend," Dylan supplied, suddenly feeling dissatisfied

with how weak the label was. Nevertheless, she checked for a reaction from Paige, hoping that it registered with her that Mark was *taken*.

“... going over with Mark his photo shoot for tomorrow.”

“It’ll be my first time in *Sports Illustrated* as well,” Paige said.

“But I’m happy even to be used as prop. My father’s going to be so excited.”

“So the other shots,” Vince continued, “will be outside, with you, Mark, in a variety of poses like you’re in the middle of a play and Paige on the outside, again with the mike, as though she’s trying to interview you.”

“In the middle of a play?” Mark asked.

Vince laughed. “Yeah, I know. That would never happen. But we like to use some creative license, and our readers like shots where there’s some action.”

Mark nodded. Dylan could tell even though she couldn’t see his face that he’d already lost interest in the conversation. Vince pulled out what looked like an artists’ portfolio from next to him and produced out some large sheets of paper.

“I’ve got some mock-ups here,” he continued. “At first we thought we would do only Mets uniforms, but now we’re thinking variations on the uniform, with Mets colors of course. Your front office was very clear on that.”

“Okay, let’s see what you got,” Mark said. He reached around Dylan so she stood, satisfied that she had sufficiently staked her claim.

“Wine for anyone?” she asked as she headed back to the kitchen.

“No, no thanks,” Vince said.

Paige Allen smiled and shook her head. “I’m great. Thank you though.”

Dylan went back into the kitchen to finish dinner and found that while she’d been planting her flag in Mark, she’d overcooked the bow-tie pasta. She dumped it all out and began again.

When Paige and Vince were leaving, they called out their goodbyes which Dylan cheerfully returned. She’d set two places for dinner at the butcher block center island for her and Mark and poured them generous glasses of wine. He came in and sat down, picking up his wine and taking a sip.

“A little or a lot?” she asked as she spooned meat sauce over his pasta.

“A lot,” Mark said. “I’m twice as hungry as when they got here.”

Dylan put the plate in front of him and watched with satisfaction as he dug in. She couldn’t remember having ever cooked for a man before, with the exception of the occasional breakfast if they slept over. But she hadn’t lived with anyone before either, or felt about them the way she felt for Mark. All of the fears in the back of her mind—about being taken for granted, or about him becoming bored— had been unfounded so far. Still, they’d only been living together for two weeks, so there was plenty of time for things to go awry. Especially if he would routinely be working with women as gorgeous as Paige Allen.

After spooning out her own meal, Dylan sat across from Mark and began eating, enjoying the contented silence between them.

“So, Dylan?” Mark said.

She looked up.

“In case you were wondering, she’s not my type at all.”

Dylan didn’t look up from her meal, but felt her face grow warm. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Mark smiled. “It’s okay,” he said. “I’m glad I’m not the only one.”

“The only one what?”

“Who gets jealous.”

The difference though, was that he had no reason to be jealous. They ate in silence for awhile more, until Mark emptied his wineglass and rested both his elbows on the table, smiling at her.

“Enough left for seconds?” he asked.

“Should be,” Dylan said.

Mark took his plate over to the Viking—a stove so sophisticated it was taking awhile to figure it out completely—and heaped more pasta and sauce onto it. On his way back to the table, he stopped and kissed Dylan on the neck before sitting to resume his meal.

“What *is* your type?” she asked.

Mark held his fork in mid-air and looked at her.

“What?”

“You said Paige Allen wasn’t your type. What is?”

Mark smiled. “You are,” he said taking another bite of his food.

“So most of the women you dated before looked something like me?” she asked.

Mark chewed slowly and swallowed. “I walked right into that one, didn’t I? Why do I feel like I’m about to get in trouble no matter what I say?”

“I don’t know,” Dylan said running a finger around the rim of her wineglass. “Why do you?” Mark put his fork down and pushed his plate away.

“Something’s on your mind,” he said. “Tell me.”

He was always so straightforward; the least she could do was return the favor.

“Who’s Patricia?”

In an instant, his eyes closed off to her. He took a sip of his wine. “Who have you been listening to?”

“Is that an answer?” Dylan said lightly. “It doesn’t sound like one to me. But for starters, Pedro mentioned her name at dinner. He made it sound like she’s someone you know quite well.”

They stared at each other, both of them willing the other to look away first. Finally, Mark did.

“We were going to be married,” he said.

She knew that before he answered, but somehow hearing him actually say it felt like a punch to the gut.

“How long ago was that?”

“We broke up three years ago,” he said.

“What does that mean ‘we’?” Dylan asked. “Who did it?”

“She did,” Mark said.

Dylan swallowed. A hot poker lanced her heart. So if it had been up to him, he would be *married* now. To Patricia.

Dylan stood and grabbed her plate, scraping the remnants of her meal into the trash can and putting the plate in the sink.

She turned and went to take Mark’s plate.

“Are you done?” she asked, reaching for it.

He grabbed her wrist. “Is that all you want to know?” he asked.

“It’s enough, don’t you think?” she asked. “I understand now.”



“What do you understand?” Mark asked, his voice quiet.

“That you were going to marry someone and she didn’t want to marry you. At least not then.”

“Is that what you understand? If so, you understand nothing.”

Mark said. “And what do you mean by ‘not then’?”

“She’s back, isn’t she?”

Mark hesitated. “You *have* been talking to someone,” he said.

“No, I haven’t,” Dylan said, pulling her hand loose. “Are you done or not?” she snapped, reaching for his dinner plate once again.

“Yes.”

She snatched up the plate and realizing she’d left his fork behind, indelicately used her bare hands to slide the food off it into the trash. Mark watched her as she turned to the sink.

“She is back,” he said finally. “But that doesn’t have anything to do with us.”

“Doesn’t it?” she asked, her back still to him. “Was that her in the paper with you? Did you take her to a Mets event?”

“No,” he said. Then he paused. “I mean, yes that was her in the paper and no, I didn’t take her to a Mets event.”

“Really? Are you sure?” Dylan turned on the water and watched as the marinara sauce washed down the drain. “You want to think about that, and answer again?”

She was holding her breath, waiting for his response when suddenly Mark was behind her, his hands were on her shoulders, and he was turning her to face him. Dylan stubbornly refused to look him in the eye, focusing instead on his naked pectorals, angry that even at a moment like this she was distracted by his beauty. Of course, other women wanted him. The question was why would he want just her?

“I don’t lie to you.”

Dylan kept her gaze stubbornly focused on his chest, refusing to budge until Mark held her chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilted her head back. The force he used was minimal, but still, tears rose to her eyes.

“Who are you listening to?” he asked. “Who’s telling you this stuff?”

“I overheard some of the women at the party at Pedro Lima’s house,” she admitted. “They said you brought her to a press event.”

Mark rolled his eyes. “And you believed them without asking me? Is that why you were flirting with Ray Hernandez that night?”

It was Dylan’s turn to be exasperated. “I wasn’t *flirting* with Ray Hernandez. I was being nice to him because he’s your teammate.”

“And you found him attractive,” Mark said.

“He *is* attractive. There’s no question that he’s attractive,” Dylan said.

Mark threw his hands up as if to say, ‘*see?*’

“But that wasn’t why I was talking to him!” Dylan said. “And don’t try to change the subject! This isn’t about me having a conversation with someone in full view of you and a dozen other people; this is about the fiancée you hid from me!”

“Former fiancée,” Mark corrected. “And keep your voice down.”

Dylan pursed her lips, and tried to turn to the sink again, but Mark refused to let her. Tears rose to her eyes.

“Why would I hide her from you?” he asked.

“Because maybe you wish she wasn’t your *former* fiancée. Maybe because you wish she was your wife.”

Mark froze and Dylan felt a stab of panic.

*Oh my god, she was right. He did wish that.*

She tried to push her way past him but Mark grabbed her into a hug, his arms like a vise about her, so that she couldn’t move. He held her like that for awhile and when he saw that she wouldn’t struggle, he finally spoke, but his words were not at all what she expected.

“What makes you *think* things like this?” he said, his voice like a hiss in her ear. “I say I’m crazy about you, you don’t believe me? I say I want you to live with me, you think I want to be married to someone else. I get jealous about another man, and you think I want to be with another woman. What do I have to *do?*”

Dylan was heaving now, her breaths coming hard and fast. She closed her eyes tight. Ava was always telling her she was insecure, and that she sold herself short. Boyfriends in the past had said the same thing. She’d pushed them away with her neediness and insecurity; they grew exhausted, as anyone would. As Mark would. As he probably already had.

Then Mark was lifting her by the waist and putting to sit on the butcher block island so that they were eye-to-eye.

“Dylan,” he said, sounding exasperated now.

She raised her eyes to his. What she saw there was honesty, warmth and something else she couldn’t name. They stared at each other, their eyes unwavering.

“I asked Patricia to marry me when I was only eighteen,” he said. “She was the first girl I’d been with. We were together since I was sixteen ...” and when Dylan tried to look away, not sure she could stand to hear anything further, he gently turned her head so she was looking at him again. “I didn’t know anyone else as well as I knew her. Her father was my coach, so I spent hours in her home and with her family. I loved her because I loved her family. And because my family loved her.

“And when I knew I was going into the minors, I asked her to marry me and she said yes. Our families were happy, but I wasn’t sure.”

“So why did you ask her, if you weren’t sure?” she asked, her tone accusatory.

“It seemed like the natural next step,” Mark said shrugging.

“And she was so comfortable and familiar to me. And I was about to leave home. Be away from my brothers and sister and my parents for the first time. I was trying to hold on to home. So I held on to Patricia.”

“But you didn’t leave her,” Dylan pointed out. “She left you.”

“At the end of my second year, she told me she wanted to get married. She wanted to get married and start having babies and I panicked. All of a sudden all I saw when I looked at her was what I didn’t feel for her. What I would never feel. So I ... I cheated on her. I lied to her and she found out. And when she broke up with me, I was relieved.”

Dylan looked into his eyes. What she saw was regret.

“I treated her like crap. And she left, which was what I wanted her to do. Because I was too cowardly to just break it off. But she protected me. She didn’t tell her father, or my family. So all they knew was that she didn’t want to get married anymore. If she had told them, it would have caused a rift; Wilfredo would never have forgiven me. He’s one of my parents’ closest friends.”

“So you’re grateful to her. What about the Mets event where

they took your picture together?”

“I invited her father and he brought her along. I didn’t even know she was back, Dylan. But I was happy to see her. She’s a good friend and we’ve known each other a long time,” Mark explained. “When that picture showed up in the paper, I was worried you would see it and think the wrong thing. But you never mentioned it.”

“I did see it. And I did think you were with her,” Dylan admitted. “But I had no right to ask you about it, so I ...”

Mark looked almost pained at that. “What do you mean you had no right?”

“We weren’t together.”

“You keep saying that, but since I met you, Dylan there’s been no one else. Since we met ... just you. ¿Entiendes?”

She looked away, resisting his words, not knowing why it was so hard to accept. Mark turned her head to face him yet again and leaned in, pressing his lips against hers, trying to get her to kiss him back, but she pulled away.

“But now that Patricia’s back, your family and everyone will expect ...”

“My family loves you, Dylan. And as for Patricia, she’s a good person, but I don’t love her,” he said. “I love *you*.”

Dylan’s head snapped up and she looked at him.

He’d never said it before, and she hadn’t expected it. At least not so soon. She knew possessiveness didn’t equal love, and had never believed that Mark’s occasional jealousy meant anything other than that he wanted her to himself. Men were like that. They didn’t like to share their toys.

It should have made her happy to hear it—and it did—but she also felt an inexplicable surge of panic, a flight response that came from she knew not where. She literally wanted to *run*.

“I love you,” Mark said again, as though he sensed what she was feeling. “Can you handle that?”

He put his arms about her waist, moving closer, so she couldn’t help but look at him.

Dylan’s heart was pounding in her chest, but with some effort, she managed to steady herself and wrapped her arms about his neck. Mark lifted her off the butcher block, carrying her into their bedroom. He placed her on the bed and with his eyes never leaving hers, undressed her. The way he looked at her

once she was naked made Dylan shy, even though her body was one thing she'd never been uncertain about.

He lowered himself over her and she sighed. With his weight on her, she felt calmer, safer. With him pressed against her like this, it didn't seem so implausible that he might love her, or that it might be safe for her to love him back. Mark kissed her, his tongue in her mouth, his lips closed about her lower lip, gently tugging it between his teeth. He led and she followed. When she opened her mouth wider, he captured her tongue, sucking on it in a way that sent a shock of sensation down to her center.

She arched toward him, and he slid a hand between them, his fingers spreading the moisture he found there over the most sensitive part of her, until all Dylan was aware of was his touch.

*“Qué preciosa.”*

Dylan felt his hardness against her, pressing between her thighs, gliding between her lips, but tantalizingly avoiding entry. Mark lowered his head and pressed the flat of his tongue against her breast, then without warning, taking her nipple between his teeth and Dylan cried out his name, convulsing beneath him, surprised by the suddenness and intensity of her orgasm. Mark pushed into her and she gasped at how far, how deep he went. He bent and flexed in and out of her and Dylan wrapped her arms about him holding on for dear life. He was whispering in her ear, words of endearment that she couldn't translate, but fully understood.

*“Dylan,”* he said her name as though summoning her back to him from some faraway place.

She opened her eyes, and looked at him and in that instant, she saw it. The words may have been hard to believe, but there was no mistaking what she saw in his eyes, and Dylan came apart in an overwhelming flood of tears. Mark's movement slowed as he held her tight, kissing her, soothing her until finally, he tensed and grabbed her tighter, so Dylan opened herself to him and took everything he gave.

It was bitterly cold outside and spring training was only one short week away. Dylan dodged the patches of ice outside the building and considered once again whether she should bother

going in to the office. A blizzard had put the city at a standstill for several days and no one would have batted an eyelid if she wasn't able to make it in, but she was beginning to go stir-crazy in the apartment, and Mark, quite frankly hadn't been such great company lately.

As the time for him to leave for Port St. Lucie drew closer, he was alternately testy and withdrawn, walking about with headphones on, reading playbooks or working out on his BowFlex. The workouts were intense—he spent three hours at a time on resistance training; and because it was too dangerous to run outside, took to going into the stairwell, running up and down to get his cardio that way. When she tried to talk to him, he responded with grunts and sometimes not at all.

And so she woke up this morning and decided to flee to the office, where she would be safe from the new and disconcerting feeling of—for once—not being the focus of Mark's attention.

The building was locked and Dylan had to use her security pass to get in. The security desk was unmanned, and there was no one else in the lobby. She rode the elevator up to her floor, and once there had to turn on lights as she made her way to her office. The entire place was deserted. She sighed. No one had been as foolish as she had, to think that there would be work to do today. She had left home for nothing.

But rather than return home, she turned on her computer and looked through her files, trying to find projects she could work on independently without having to check in with any of the attorneys. There was a review memo she'd promised Grant she would finish, and some filing that she'd allowed to languish over the holidays. Dylan worked steadily for a few hours until the silence got to her and she picked up her cell phone, dialing Ava's number.

"Hey, pal. What're you doing here?"

Dylan dropped the phone, startled by the unexpected sound of another voice.

"Grant!" she put a hand to her chest. "You scared the ..."

"Sorry." He came in and sat at the edge of her desk. "I didn't know there was anyone else here. What the heck moved you to schlep all the way into the office on a day like this?"

Dylan smiled. "I might ask you the same thing."

"Jenn was driving me insane," Grant admitted. "I had to get out of there or one of us was going to kill the other."

"Same at my place," Dylan said without thinking.

Grant's eyebrows rose. "Wait. So you've got a boyfriend now? Whatever happened to the Dylan who was lamenting the lack of a dating life. Who is this guy?"

Dylan blushed and opened her mouth to give a generic answer but Grant stopped her, holding up a hand.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That's probably not an appropriate question for me to ask as your boss. Particularly not as your male boss. So feel free not to answer."

Dylan hesitated for only a moment. She actually *wanted* to answer him, now that she thought about it. No one knew about her and Mark except for her mother and Ava. Their relationship almost didn't seem real because of it.

"His name is Mark," Dylan said. "Mark Acosta."

Grant paused as he processed this, narrowing his eyes. "Wait," he said. "Mark . . . ? Do you mean . . . ?"

Dylan nodded, smiling. "But it's brand new still, and . . ."

"You're dating Mark Acosta, the Mets' new short stop," Grant confirmed.

"Yes. Just after the holidays, we moved in together."

"Holy shit, Dylan!" Grant said. "Way to grab the most eligible bachelor in New York."

"I don't think of him that way. He's just . . . Mark."

Grant shook his head. "You really have to get over that self-effacing bullshit, Dylan. Really."

"So I've been told," she said wryly.

"Okay, so this merits a longer conversation," Grant said.

"Let's go in the break room and make some coffee. I'm going to want all the details to share with Jenn later."

Dylan laughed and followed Grant when he led the way out of her office, down the hall and into the firm kitchen.

Along with the coffee, they managed to scavenge the remnants of someone's birthday cake, which looked like it was only about a week old. Dylan described for Grant how she and Mark met, relishing the telling of the details about their talk on the fire escape, how he had left and come back just to get her number and finally, how he'd insisted that she come with him

to the Dominican Republic for Christmas.

“Well, I hope he knows how lucky he is,” Grant said when she was done telling her story.

Dylan looked at him in surprise. She expected him to say that she was the lucky one. Grant seemed to read her face.

“He is, y’know?” he said. “Lucky, I mean. He may be rich and famous but you’re a gem too, and I hope you never forget it.”

Dylan smiled. “Thank you. That’s nice of you to say.”

“No, it’s not. It’s true. It can be heady stuff dating someone who has that kind of public recognition, I bet,” Grant said. “I’d bet it makes someone who’s like a regular person, let’s say, feel overwhelmed. Just don’t start feeling ... honored or anything. You’re a great girl and he’s a smart man for having chosen you.”

Dylan looked down, embarrassed by all the praise.

“And I didn’t mean to call you a ‘girl’ by the way,” Grant said.

“You’re a great woman, I should have said.”

Dylan laughed. “No offense taken.”

For a moment, they looked at each other and there was a sense that they had perhaps broken down the barrier between boss and employee a little *too* much. Grant slapped a hand on the table.

“Anyway,” he said. “I actually *was* getting some work done. And I bet you were too, so I’m going to get back to it. And don’t worry—with the exception of my wife, who I could never keep a secret from anyway—I will not breathe a word about this to anyone until and unless you do yourself.”

“Thank you,” Dylan said. “I appreciate it.”

“And even though I’m a Yankees fan myself, I wouldn’t be opposed to some signed memorabilia once the season gets underway.”

He winked at her as he left the room.

Dylan finished her coffee and returned to her office, feeling buoyed by her conversation with Grant. His advice that she not start to feel “honored” by Mark’s choosing her was so astute it was almost as though he’d opened a little window on her forehead and peeked into her psyche. Not a day went by that she didn’t wonder how and why Mark chose her; what it was that he saw in her that she didn’t see in herself.

Her cell phone rang and she looked at the number, smiling.



“Hey,” she said. “I was just thinking about you.”

“Good things?” he asked.

“Always.”

“So Dylan,” he began. And somehow she knew that at the end of that beginning would not be good news. “Something’s come up. And I need to be away tonight.”

She mulled that over for a moment. It was an interesting sentence, because it told her absolutely nothing, and that was not at all like him.

“You there?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“It’s just something I have take care of before camp,” he continued. “I’ll be back tomorrow night.”

“Will you be home when I get back later?” she asked. “Or will you have left by then?”

“I’ll probably have left ... I have to fly out.”

“The airport reopened?”

“A couple hours ago. This was something planned before the storm and now that everything’s getting back to normal, I can go take care of it.”

A part of her wanted to interrogate him, but she shoved the urge back down. That was a throwback from other relationships, other men who had been less trustworthy. If their little tiff about Patricia had proven anything, it was that she had to leave her old baggage behind in this new relationship or risk losing him.

“Okay,” she said finally. “So I’ll see you tomorrow night then. Any idea what time?”

“As early as I can. I’m guessing flights are still all screwed up. But I’ll call you tonight, okay?”

“Okay.”

“See you soon. I love you.”

There was an awkward pause while he waited for her to return the endearment.

“Okay,” she said finally. “Bye.”

When the connection was broken, Dylan closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

## 8

“So what is it?” Ava asked her, as they walked down Fifth Avenue. “What’s stopping you from saying it?”

“I don’t know,” Dylan said. “I just ... I freeze.”

“Well *do* you love him?”

As they dodged a particularly large and grimy pile of snow, Ava looped her arm through Dylan’s.

They were heading out for Indian food, liberated from their respective apartments now that the snow had stopped falling and the plows had done their work.

“*Yes*. And every time he says it and I say nothing, I wonder if he thinks I don’t.”

“Of course that’s what he thinks,” Ava said unhelpfully.

“Remember when we used to joke about that? How we’d say to some guy, ‘I love you’ and he’d go, ‘thank you’? You don’t even say that much.”

“But he has to know that I do.”

“Oh really, why does he *have to* know?” Ava pressed.

“Because I show him. Because I moved in with him. Because ...”

“And he does all the same things and yet you still called me the day after *he* said it and asked whether I thought he really meant it,” Ava pointed out. “You really have to get over this pathological thing where you think you’re unlovable.”

“I don’t think that,” Dylan said, shaking her head.

Ava looked at her skeptically. “I blame your mother. My mother, as messed up as she was, at least hugged me and told me she loved me. Your Mom? I don’t even remember her *smiling* at you when we were kids.”

“Let’s not get into that old discussion again, please,” Dylan groaned.

“I know you don’t like to talk about it, but if it’s affecting your relationship with Mark, maybe you need to work through this, y’know?”

“It’s not like I never told a guy I loved him before.”

“Maybe you were able to tell those other guys before because you didn’t really love them,” Ava shrugged. “Maybe you were able to tell them because then it was just words.”

“Could we please just have a nice dinner and leave the psychoanalysis for some other time?” “Yes,” Ava said. “Because I have something exciting to tell you.”

Ava’s exciting news, told as they were being seated in Tandoori Palace, was that she was involved with someone new. A newspaper reporter she’d exchanged email with for work for the past year had asked her out for a drink and they’d hit it off. But there was one minor catch.

“So he’s still legally married,” Ava said, and when Dylan shot her a look, held up a hand. “I know what that sounds like. But it’s not like that. They’ve been separated for over a year.”

“Yeah?” Dylan asked taking a sip of water. “And they’re not divorced why?”

“Property settlement issues,” Ava said with a wave of the hand, as though it was inconsequential.

Dylan let her shoulders sag. “Ava. This just sounds like a recipe for drama to me. Why do you keep picking these *men*? Staying with Jacob would have been better.”

“Yeah, Jacob who was still so immature he broke up with me before every holiday to avoid giving me a gift? Right. Jacob is a boy. Max is a man.”

“Yes. A *married* man.”

Ava held up the menu. “Let’s order. I’m not going to let you rain on my parade.”

Dylan rolled her eyes and began looking over the menu. Jesus, they were both a mess. She had the perfect man who she would probably wind up driving away and Ava had the crappy men she seemed unable to let go of.

They ate way too much and drank more wine that was advisable, and laughed and talked until it was late. Then they walked back out into the New York night, where the sidewalks had begun to come alive once again. Couples walked hand in hand, and groups of people ventured out, stopping at the corner bodegas and looking in store windows, elated to be outside once again after several bleak days of relentless snow.

Dylan and Ava stopped for Krispy Kreme donuts and large cups of coffee before making their way back to Ava’s place where Dylan had decided to spend the night. No point rushing home if Mark wasn’t there and she and Ava hadn’t spent nearly enough time together since the holidays.

“We’ll be up all night,” Ava said as they got in. “With all this coffee and sugar.”

“So I’ll tell you all about Mark’s cute cousins in the DR,” Dylan offered. “It was like a freakin’ Chippendales show when they were hanging out by the pool ...”

Ava groaned. “Oh, don’t tell me that.”

Dylan laughed and dumped her bag, fishing out her cell phone to turn it off. Since she didn’t have a charger, it was probably better to conserve battery strength until she got home.

“Oops,” she glanced at the console. “I missed a bunch of calls.”

She scrolled through and as expected, they were all from Mark. The last call he’d made was just past eleven-thirty.

“Call him back, let him know you didn’t slip on a patch of ice and crack your skull,” Ava said sipping her coffee.

“I didn’t say it was Mark who called,” Dylan mumbled.

“Who else would it be?” Ava said reaching for a donut. “The only other person who calls you that excessively is me.”

Dylan rolled her eyes and took the phone with her as she sat on Ava’s futon to remove her boots. Mark answered right away and Dylan lay back on the futon, anticipating a fairly long conversation. It had been quite some time since she’d been away from him overnight she now realized.

“Hey,” he said. “Where are you? I’ve been calling all night.”

“I’m with Ava,” she said.

“I’ve been calling the condo and your phone. I had no idea where you were.”

*So that makes two of us, Dylan thought. Because I have no idea where you are either.*

“We went out to dinner and hung out for a little while. I guess I didn’t hear the phone in my bag,” Dylan explained.

“Okay. Well you should check in every once in awhile,” he said. “I almost asked one of my brothers to go by and see if you were alright.”

“No need. I’m fine. I’ll probably stay with Ava tonight.”

“You probably will, or you will?”

“I will. So don’t send out any search parties.”

Mark laughed. “Okay, so I’m being stupid. But there’s power outages all over the city and I’m a plane ride away ...”

“I’m fine. Apart from a little too much to drink at dinner and

being hopped up on coffee, totally fine,” Dylan said. She curled up on her side, the phone pressed against her ear.

“I’ll be back tomorrow. It’s looking like I might get an early flight, so I should be home before seven, I think.”

“Okay.”

There was a brief silence and then Mark’s voice again. “I have to go. See you tomorrow night, okay?”

Dylan held the phone away from her ear and looked at it in disbelief. *That was it?*

“Mark?”

“Yeah?”

If she could make herself say the words, now would be the perfect time. He was safely out of sight, faceless on the other end of the line. And she had no idea where he was or what he was doing. Telling him she loved him right now would be the perfect way to ensure that whatever he was doing, wherever he was, he would think about her when he hung up.

But she couldn’t do it.

“You have a good night.”

When the connection was broken, she turned over onto her back to the sight of Ava watching her from the kitchen, chewing thoughtfully on a mouthful of donut. She raised her eyebrows at Dylan.

“Couldn’t do it, huh?”

“Shut up,” Dylan said.

She went to sit next to Ava and took a sip of her coffee, reaching into the Krispy Kreme box for a donut.

“And also, since you’ve been obsessing about where he went, why didn’t you just go ahead and ask him where he was?” Ava said, her mouth full. “You know he would have told you.”

Dylan paused for a moment. “He probably would have.”

“So why didn’t you ask?”

“I’m working on the trust thing.”

Ava nodded. “Got it,” she said, sounding as though she didn’t get it at all.

.

It was quite one thing to be understanding and mature about Mark’s inexplicable caginess when she was at Ava’s but it was quite another once she got back to the empty apartment. Dylan had gone in to the office once again because even though it

was likely to be deserted, there was very little for her to do at home other than clean or watch television. This time Grant wasn't in so she'd spent much of the day alone, digging herself out from the pile of paperwork that she'd allowed to languish for way too long. By the time she left, it was dark out, and she felt inexplicably lonely as she walked toward the subway. Ugly piles of grey snow stacked up at every intersection depressed her, and she pulled her coat closer, trying to occupy her mind with something other than questions about where Mark might be.

Ever since she was a teenager, from the moment she'd first started dating, Dylan knew she was prone to get ahead of herself where relationships were concerned. She was the girl who practically ceased to exist when she had a boyfriend. Everything became about him. Friends, schoolwork, even Ava took second fiddle to the guy of the moment.

It was the thing about herself she hated most, the fact that she reeked of desperation when she was in a relationship. She was always the one to say 'I love you' first; the one to force 'the talk' about being exclusive. When she met Mark, she had been single for the longest time in her life since she was sixteen and was just beginning to get the hang of it. For the first time that she could remember, she felt okay being alone. And then he had to show up and overwhelm her with attention. She felt like a junkie who'd been off her drug for a long time, who was just beginning to feel comfortable in sobriety when someone came along with a much more potent intoxicant than she could even have believed possible.

Something about the timing felt off. She was supposed to be thinking about law school and about figuring out who she was going to be for the *next* period of her life. Instead she was back where she'd always been, hanging her happiness almost completely on what someone else did or didn't do. Even as she pushed her way through the turnstile and waited on the subway platform, she tried to think of what a "normal" girlfriend would be doing.

She stopped at Whole Foods and bought wine, Cornish hens, wild rice and asparagus spears for dinner and when she got to

the apartment immediately got to the task of cooking and getting everything cleaned up. Afterwards, she changed into workout gear and walked over to the gym a few blocks away. Putting on her iPod, she ran on the treadmill hard and fast, until she thought her lungs would burst. She ran for almost forty-five minutes without noticing. When the treadmill slowed, she was almost surprised, and when it stopped she jumped off and bent over at the waist, hands on her knees.

A hand on her back caused her to look up. She pulled her ear buds out and looked up. It was one of the trainers, looking a little concerned.

“You went pretty hard there,” he said. “You okay?”

“Perfect,” Dylan said.

She did feel better actually. Instead of taking a shower, she ran back to the apartment and as she rode up in the elevator felt energized and empowered. Working out had always been her therapy. She almost always felt better afterward and this time was no different. This time it had definitely served the intended purpose.

As soon as she opened the door, the first thing she noticed was the bag by the door.

“Hey.” Mark came out of the bedroom, bare-chested and wearing faded jeans.

“How was your trip?” Dylan asked, keeping her voice airy.

“Good.” Mark grabbed her by the waist and kissed her. “How was your workout?”

“I cooked for you,” she said pulling out of his arms. It was uncomfortable to be held while she was this sweaty, even if he didn’t seem to care.

“I saw. I didn’t want to eat without you, but I’m starving.”

“I’ll only be a moment. I’ll shower while you set the table?”

“Sure.”

Dylan washed up quickly and pulled on one of Mark’s white undershirts that fell almost to her knees. She joined him in the kitchen where he had set their places at the center-island and even lit candles. Watching him move around, getting the food together and opening wine, Dylan felt her curiosity peak once again. That and a slender reed of suspicion.

“I’ll get the hens,” she said, to occupy herself.

When she opened the oven, it was warmer than expected. Her

shoulders sagged. She'd left the oven on.

"I overcooked them," she said quietly.

Mark came over and crouched next to her. Grabbing a nearby oven mitt, he pulled the dish out of the oven and together they looked at the Cornish hens.

"They're not burned," he said. "We can still eat them."

"They're dry," Dylan said, standing. "They'll taste like crap."

"No they won't. C'mon, let's eat. I'm dying here."

Dylan sat at her place, trying to restore the earlier sense of confidence her workout had produced. Mark put a hen on each of their plates and served helpings of the garlic asparagus and wild rice, sitting down and bowing his head for a few moments to say a silent prayer as he did before every meal.

"Smells good," he said encouragingly as he cut down the center of his hen.

"Dylan picked up her own utensils and ate a forkful of the rice. It was pretty good, if she did say so herself. She sipped her wine and tried the asparagus. That was good too.

"What the hell . . . ?" Mark was pulling something out of the cavity of his bird and holding it up with two fingers.

It was the plastic sac that contained the neck, gizzard, heart and liver of the hen. Dylan looked at it in horror. She had forgotten to remove it. She'd washed the birds, how was it that she'd overlooked ...

Then Mark was laughing; a full-throated belly-laugh, head thrown back. He dropped the plastic sac next to his plate and shook his head. Just as it seemed he had regained his composure, he began laughing again.

Dylan felt her face grow hot with embarrassment. She couldn't even cook a simple meal without it turning into a fiasco. And before she could stop it, she was crying, the tears spilling down her cheeks and her face crumpling. It took Mark a moment to realize but when he did, he stopped laughing immediately and in an instant was up and pulling her into his arms.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm not laughing at you. I know you worked hard on this ..."

Dylan cried for a few moments, her face pressed into his chest, until his words penetrated. She pushed him away and looked up at him.



“This isn’t just about the *dinner!*” she said.

Mark froze, looking confused. God, if she had a dime for every time she’d produced this exact reaction from him. She was a basket-case seventy percent of the time; it was a wonder he didn’t decide she was emotionally unstable and run from her as fast as he could. Or maybe he had. Maybe he *was* running ...

“Then what . . . ?”

“Where *were* you?” she blurted. “Why was this trip so different? You never even go as far as the Bronx without telling me exactly where you’re going. But this time, you told me nothing.”

“I couldn’t tell you,” Mark said quietly.

“Why not?” she demanded. “You said. No reason to doubt. That’s our rule. And I’m doubting right now, Mark.”

He looked surprised. “Where do you think I was?”

“I don’t know!” she said. “We’d just spent five days cooped up in the apartment getting on each other’s nerves. You weren’t talking to me. And then I go to work one day to give you space and you tell me you have to fly out of the state within hours of the airport re-opening. What am I supposed to think?”

“Exactly what I told you. That there was something I needed to take care of. You have to trust me, Dylan.”

“I can’t, okay?” she admitted. “I have issues with that. There. That’s the ugly truth.”

“Have I ever given you any reason not to tr ...?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Dylan said, pulling away from him. “Chalk it up to my shitty childhood. Not being breastfed, not having a father. I don’t know, Mark. But it’s just something I need to work on. And so I ... don’t trust. Not anyone, except for maybe Ava.”

“Even Ava only gets a ‘maybe’, huh?” Mark said, sounding awed.

“Yeah. Even *Ava* only gets a maybe,” Dylan said, looking at him.

If he ran now, she couldn’t say she’d blame him. This was Dylan Sanger, warts and all. It had been so strenuous pretending; it was almost a relief, letting all the crazy hang out.

“So I guess I have to tell you where I was,” Mark said,

thoughtfully.

"I guess you do," Dylan agreed. She wiped her face.

"Sit down," Mark said indicating her stool.

Dylan took a deep breath and resumed her seat, closing her eyes for a moment, bracing herself. When she opened them, Mark was watching her.

"So when you moved in," he said slowly. "My plan was to have you be here, live with me here until after the first season and then we'd see, y'know?"

Dylan didn't see, but she nodded nonetheless.

"I always have a game plan, and I almost always stick to it. But almost as soon as you got here, I realized ..." he paused.

"Just say it," Dylan sagged in her seat, steeling herself for what was to come.

"It's just not ..."

Dylan gripped the edge of the center island.

"... enough," he finished.

Dylan looked up at him, not sure she understood.

"Living together," he said, shrugging. "It's not the right thing for us. We should be married."

Dylan blinked, not sure she'd heard correctly. She leaned forward as though craning to hear better.

"I went to Arizona," Mark explained. "To see your mother."

"*What?*"

"I didn't feel I could ask you until I'd at least met her, talked to her, let her know at least a little bit about who I was so she could feel comfortable that ..."

"That's where you were? In Arizona seeing my *mother*?"

Dylan asked incredulously.

Mark nodded slowly.

Dylan started crying again. "You're *proposing* to me?" she asked between sobs.

"I'd planned on doing it this weekend at my family's house,"

Mark said nodding. "I leave next week, so I wanted to ..."

Dylan threw herself at him and he lifted her off her feet so she could wrap her arms about his neck.

"Dylan," he said. "What am I going to do with you? How many times do I have to tell you, you don't have anything to worry about?"

She kissed him with all the bottled up feeling she'd held inside

for so long. It was as though a dam inside her had broken open.

“You want to marry me?” she asked again.

“Yes.”

“Even though you’ve only known me for a few months? And even though you tell me you love me and I say nothing?”

“Yes,” Mark said looking her in the eyes. “Even then.”

“But how?” she asked, serious now, despite her excitement.

“With all that ... and me not saying ‘I love you’ back ...”

“Dylan,” Mark said shaking his head. “I know you love me. I’m only human and sure, I get jealous sometimes and insecure, but I *know* you love me. And I know you’ll say it. When you feel ready.”

God. His *faith* in her, more than she had in herself, was humbling. He was so sure of them and she was not. She could pretend she was, but she wasn’t. As far as she was concerned, it had seemed a much more likely outcome that he’d been about to dump her than propose.

And he was insecure? That was news to her. Even when he was going ballistic about her talking to Ray Hernandez, she’d never for a moment interpreted it as insecurity. *Possessiveness* maybe, but Mark and insecure just didn’t seem to go together. Someone like him, who had been assured all his life that he was loved, how could he be insecure about her?

“You know I love you?” she asked, as he lowered her to her feet again.

“Yes, I do,” Mark said, and then he smiled. “I mean, I do want to hear it. But I’m willing to wait until ...”

“No,” she shook her head emphatically. “You don’t have to wait anymore. I love you, Mark. I love you *so* much. I ...”

Now that it was out, she wanted to say it over and over again, but she couldn’t because Mark was kissing her, and she was closing her eyes and relaxing in his arms feeling completely safe.

## 9

It hadn't even been a day after they told Mark's family about their engagement that a paparazzo had snapped a picture of them having brunch in a café near the apartment. Mark had raised her hand to his lips to kiss it and that was the moment the shot had captured, through the window, her new ring glinting in the sunlight. It had been one of those tacky *New York Daily News* headlines, in bold, sensationalist type and read: *Off the Market?*

The story went on to describe how Mark Acosta, the brand new Mets acquisition had made a "surprise proposal" to longtime girlfriend Dylan Sanger, a law student and Brooklyn native. The details were wrong—by no measure had Mark and Dylan been going out for a "long" time, and she was not from Brooklyn, nor did she live there at the time of the engagement and the law student part was decidedly not true. But New York tabloids were not ones to let little things like facts stand in their way—close enough was sufficient for them to go to press.

Mark had been incensed about the story because it meant that someone who knew at least one of them even tangentially had spoken to a reporter. She'd heard him on the phone with Corey the next day, as if the poor guy could do anything about it. She didn't catch everything but the gist was that he didn't want her and his family to become targets of the press. Dylan knew he was really pissed, because he transitioned into Spanish without realizing it.

"¡Esta es mi familia!" he said. "¿Entiendes? ¡Mi familia!"

When Mrs. Acosta heard they were considering getting married at the courthouse instead of in a church, she'd cried for the entire day, so that essentially put an end to that plan. So the revised plan was to do it in the middle of spring training. Mark would fly back for a weekend, and return to camp on Monday. There would be no honeymoon because his schedule wouldn't permit it.

*We could wait until after the season*, Dylan had suggested. *It doesn't have to be right away.* How could he be so sure he wanted something this permanent so soon? Maybe he was doing the same thing he'd done with Patricia, holding on to something familiar just because he was moving into a scary new phase of his life.

*I don't want to wait*, Mark had said right away. *Why? Do you?* Everything with him came in such absolutes. He made a choice and he stuck to it. But he'd chosen Patricia at one time and that hadn't stuck. That was only an engagement and far easier to get out of than a marriage. What if he rushed this and wanted out later on? That would be far more painful than letting him go now. But she couldn't make herself raise the issue so she'd simply smiled.

*No*, she said. *I don't want to wait.*

So Dylan would plan the entire thing with Ava, Mrs. Acosta and Miri, and without his input. Her mother wouldn't do much since she was in Arizona. And she was still reeling from Mark's visit. When she and Dylan had finally talked about it, she said that he'd called her out of the blue and asked if he could come by and take her to dinner. Apparently, until that point he hadn't contacted her to let her know that he was planning to fly out. And from the sound in her mother's voice as she described the dinner, Mark had apparently overwhelmed her, just as he had Dylan.

Before she had even grown accustomed to wearing her engagement ring, Dylan was helping him pack to fly down to Port St. Lucie with the rest of the team. The night before, there had been four inches of snow; and while Mark slept next to her, his arm heavy across her abdomen, Dylan lay awake hoping the weather would mean a delay or even cancelation of his flight. She hadn't even had a full week to enjoy being his fiancée and he was leaving. She'd lifted his arm and turned so she was on her side facing him, watching him sleep. He looked so at peace in sleep, so confident even in repose, as though he knew precisely who he was and that he was in his correct place in the world. She had never known that kind of certainty about anything, not even about their engagement. The ring—a five-carat diamond surrounded by pavé in a platinum setting—was heavy on her finger and felt unfamiliar, as though it

belonged to someone else, someone more deserving.

Now, Mark was tossing things haphazardly into a large sports bag that could only hold a week's worth of stuff, if that. And there were all his athletic shoes, underwear ...

"This isn't going to work," Dylan said dumping everything onto the bed. "You need a suitcase."

Mark emerged from the closet they shared.

"What?" he pulled his ear buds out of his ears.

She hated when he wore them around the apartment, as though he was blocking her out. She knew that wasn't his intent, but for heaven's sake, he was leaving in less than four hours; one would think he could live without Dominican rap music for that long.

"This bag isn't big enough," she said. "You need to take the suitcase."

"No. I only need a few shorts, some sweats, a few t-shirts. And I don't want to check anything. I want to carry everything on."

Dylan sighed and began repacking everything.

"Why're you so cranky?" Mark came out of the closet and wrapped his arms about her waist.

Dylan turned to look up at him. *Wasn't it obvious?*

"I'll miss you too," he said.

But he said it cheerfully. She was glad one of them was excited about spring training.

"Before I leave, there's something I have to tell you," he said pulling her close again.

Dylan waited a moment and when he said nothing, she turned in his arms to look up at him. "So here's a tip. When you begin that way, you probably don't want to pause for too long before going on."

"Okay, but I don't want you to get upset," Mark said.

Dylan pulled completely away this time and sat on the bed.

"You're making it worse."

"It's no big deal, really," Mark said, suddenly becoming busy with folding socks and stuffing them into his bag. "Cindy Hernandez invited us to dinner a couple nights ago, that's all. And I told her we were busy."

"Well ... *were we?*" Dylan tried to think of what they'd been busy with. All she could recall was hanging out in the Bronx at his parents' house.

“That’s the thing,” Mark glanced up at her. “I lied to her. Anyway I told her to call you next week and gave her your number.”

Dylan shook her head. “Wait. I don’t understand. Why did you . . . ?” And then it came to her. “Mark. Really?”

“The whole dinner invitation thing was probably his idea in the first place,” he said quickly. “I mean, Cindy’s never met you. Why would she be so eager to have dinner with us all of a sudden? I’m telling you, that was all Ray. And it wasn’t me he was excited to see again, I can tell you that.”

“Okay maybe so, but I wasn’t exactly welcomed with open arms at Pedro Lima’s house. So I would have loved to meet Cindy Hernandez.”

“She’s going to call you next week.”

“When you and Ray are conveniently away at spring training,” Dylan said shaking her head. She smiled. “You’re such a baby.”

“I’m trying really hard to like him,” Mark said. “But if I saw him all over you again like he was at Pedro’s, then . . .” he let his voice trail off into silence.

Dylan smothered a smile and turned to help Mark with the rest of his packing. Nothing beat a good old-fashioned display of jealousy to lighten a girl’s mood.

“And before I forget,” he said, going over to the dresser and found an envelope that he handed to her. “Take this.”

Dylan opened it. Inside was an American Express card; the Centurion card.

“You might need stuff,” Mark explained. “For the wedding or whatever.”

“Oh,” she said. “Okay.”

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“I really wanted to bring you breakfast in bed,” Ava said as she entered the bedroom, bearing two mugs of coffee. “To cheer you up. But I couldn’t figure out how to open your crazy space-age refrigerator.”

Dylan rolled over and rubbed her eyes, yawning as she sat up. She’d slept surprisingly well but was glad that Ava was there to help her fill her weekends since Mark left. She took the mug of coffee and groaned in pleasure at the first sip.

“What do you mean you couldn’t open the refrigerator?”

“There are like, no handles on the doors.”

“Oh yeah. I’ll show you how later.”

Ava sat cross-legged on the bed next to her. “Am I the luckiest girl in the world or what?” Dylan laughed. “Why are you the luckiest girl in the world?”

“Because my best friend is loaded. Like Gayle and Oprah, I’ll get the benefits of you being rich

without all the pressure!”

“I don’t have any pressure,” Dylan said. “Mark has all the pressure. And I’m not rich because we’re engaged, not married yet.”

“Same difference.”

“Not quite. But I did get a blessing from on high ...”

“What’re you talking about?” Ava took a sip of her coffee.

“Ray Hernandez’ wife is going to call me.”

“So you can do lunch?” Ava said in a bad imitation of a British accent.

“I guess Mark blew them off for a dinner so she’s supposed to get in touch.”

“She’s always in the papers helping foster children and stuff like that. But so weird, she’s always

wearing these five thousand dollar purses and she’s at a frickin’ shelter feeding the homeless.” Dylan shook her head.

“I’m going to have to try to get along with her though. Since our husbands

are co-workers and everything.”

“Co-workers. Yeah, like they’re on a Ford auto assembly line,”

Ava said dryly. “And don’t think I

didn’t hear how you called Mark your husband right then.”

Dylan laughed. “Husband, fiancée, same difference.”

“Okay, you promised me we’d go shopping,” Ava said losing interest with the subject. “So finish

up that coffee and chop-chop.”

They were in Macy’s later that afternoon when Dylan’s phone started chiming and she reached for

it in her pocket-book. The caller was a 212 area code from a number she didn’t recognize. “Is this Dylan?” the voice on the other end asked.

“Yes it is.”



“This is Cindy Hernandez,” the caller said. Then she paused as though waiting for a reaction. It took Dylan a moment to process the name.

“Oh! Hi! Yes, Mark said you might be calling. Nice to hear from you, Cindy.” She made a face at Ava.

“And nice to hear your voice as well, Dylan. I hope you know Ray and the rest of the guys are so excited to have Mark onboard. I met him awhile back and he is just adorable. And such a talent.” “Thank you,” Dylan said. “I think he’s adorable as well.”

Cindy Hernandez laughed, a delicate tinkle of a laugh. “Well, I just wanted to call and formally welcome you to the Mets family and see whether you might be interested in getting together and meeting some of the girls.”

“I would love to,” Dylan said, mustering up all her enthusiasm. “I feel like Mark and I have been a little inaccessible ...”

“Oh god, don’t worry about that,” Cindy Hernandez said. “You’re newly engaged and besides, just before they have report for camp we all try to keep our men close. No need to explain.” “Well, now that he is at camp I’m wide open. I would love to meet everyone.”

“Fabulous. Is tomorrow too soon?”

“Tomorrow,” Dylan repeated. “What do you have in mind? I have a friend visiting so ...” “Bring your friend. It would just be something casual at my place—we’re doing steaks on the rooftop deck, that kind of thing.”

“Can I check in with my friend and let you know?” Dylan asked.

“Of course. I know it’s last minute but I am so not a planner. You’ll learn that about me before too long.”

“Well, why don’t I call you later this evening to let you know,” Dylan continued. “What time would you be cooking out tomorrow?”

“Say around noon till four or so? I have to get my kids ready for school on Monday so nothing past six in any event. And I understand you work still so you

won't have to worry about being out too late."

You work *still*, she'd said. Dylan blinked. What the heck did *that* mean?

Dylan ended the call and looked at Ava who was practically jumping out of her seat with excitement.

"We have to go," she said. "There is no way I'm passing this up."

"You sure?" Dylan asked. "It might be a little stuffy."

"Who cares? Is it at Ray Hernandez' place? I saw pictures in *Us Weekly* and it is insane. Sure, it's a little over the top and a little tacky ..."

"Yes, it's at his place."

"Seven bedrooms, Dylan. In the middle of New York City. I wonder if she'll give you the tour." "God I hope not. I would hate to have to pretend to like seven bedrooms worth of tacky." Ava laughed. "Okay, let's go shopping. I have to help you buy an outfit for tomorrow. You have to look the part of Mark Acosta's fiancée."

Dylan leaned back. "I am the part of Mark Acosta's fiancée. So I only need to look like me." "Yes, yes Dylan. But a new and improved you," Ava said gently as though speaking to a two-year old.

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The Hernandez apartment was two entire floors at the top of an exclusive building on W. 54<sup>th</sup> Street and the only way to get to it was in a private elevator that had to be sent down especially to pick them up. Dylan had permitted Ava to dress her for the occasion, in black skinny pant, a casually chic white shirt and pointy-toed black boots. She'd drawn the line at having her hair French-braided and instead consented to having it tied back with a black scarf. Ava was wearing dark wash jeans and a Chanel-esque jacket with pearl-drop earrings. Dylan was convinced they would be overdressed until the elevator door opened and she saw Cindy Hernandez.

She was stunning; not quite pretty because she had really big teeth, eyes too close together and hair that was one shade too blonde for her complexion—but stunning nevertheless.

Everything about her seemed to have been carefully orchestrated. Every strand of hair looked as though it had been placed very carefully where it was to create a casual, tousled look. Her skin was perfectly smooth, her make-up flawlessly applied and her eyebrows were so symmetrical they looked stenciled on. And as for her outfit; though only a pair of skinny jeans and a bejeweled tank top, topped by a mohair sweater, it all came together to look like something on a Bryant Park runway. The fact that she was Manhattan-socialite-thin, thinner than Ava even, was only accentuated by the ultra-high spike-heeled boots she wore.

“Dylan,” she said extending a hand as they stepped off the elevator. She leaned in for a cheekbrush and Dylan’s nostrils filled with a rich scent, reminiscent of green tea.

“This is my friend, Ava,” Dylan said.

“Ava,” Cindy leaned in and brushed Ava’s cheek as well.

“Well, everyone’s here. We’re upstairs. And don’t worry, we’re under a heated tent—wouldn’t want you telling Mark I froze you half to death on a Manhattan rooftop.” She laughed her delicate laugh and rested a hand on Dylan’s back to guide her through the apartment.

It was every bit as overdone as Ava had warned, in rococo style—gilding and chintz everywhere. They passed through a parlor into a more private sitting room in which a fire blazed in a six-foot high fireplace. Off to one side of the room, almost hidden was a winding staircase that led to the second floor and eventually out to the roof. When Dylan looked over her shoulder at Ava who was following close behind, the look on her friend’s face was a mixture of fascination and repulsion.

The rooftop deck appeared to have been completely covered for the winter in a greenhouse-like structure. At the far end, tables were set up as though for a garden party with floral arrangements at every table. A bar, staffed by two bartenders and a grill manned by a chef in full dress were nearby. At the tables were three other women and children were running about, squealing and chasing each other. As they approached, the women suspended their conversation and looked up. Dylan immediately felt appraised.

They were all dressed similarly to Cindy Hernandez, with a clever balance of opulence and casual, managing to look as

though they hadn't tried too hard to look wealthy, but just did. One of the first things Dylan noticed was the jewelry—they all seemed to have enormous rings that glinted in the light at their slightest movement. She and Mark had chosen simple platinum wedding bands and Dylan's only diamond was her four-carat engagement solitaire which before today had seemed enormous to her. Dylan noted that none of these women had been at Pedro Lima's house, and something told her it wasn't just because they weren't Dominican. Something told her that this was the A-Team of Mets wives and that being invited here had catapulted her to the major leagues, no pun intended.

"Everyone, this is Dylan Sanger, Mark Acosta's soon-to-be-wife," Cindy said, squeezing Dylan's shoulder. "And her friend, Ava."

The women regarded them coolly and eventually one of them said 'hello'.

"This is Marjorie King ..." another blonde whose color was a little off, slightly heavy with a round cherubic face, "Lori Santos ..." very pretty, and slender with a mass of long, curly hair that looked like spun taffy and green eyes, "... and Stephanie Alfieri."

Stephanie had jet-black, pin-straight hair that fell like a curtain to her waist and a golden tan that looked to have been accomplished the old-fashioned way rather than in a tanning booth. She was the only one who gave Dylan a genuine smile and was the first to extend her hand.

"My kids are four of the little wild animals you see running around here," Cindy said. "You'll meet them sooner or later. Two of them are Steph's, there are Marjorie's two and Lori's baby is asleep downstairs."

"Gosh," Ava said. "Had we known we needed to bring kids, we would have picked some up at the store."

Stephanie Alfieri laughed but no one else registered a reaction.

"Welcome, Dylan," Marjorie King raised her glass. "People have been waiting with bated breath to meet you."

"And no one more so than you, Marjorie," Cindy said with a hint of strain in her voice.

"Our husbands, I mean Mark and my husband, play the same position," Marjorie said. "So they'll spend a lot of time

together at camp.”

“We’re not going to talk baseball, are we?” Stephanie Alfieri said wearily.

“No. We are not,” Cindy Hernandez said with finality. “Dylan, you and Ava sit. What would you like to drink?”

“Well, what’s good?” Dylan asked.

“Mango daiquiris,” Stephanie said. “Reminds me of the islands.”

“Stephanie, I swear if we have to hear one more time about your trip to Mauritius I’m going to throw up,” Lori Santos said.

“Don’t hate on me because you’re afraid to fly,” Stephanie said.

“Girls, we want to hear about Dylan,” Cindy said. “But first let’s get those drinks. Ava? What’ll you have?”

“I’m game for the mango daiquiri,” Ava said.

“Good.”

Cindy motioned for one of the bartenders and ordered two mango daiquiris for Dylan and Ava before Dylan realized that she hadn’t actually said what she wanted to drink. Dylan and Ava sat at a table with Cindy Hernandez who seemed to be watching the bartenders do their work, as though concerned they might skimp on the alcohol. Ava was looking about like a kid in a candy store, clearly still hungrily taking everything in. But knowing Ava, there was no way she was actually impressed by it all—more likely she was gathering information for their confab later when she would rip to shreds the conspicuous consumption.

“So how’re you handling all of this?” Stephanie Alfieri asked, leaning toward Dylan.

She seemed genuinely curious, and in a kind-hearted rather than voyeuristic way.

“It’s been fine,” Dylan said, clearing her throat. “Mark’s only been gone a few nights and of course, before that we’ve been together almost every day, so ...”

“I hope you soaked it all in,” Lori Santos said. “I remember Jason’s rookie season. It felt like it was two years before we spent any quality time together again once he got started.”

“It’ll be worse for Dylan,” Marjorie said, taking a sip of her drink. “Mark is already a way bigger star than Jason ever

was.”

Lori looked at her levelly. “Or your husband, Margie. In fact, it remains to be seen whether he’ll even ...”

“So I heard you work in a law firm,” Stephanie said to Dylan, pointedly cutting the other women off. “I used to be a paralegal before I got married. I still kind of miss it.”

“Dylan’s just killing time before law school,” Ava said.

“Well ... I’m doing more than killing time,” Dylan said. “I like the work. And I think it’ll make me a better lawyer once I get around to it.”

“Hmm,” Marjorie said. “That’s very dedicated of you. To want to study the law still.” Dylan blinked. There was that word again.

“We have lots of food,” Cindy Hernandez broke in. “Ava, Dylan, you want to go over and take a look?”

Next to the grill, a buffet table was laid out. Dylan rose, grateful for a reason to get away from the women for a moment. Ava followed and they walked over to browse the culinary selections. There was smoked salmon, shrimp cocktail, roasted chicken breast sliced perfectly and grilled vegetables. Still on the grill were lamb chops and a few very fine looking steaks.

“Oh my god, this is everything I’d hoped for,” Ava whispered.

“Can you believe these women?”

“Stephanie seems nice,” Dylan said.

“Yes, but that Marjorie one wants to go for your throat. You know why, right?”

Dylan looked at her. “No. Why?”

“You really ought to start reading the Sports pages, Dylan. Mark is taking her husband’s job. Or at least taking the limelight from him.”

“But Ray Hernandez has the limelight.”

“Oh Dylan, keep up will you? Ray and Mark don’t play the same position and there’s room for two superstars on a baseball team. Ever since Strawberry and Gooden. But only two. If one star is Ray Hernandez and the other is Mark Acosta ... oops, no room for Craig King, get it?”

Dylan looked at her. “But I don’t have anything to do with that!”

“Envy is not based on reason, sweetie. When all those

advertisers come looking for a Mets player, they're only going to have two flavors on their menu—Hernandez and Acosta.”

# 10

Fidgeting with her necklace, Dylan surveyed the room and realized that she only knew a handful of the people who were in attendance. Mark's brothers and Ava, and some of the Mets wives. But just about everyone else was known to her only on television or from the newspapers. If this were really a party for her, one would have thought that Cindy Hernandez would have asked her for a guest list, but she hadn't. Instead, she had announced that she and Ray wanted to have a "little celebration" for her and Mark a couple days before the wedding, but that she needn't worry about a single thing. Dylan had been forced to accept because she and Mark had invited no one from the Mets to the wedding itself.

And so Dylan hadn't worried about it. She thought only about what to wear and Ava had helped with that, taking her to Saks where they browsed items that she would have been afraid to even touch just a few months ago. Her shoes alone had cost eleven hundred dollars; the dress another eighteen hundred, and her hair, which she'd blown out for the occasion and had professionally done, four hundred. She'd fretted over the amount she spent until Stephanie Alfieri had called her and mentioned in passing what she was wearing for the party, a designer whose collection Ava said had "low-end pieces" that cost somewhere in the neighborhood of six thousand dollars.

And when she tried to discuss it with Mark, he'd lost interest immediately when he realized her angst was about clothing and told her he was sure she would do whatever was best. At least one of them was sure.

Looking about the room of high-profile New York personalities, Dylan spotted a couple of local channel sportscasters, more than one of the NY Jets players, an actress who was currently on Broadway in a Tony-winning production and three young sitcom stars. When Cindy had introduced her, they all greeted her as though she was a friend, immediately familiar as though had been inducted into some secret society.



Mark was talking mostly to other athletes, a beer in hand, looking as comfortable as he was during Sunday dinner at his parents' house. Though she wanted to, Dylan resisted the urge to cling to him for safety. She'd noticed when they entered the Hernandez' apartment that he hadn't reacted one way or another to the opulence. He almost seemed not to notice things like that. But Dylan took it all in, inventorying what she would do the same way, and what she would do differently, studying everything for future reference.

If she was to enter this new world, she would have to pay attention. Some day she might have to arrange her own "little celebration" for someone and Cindy Hernandez set the standard everyone else seemed to want to emulate. She remembered all too well how much weight had been given to the fact that Cindy did not attend Vanessa Lima's party. It was no small thing that somehow Mark and—by association—she had been vaulted to the top of the heap, so much so that Cindy was hosting on an event their behalf. Ray was still back in Florida at spring training but even while he was away, his wife was fortifying his stock, maintaining his stature by throwing parties like this one. It was something Dylan would never think to do, so she decided to pay attention and learn from Cindy.

"Pre-wedding jitters?"

Dylan turned to face the hostess, fixing a smile on her face.

"Not at all," she said. "Just general party jitters."

"No need," Cindy said, looping an arm through hers. "We're all just faking it, Dylan. All of us, all of the time."

Dylan smiled. "You too? I find that difficult to believe somehow."

"Oh of course me too, but thankfully not *only* me," Cindy said. She pointed out a woman across the room in a sapphire-red dress. "You see her?"

Dylan nodded.

"That's Giselle Barton. Her husband is in the NFL and she's known for having the biggest and best parties of the summer at her mansion in Southampton. But I happen to know that she can barely manage to keep the lights on in her home in the city because her husband gambles all their money away..." and

pointing to a man in a dark grey suit. “Frank Lawson. Award-winning architect, with a drinking problem so severe that he can’t draw a single line without the aid of a good scotch ...”

For the next half hour, Cindy stood next to Dylan, dissecting the people in the room, telling all of their dirty little secrets.

“No one here is better than you,” Cindy said. “They just have a little more practice with building a façade. So have some more champagne, smile at everyone, share a few laughs and then go home to sleep a peaceful sleep with the man you’re about to marry.”

Dylan smiled. Sounded like good advice to her. She would need both the champagne and the laughs tonight because the next day her mother would be flying in.

.

Dylan circled the arrival terminal at LaGuardia in the Jeep, waiting for Mark to emerge with her mother. She fidgeted with the dials on the radio and tried to calm herself. He had insisted on going in even though before leaving the condo Dylan pointed out quite reasonably that her mother may not even recognize him, having only met him that one brief time in Arizona. Mark had held up an 8.5 x 11” poster board on which he’d written ‘Leslie Sanger’ in block letters.

“People will mob you in the terminal,” Dylan had said, trying another approach. “Hat, glasses,” Mark said.

“That’s not a disguise, Mark. And why do you want to go in anyway?”

“I want to be the one to greet her,” he said.

Dylan heaved a deep sigh. “Mark, she’s not like your family. You might not get the response you think.”

“It doesn’t matter. Relax, baby.”

Dylan wished she could relax. She circled the airport terminal three times before she spotted Mark’s baseball cap, almost a head taller than most other people at the curb. He was speaking animatedly to someone and soon spotted the Jeep and waved her over. Dylan pulled up to the curb and got out to greet her mother. She was wearing jeans and a beige floral short-sleeved blouse and was actually smiling. Dylan hugged her awkwardly.

“Mom, you look great,” she said.

It was true. Since she'd moved to Arizona her mother almost seemed to have reverse-aged. She looked fresh faced and calm, probably from all that yoga, meditation and Reiki practice. A part of Dylan was hurt by this transformation wondering whether raising her been the stressor that had made her mother look so much more harried when she was in New York.

"You too." She touched the side of Dylan's face then reached down to take her hand and look at the engagement ring, her eyes widening at the size of it. "Congratulations."

"Thank you. Are you tired?"

Mark was putting her bags into the back of the Jeep and had taken the keys from Dylan.

"A little."

"Hungry?"

"A lot."

Dylan laughed. "We'll take care of that right away."

During dinner, Mark did most of the talking, filling her mother in on their plans for the wedding that weekend. Dylan watched her mother sizing him up. Mark ate a lot, as he always did but Dylan could barely manage a bite. He thought it would be a good idea for them to sleep apart while her mother was there so they decided that she would stay at Dylan's old apartment since it hadn't been sublet yet, and Dylan would stay there with her until after the wedding.

Mark dropped them off after dinner and declined Dylan's suggestion that he come up. She frowned at him—he was taking this "out of respect for your mother" thing way too far, to her mind. While her mother waited at the curb, Dylan leaned in to kiss him goodnight and fought the urge to beg him to take her with him.

On the way up to the apartment, Dylan and her mother did not speak and once in the apartment, there was the predictable bickering over who would take the sofa and who would take the bedroom. Dylan finally won the argument and got some comforters to prepare for the uncomfortable night ahead. If they were any other mother and daughter, it would have gone without saying that they would share the bed; it was certainly big enough.

When they were both in their nightclothes, Dylan was

surprised that her mother came to join her in the living room, sitting next to her on the sofa.

“He seems like a wonderful man,” she said unprompted.

“He is,” Dylan said.

“And I suppose the money doesn’t hurt either.”

Dylan looked at her. “What does *that* mean?”

“You haven’t known each other for very long.”

“And so you think I’m marrying him for his *money*?”

“Are you?”

Dylan shook her head. “I never realized just how little you thought of me.”

“I think it’s a fair question. You’ve only known him four months.”

“And it took less time than that for me to love him, believe it or not.”

Her mother nodded. “He’s very affectionate with you.”

“Yes! Something I never knew much about until now, incidentally.”

At that, her mother’s head bowed almost imperceptibly.

Dylan touched her hand. “I’m sorry. I didn’t say that to be hurtful ... okay, yes I did. But I’m sorry.”

“If you love him, then I’m happy for you,” her mother said heaving a deep sigh. Then she looked directly at Dylan and smiled a sad smile. “I was only twenty when I married your father and just a little older than you are now when he died.”

Dylan sat very still. Her mother never talked about her father.

“When he died, he was still flawless in my eyes. We still had that perfect love, before harsh reality sets in. And then we had you, and we were the perfect family. And then well, after he died, I guess I just ... broke.” She looked at Dylan. “And sometimes I wonder whether maybe I broke you too.”

“No ...”

“I do know I would do some things differently if I had the chance.” She stood and touched the top of Dylan’s head. “I’m looking forward to meeting Mark’s family. Goodnight.”

Dylan watched her mother as she headed for the bedroom. Dylan looked very much like her, except that her mother was leaner and had cut her hair very short and even now, unlike Dylan, she almost never smiled.

Dylan lay in the dark for several hours, long after the lights

under the bedroom door were turned off. She tried to relax but realized that her hands were balled into fists at her sides. There was so much more she wanted to talk with her mother about but knew they likely never would. Having her so close—mere feet between them—yet still so far away was as frustrating and unsettling as it had always been. Their conversation had been barely that. Strangers might have shared more.

If she had had a different mother she would have told her that though she loved Mark and didn't care about his money, she wasn't sure getting married was the right thing. She would have admitted that there was still so much she wanted to do on her own and learn about herself first, but that loving Mark and having him love her back was like a mistake the universe had made, a gift it had given her that was worth far too much, but one that she could not possibly give back. If she had a different mother, she would have told her that even if the timing was wrong, and even if she was terrified and wasn't sure she knew how to be what he might need, someone like Mark was certain never to happen to her again.

It was almost one a.m. when Dylan gave up on those pointless thoughts and slid her feet into her sneakers; and without bothering to change, she crept out of the apartment and down to the street where she caught a cab.

When she let herself into the condo, the only light was from the city skyline outside the wall of windows in the living room. Dylan slid off her shoes and went to the bedroom. She could barely make out Mark's sleeping form on the bed and felt her way closer, pulling back the covers and getting in next to him. He mumbled something in his sleep and Dylan slid backwards until she was wedged against his side.

Mark turned and wrapped his arms tight about her waist, pulling toward him and nuzzling her neck, recognizing and drawing her close even in sleep. The feel of him, solid and sure, against her drove all doubt away and made foolish all of those things she thought she would want to tell her mother. Of course she was doing the right thing marrying Mark, of course she was. She would be his wife but she would still be Dylan. A ring and a wedding didn't change that.

.

The weatherman promised sunny and an unseasonably warm seventy-four degrees for their wedding day, but when Dylan awoke that morning it was cold and raining. Ava was next to her on the bed, and sleeping in the other room were Chelsea and Karen, two of her college girlfriends who had flown in to be bridesmaids. She was surprisingly calm, even when she saw the rain. She didn't think about how her "big day" might be ruined or any of those clichés, she instead watched the raindrops hit the glass and smiled, because by nightfall, she would be Mark's wife.

No one had had stronger opinions about the wedding than Mrs. Acosta. She wanted it to be in a Catholic church with Father Arredondo officiating because he'd been Mark's priest since he was a baby. And the reception had to be somewhere "family-oriented" which meant suitable for the guests to bring their babies and children. And Dylan had to wear a white dress, not an off-white or ecru dress.

This last request was made while Dylan, Mark and Miri were sitting with her at the kitchen table eating breakfast and at the mention of white dresses Mark had winked at Dylan and taken his plate of food into the living room to watch television with his brothers. Dylan had stifled a smile and looked down into her own food, wondering whether it was possible that Mrs. Acosta had missed the constant sexual tension between them. It was fine to insist on a white dress just so long as she didn't think it *meant* anything.

Since there was so little time to plan, Dylan given in and hired a planner who found a restaurant called Paraíso that could cater all the food, including lots of Dominican favorites and fit all two hundred of their guests. The entire morning, as she was primed and polished by her friends, Dylan was in a happy haze, drinking the mimosas Karen kept making and staring out the window at the rain. By three o'clock, the rain had let up and by four, she and her girls were in the car heading uptown. At five, she was walking toward Mark in the perfect white dress that Mrs. Acosta, Miri and Ava had chosen for her, looking into his eyes and feeling the strength of his love for her. Everything that had come before was wedding jitters she

decided. Looking into his eyes, she was surer of him than she had been of anything else in her life up until that moment.

By five-twenty, she was Mrs. Mark Acosta.

Paraíso had exactly the rustic and relaxed atmosphere that met all of Mrs. Acosta's requirements— children ran between the tables as their parents ate dinner and instead of the stuffy speeches at weddings Dylan had been to in the past, the mike was open for anyone who wanted to, to give their best wishes to the bride and groom. Mark's brothers each gave boozy speeches about how much they loved their brother but how grateful they were that Dylan had taken him off their hands.

Various childhood friends followed, speaking almost entirely in Spanish, finally prompting Mark to take the mike himself and tell the guests "my wife does not speak Spanish yet, so please speak English so she can understand you." It was the first time Dylan heard him say the words "my wife." It had slipped off his tongue so naturally that it made her blush with pleasure.

When all the speeches seemed to be done and the evening wore on, their guests became preoccupied with their dinner and the music so Mark pulled Dylan away and into the coat room where they made out like teenagers, secreting themselves among the crowd of damp coats.

He didn't like it. When Dylan opened the door to her suite, Mark literally stopped in his tracks, his mouth partially open as though the greeting he'd intended was stuck in his throat. Dylan put her arms about him and finally he responded, kissing her quickly on the lips and then holding her away from him to look her over. Still he said nothing, finally running his fingers through her newly straightened hair. It now fell well past her shoulder blades in soft, undulating waves with subtle auburn highlights. She had yet to get used to the sight of herself in the mirror having just done it that morning.

Dylan's shoulders sagged. "You hate it," she said. That seemed to have an impact and Mark forced a smile. "No, it's just different." Then he looked down at the three-hundred dollar Chloe jeans and the Manolo Blahnik lace-up ankle boots

Cindy Hernandez had convinced her were sexy. “You look different.”

Dylan leaned into him. “I thought you’d be surprised. That you’d like it.”

“I am surprised,” Mark said, shutting the door behind him.

“But you don’t like it.”

“It’s just that I missed my girl and then I get here and ... you’re some other girl.”

Dylan exhaled.

“Is it permanent?” he ran his fingers through her hair again.

“Until it grows out. It’s longer now,” she offered.

“It was long before, it just wasn’t ... straight.” He said the word as though it tasted unpleasant on his tongue.

“I thought you’d like it,” she said again.

Mark said nothing, just smiled apologetically. For the first time, Dylan looked him over. He looked leaner and stronger from the challenging daily workouts and healthier meals, his hair had grown more. Dylan leaned into him and this time his hug was heartfelt.

Later, when Dylan was lying next to him, her hair fanned out on the pillow, Mark reached over and stroked it.

“Now you look like all the rest of them,” he said.

Dylan sat up, stung. “That wasn’t the point.”

“It wasn’t?”

“No. I wanted to look nice. And to have my hair not like a bird’s nest for a change.” “I thought you looked nice before. I liked your hair exactly the way it was.”

“Okay, can we get past the hair already?” Dylan reached for the shirt Mark had shed earlier and pulled it over her head.

“What’re you doing? Get back here.”

“We’re going to dinner with Cindy and Ray Hernandez.”

Mark groaned. “I’ve spent more than enough time with Ray Hernandez over the last few weeks. And from the looks of that outfit you had on when I got in, you’ve been spending more than enough time with Cindy.”

Dylan said nothing. He was in a bad mood, and probably for reasons that had nothing to do with the fact that her hair was straightened. Tomorrow he would have his first in a three-game series and the pressure had to be tremendous. She twisted her hair and pulled it up into a loose knot; it would



take some getting used to the fact that it was so easily handled. The truth was she wasn't entirely certain she liked it straight either.

"So I'll call Cindy and cancel," she said finally.

"Thank you."

They were in Montreal, Dylan and Ava having flown in just hours ago. When they'd arrived at JFK early that morning practically the entire flight was occupied with Mets families, flying to Canada for the first preseason game. And surprise, surprise they were all staying at the same hotel, recommended by the front office. Scarcely an hour after check-in, Cindy had called and asked whether she could stop by and within minutes was knocking at the door. She looked down in horror at Dylan's Adidas tracksuit and tennis shoes, her eyes running over her hair, which was haphazardly pulled back into a French braid.

*I wanted to be comfortable for the plane ride,* Dylan explained.

*Okay, that's fine. But you cannot let Mark see you like that.*

*He's seen me like this before,* Dylan pointed out, stepping aside to let Cindy in.

*Yes but he's been away for weeks. You need to greet him the way he deserves to be greeted. Not looking like you just wandered in from putting out the trash.*

Dylan glanced over to where Ava was in the sitting room, reading the book she'd brought along. She didn't even seem to register Cindy's presence, but Dylan knew better. By her stillness, it was clear she was taking in every word.

*I actually know a really good stylist here,* Cindy said. *She'll pull you together in no time. And a hair guy who is incredible. When is Mark getting here?*

*I don't know. Later in the afternoon he said.*

*Well then we have time. Let's go.* Cindy already had an arm looped through hers and was pulling her toward the door. Then, as an afterthought she looked over her shoulder. *Want to come, Eva?*

*Ava. And sure, why not?* Ava had tossed aside her book and followed them out.

"Is it okay for you to be here?" Dylan asked Mark now, looking at him still comfortably naked and reclining in bed.

Cindy had taken the dinner cancelation in stride, leading Dylan to believe that Ray had probably voiced some of the same objections as Mark. And it was fine. She'd only agreed to dinner to thank Cindy for taking her out this afternoon. As it was turning out, perhaps thanking her was not what Dylan should be doing.

"Where else would I be?"

"I don't know," she shrugged. "With the game tomorrow, I just wondered."

"I don't want to talk about the game. I don't want to think about the game."

Dylan crawled back into bed and sat crosslegged atop the sheets, reaching out to stroke his head. She didn't actually know what Mark was like during the season, she realized. She didn't know whether he was even-tempered or tense, whether he was confident or insecure before he played. His baseball career up until now had been nothing more than a big idea, a concept. But now, here it was—he was about to play and seemed like a different person. Even now, as she ran her hand gently over this scalp, he had an intense look on his face almost like a scowl and she had the distinct feeling he wanted to pull away from her.

"Do you prefer to be alone before a game?" she asked.

Mark looked at her. "That's what I used to do," he admitted.

"Go off somewhere to clear my head."

Dylan nodded. "It's okay," she said. "If that's what you have to do. I understand."

He reached up and gently tugged on a lock of her hair. "You sure you're okay with that?"

"Of course. Whatever you have to do to play your best."

He put a hand at the back of her neck and pulled her in for a kiss. "Thank you. I know it's a stupid thing but the only voice I try to have in my head during a game is my own. Y'know?"

No, she didn't know. His voice had been in *her* head for weeks, sometimes even crowding out her own. She imagined what he would say about each and every dollar she spent. So no, she didn't know. She was looking for a house for them. Without him. And she didn't know what made sense in terms of price, or how he would want it decorated or any of the stuff regular couples could talk about.

Last night she'd barely gotten a wink of sleep anticipating seeing him and hearing his voice while he held her and told her everything was fine and that she was doing a great job holding down the home-front, the best job she could. He would say he loved her, that he missed her and that all these changes in their life left one thing unchanged—the way they felt about each other.

But instead, just about an hour and a half after he'd gotten there, Mark was dressing to leave. Dylan pursed her lips to prevent herself from begging him not to go. She lifted his shirt over her head and handed it to him so he could put it back on.

"It'll be different afterward," he promised. "I just have to get through this ..."

He raised the tail of his shirt to his face and inhaled it, smiling. "Smells like you."

Dylan returned his smile with a thin one of her own. It felt degrading all of a sudden—to be sitting there naked while he dressed and left her alone in a hotel room. He hadn't breathed a word about wanting to be alone when he was inside her, she thought resentfully. Then she pushed the thought away. This was Mark; her sweet Mark, who always put her first. This time, for the first time, she would have to let him be selfish.

Dylan walked him to the door where he kissed her and was gone. She wanted to cry, thinking about the expectations she had built up her in mind about this reunion. Instead he had come and gone like a ghost.

Ava was still in her own room and sounded surprised to hear from her but came over as soon as Dylan asked.

"What happened?" she demanded, even before she crossed the threshold.

"Well," Dylan handed her a glass of the wine she had just opened. "It seems my husband has an appetite for sex but no actual companionship just before a game."

Ava smothered a laugh. "So, what? He just hit it and left?"

Dylan nodded. "Pretty much."

Ava gulped her wine and was about to sit on the ruffled bed before thinking better of it and choosing the sofa. "Well, everyone knows baseball players have all these weird rituals before games. I guess this is his."

"Well then the obvious question is: who did he used to have sex with before games?"

“Hookers?” Ava suggested, and then seeing the look on Dylan’s face, grew serious. “Look, who cares? You’re his wife. Whoever it was clearly did not capture his interest the way you do.”

“I know that. But to fly all the way here ...”

“Oh! What did he say about the makeover?”

“That’s the other thing. He hated it.”

Ava raised a hand to her mouth. “Ouch.”

“He didn’t say so in as many words but I can’t even describe the look on his face when he first saw me. And then he says something like, ‘Now you look just like Cindy Hernandez’.”

“Well.”

“Yeah,” Dylan agreed. “There’s nothing to say to that, is there?”

As it turned out, a lot of the wives were on their own that evening. Groups of them were in the hotel lobby, dressed as though for dinner and Ava and Dylan ran into Stephanie Alfieri in the hotel bar, drinking a fruity-looking drink all alone.

“They don’t taste quite right when you’re not having them on the beach,” she said as they joined her. She had obviously taken considerable care with her appearance and looked fabulous, but sounded a little tipsy.

“Is Tim with you?” Dylan asked, looking about the bar.

“No. Tim has something to prove. So he’s back with the rest of the team.”

“Well then we’re in the same boat,” Dylan said cheerfully. She patted Stephanie’s arm. “Mark dropped by for about an hour and I haven’t heard from him since.”

Stephanie looked at her. “It’s pretty standard for them to do that—go off to get their game faces— so I hope you’re not feeling badly about Mark.”

Dylan smiled at her, remembering once again why she liked Stephanie as much as she did.

“I’ve read about these pre-game rituals,” Ava said. “Some of them are pretty out there.”

“You’re telling me,” Stephanie said, signaling for the bartender. “I know one wife, who shall remain nameless, who gets her ass kicked before every big game. She shows up in sunglasses or long sleeves to hide the bruises.”

“Ohmigod. Are you serious?”

“You have to understand,” Stephanie said. “For some of these women, being a baseball wife is like a religion and their husbands are their gods. And like all gods, they’re infallible to those who worship them.”

Ava leaned in, clearly fascinated. “Like a cult.”

“Worse,” Stephanie said.

The bartender showed up and they each ordered a drink. Dylan asked for the menu, thinking of the wine she’d had in the suite. Getting something else on her stomach was probably a good idea.

“At least in a cult you all observe the same screwed-up rules. With baseball wives there’s only the illusion that we’re all in the same boat,” Stephanie continued. “But really in every baseball marriage, the rules are very different—some wives accept cheating, or beating, or ... other things. Our own private, lonely dysfunctions.”

Dylan thought about the rumors of Tim Alfieri and steroids. Was that what Stephanie accepted?

“Let’s get a table and have a real meal,” Stephanie suggested her tone more lighthearted. “I heard the seafood here is amazing.”

They had a four-course seafood feast and two bottles of wine that amounted to a six-hundred dollar tab that Dylan decided not to flinch at. She grabbed for the check before Stephanie could and pulled out her Amex card, handing it to the waiter.

“Thanks for treating,” Stephanie said. “And for the great company.” She raised her glass to Ava and Dylan.

“What are we toasting?”

They all looked up at the sound of the familiar voice. Cindy Hernandez was standing there with an impassive look on her face. It was only then that Dylan remembered that hours earlier she’d canceled dinner plans with the Hernandezes.

“Cindy. Hi!” Her voice, too shrill, only made her sound guilty.

“Where’s Mark?” Cindy asked.

Standing a few feet away, talking on his cell phone was Ray Hernandez. He was partially turned away from them and looked to be very engrossed in his conversation. His tan was a perfect bronze and Dylan was struck anew by his model good looks. Even from a distance and under these innocuous

circumstances, he looked like a superstar.

“He had to leave,” Dylan said. “So this dinner was kind of a last minute thing.”

Cindy smiled but it did not reach her eyes. “Anyway. You ladies have a wonderful evening.” She turned on her heel and walked away.

“She’s annoyed because her husband’s probably talking to his mistress with her standing ten feet away.”

“His *what?*”

“Ray Hernandez has a nineteen-year-old girlfriend. One of many girlfriends I might add, in Queens,” Stephanie said. “Open secret.”

“*Nineteen?*” Ava said. “Jesus.”

“Well she is stunning, so I’ll give him that. She’s an intern in the front office. Apparently he’s paying her way through school, pays her family’s mortgage, bought her little brother some ridiculous over-the-top sixteenth birthday party ... it was all everyone could talk about for weeks.”

“Somehow Cindy doesn’t seem like the type to put up with that,” Dylan said.

“You’d be surprised.” Stephanie emptied her glass of the remainder of her wine. “He is what you would call *chronically* unfaithful. I think she accepts it as part of the deal.”

Although she was supposed to be enjoying the gossip, Dylan felt her heart sink with each new detail. She actually liked Cindy. Under the patina of perfection, there was something there, a vulnerability that Dylan could relate to.

“Is there anything else worth doing around here?” she asked brightly. “The night is young!”

“Funny you should ask,” Stephanie said. “There *is* this one place ...”

“Hold that thought while I go to the ladies’ room,” Dylan said. She was a little tipsy but somehow managed to find her way. Washing her hands in the sink, she glanced up and was momentarily startled at what she saw, feeling for a moment what Mark must have felt when he opened that door. She looked almost completely different with her hair straight and had already begun to adopt the attendant mannerisms, flipping it back when it cascaded down the side of her face.

*Good god, what the hell had she done?*

French-Canadians sure knew how to party. The club Stephanie suggested looked from all outward appearances like a tame, lounge-style establishment where you might enjoy a bottle of wine and quiet conversation. In fact, it was the scene of weekend bacchanals, where ski bums, socialites and celebrities mixed with regular folks, dancing to loud, pounding house and techno music. Within minutes of getting there, Stephanie, Dylan and Ava were drinking with a trio of tow-headed Scandinavians who barely spoke a word of English and between dances, downing shots of Stoli.

Several hours in, Ava was making out with one of the Frenchmen and Stephanie was swaying to the beat with another. The third and most reserved of the three, an architect named Hans, was sitting next to Dylan, occasionally leaning in to make conversation.

“You’re American,” he said. “Is that so?”

“Yes. American.”

“I can tell,” Hans said watching as Ava and his friend kissed on the dance floor. “So fearless.”

Dylan smiled at him. *Fearless*. If only that were true.

“What’s this all about?”

Mark dropped a newspaper onto the table between them and Dylan blinked, trying to get the sleep out of her eyes. She was barely awake, having spent the evening after the game at a dinner that seemed to go on forever, with three other players and their spouses. At least Mark had stayed the night with her in the suite though he had been up at the crack of dawn for a workout.

“What’s what?” Dylan reached for the orange juice carafe, brushing the newspaper out of the way.

She had crawled out of bed only to answer the door when their room service breakfast had arrived. “This.”

Mark held the paper up in front of her. It was folded over to a page that depicted what appeared

to be society events all around the city, where people dressed to the nines sipped champagne and looked fabulous doing it. There, in the cluster of photos was one clear picture of her, Stephanie Alfieri and Ava standing outside the nightclub with

the three guys they'd met. Ava's arm was about her Scandinavian who had a hand raised as though hailing a cab. Dylan was standing just slightly apart from the group, looking distractedly at something out of the frame and Stephanie was captured in the middle of what appeared to be animated chatter with the other two guys. The headline was in French, so Dylan did not understand it, but one word was perfectly comprehensible: Mets.

Dylan took the paper from him and studied the picture more closely, finally looking up. How would anyone even have known who they were? But she supposed that was the job of the paparazzi; to stake out hot-spots and later figure out who was who. By now Mark had taken a seat across from her and was spreading his napkin on his lap. He wasn't speaking, so she knew he was pissed.

"Stephanie and Ava and I had dinner and then we went to this ..."

"Craig King gave it to me in the gym this morning," Mark interrupted her. "You know what *his* wife was doing the same night you were out getting drunk in the club? He was more than happy to share it with me."

Dylan shook her head mutely.

"She was at a benefit dinner for a burn unit." Mark lifted his eyes to hers, waiting.

"We weren't drunk ..."

"Why were you even in a club, Dylan? You know how that makes me look? You know how that makes *you* look?"

She swallowed. "I didn't know anyone *was* looking."

"*¡Como no!* Who would be looking?" he said, sarcastic.

"You're the one people are looking for," Dylan said carefully.

"If I want to go let off some steam ..."

"What steam, Dylan? I had the most important game of my life the next day. And you need to let off some steam!" He had never raised his voice to her before.

"Yes. Because maybe this is a little much for me as well! Maybe I didn't count on it being like this, you being so far away. Maybe Stephanie Alfieri understands what it's like to ..."

"Stephanie Alfieri is notorious. She understands nothing. She



has two DUIs, she shows up at events drunk. Is that the kind of person you want to associate with?”

Dylan looked at him evenly. “I like her. She’s genuine, which is a lot more than I can say for some of the other women. And if I remember correctly, you didn’t like that I was turning into Cindy Hernandez.”

“At least she knows how to represent her husband.”

“Represent her husband.”

“*¡Si!*”

Dylan fell silent and they stared at each other. Mark finally looked away, reaching over to help himself to some eggs and bacon, pouring himself a large glass of juice. Dylan felt tears rising to her eyes and wiped them away quickly.

“You know why I’m good at what I do?” Mark said, not looking at her. “Discipline. People like to think it’s talent, but it’s not. Talent is maybe ten percent of it.”

Still she said nothing, trying to swallow back the lump in her throat.

“If you want to see raw talent, Matt has that—he was always a much better natural athlete. But y’know what he doesn’t have? He doesn’t have focus and he doesn’t have discipline. Always distracted, always sidetracked by the next shiny, new thing. That’s the difference between us.”

Mark finally looked at her again and she nodded, this time not bothering to wipe the tears away as they rolled down her cheeks. He was comparing her to Matt. She was the unfocused, undisciplined one. And she supposed Cindy Hernandez, the perfect baseball wife, was the opposite.

“Whatever happened to law school? To these plans you had to take Miri to see some colleges?”

“I’ve been ...”

“Busy. I heard. I got a call from Wade.”

Wade was their business manager; someone Mark had hired to help manage their finances.

“He said you spent seventeen thousand dollars in Bergdorf’s?”

Dylan blanched. She had been meaning to tell him about that. It was a shopping trip that had gotten a little out of control because she’d gone with Cindy. And because Cindy didn’t look at prices, neither had she. It was only when she got to the register and heard the total that she realized the damage. And

of course, by then it was far too late. It wasn't as though she could put everything back; that would have been too embarrassing. And why had Wade called Mark about this?

"It won't happen again," Dylan said, reaching out to touch Mark's hand.

"I don't care about the money," he said, pulling away impatiently. "I care about where you seem to be spending your time these days. *Shopping*. And on this ..." He lifted a handful of her straightened hair and let it drop again.

Mark seemed not to notice her tears, or not to care. He was *that* mad.

"So what happened with these guys?" he asked inclining his head toward the newspaper photo.

"You really have to ask me that?" Dylan said.

Mark started on his breakfast, eating with gusto, as though he hadn't just intimated that she may have committed adultery. Dylan's mouth felt as dry as paper and she had no appetite whatsoever. After a moment she left him at the table and went in to take a shower.

When she got out, Mark was on the phone making plans to rejoin the team. He looked up as she entered and beckoned her over. Without missing a beat in his conversation, he pulled her towel from about her and dropped it on the floor so she was standing naked in front of him. He didn't touch but just stared, as though trying to find what was elemental about her. She waited until he was done with his phone call.

"I'm sorry," she said, not moving to cover herself. "I *want* to represent you well. I don't want you to ... it won't happen again. The nightclub was a bad idea. I know how important the game was, and I should have thought ..."

"Dylan ..." Mark looked up at her and his eyes were almost pleading, almost sad. "Even in the minors, there were people ... groupies, hangers-on, and there were players and family members who got caught up.

"They got swallowed up by stuff. And in the majors, it's a hundred times worse. Pedro warned me. Wilfredo warned me. People get swallowed up, and when they get spit back out, they're completely different. I just want you to be careful. You understand?"

She wasn't completely sure she did, but she nodded anyway,

wanting to assuage whatever his worry might be.

Mark kissed her on her belly-button and her stomach fluttered as though inside her a million tiny butterflies had taken flight. He opened his palms on her hips, squeezing her, pulling her closer, running his tongue across her, just above her hip bone. Dylan crouched so she could kiss him, and Mark put his hands on either side of her face, kissing her back almost desperately, as though he thought she might slip away.

# 11

Mrs. Acosta was stirring something in the huge pot on the stove and swatted Matt away with a kitchen towel when he tried to look inside. Dylan was sitting at the kitchen table with Miri, desultorily chopping onions and bell peppers. She'd awoken early that morning with the urge to go for a run but Mark had asked her not to go running in the park on her own unless it was the middle of the afternoon and she'd agreed that was probably wise. And besides, it was still a little cold out most mornings. So she'd gone to the gym instead and afterwards, too hyped up to sit around in the condo, had decided to go uptown to her in-laws'.

Her father-in-law had opened the front door and pulled her into a bear hug as though he hadn't seen her in ages though it had only been a week. He was a tall man with a complexion the color of molasses and the warmest eyes Dylan had ever seen, surrounded by wrinkles she had no doubt were from smiling rather than aging. He called her *mi amor* and kissed her on both cheeks as he let her in but by the way he looked at her, Dylan could tell he knew something was wrong. Mrs. Acosta was already cooking when Dylan went in to greet her.

"Here," she'd said. "Sit. Have something to eat."

Although she'd already started on the Sunday dinner, she made Dylan eggs and fried plantains, setting it on the table in front of her with a large mug of strong Dominican coffee. Mrs. Acosta was not one to talk much as she cooked but her presence was a comfort as she moved about the kitchen, getting her spices together, cutting and cleaning pieces of chicken, peeling vegetables. At different times, Matt or Peter would wander in to get something out of the fridge and eventually Miri came in and sat at the kitchen table reading a book and drinking her own mug of coffee. No one remarked on the fact that Dylan had appeared unannounced. In fact, they seemed to expect it and she wondered whether all this time they'd been curious that she didn't come over more often.

So now she was helping with chopping vegetables and was happy that no one asked her questions or tried to engage her in conversation, they just slid her more onions and peppers when she was done.

After she'd done all she could in the kitchen, she wandered upstairs to the room that Mrs. Acosta still called Mark's room. It was at the end of the hall, one door over from the room Matt and Peter used to share when they were kids, two doors from Miri's room and at the opposite end of the hall from the master bedroom. Peter had the basement as an apartment now with Xiomara and the baby. Even though Mark had offered, no one seemed in a hurry to move out of the neighborhood or into a bigger place. The closeness seemed to suit them and more and more it suited Dylan as well.

In Mark's room, all his trophies lined the walls on shelves that Mr. Acosta had put up. There were more than twenty trophies and pictures of Mark from the local paper and papers that covered his time in the minors. Over his bed was an almanac with pictures of famous Dominican baseball players and their stats. The bed was covered with a New York Yankees comforter and pillows. One pillow was covered with a Yankees shirt instead of a pillowcase. The first time he'd taken her to this room Dylan had noted all the Yankee paraphernalia and turned to look at Mark with raised eyebrows, her head cocked to one side.

*If you tell anyone about this, I'll say you made the whole thing up,* he said with a grin on his face.

Dylan lay across the bed and stared up at the ceiling. The breakfast, the sound of Mark's family, *her* family moving about the house downstairs, the warmth of the room all made her feel sleepy all of a sudden, so she closed her eyes.

Dinner was the usual raucous affair with Mrs. Acosta presiding over a table of at least ten people—her own family and at least one stray person from the neighborhood. This time it was Wilfredo, Mark's childhood baseball coach who had stopped by. Dylan had woken up late in the afternoon when Miri had come knocking on the door. She stretched and went to wash her face before the meal. It felt like she had just eaten but she knew that would not fly as an excuse for not joining the rest of the family.

Her place at the table was next to Miri who was holding the baby on her lap and rocking back and forth to keep him calm. But he'd spent his entire life thus far in the middle of the organized chaos of the family and the noise didn't seem to have any effect on him at all. He happily gurgled and played with a strand of his aunt's hair. Across the table, Matt and Peter had already begun eating until their mother protested loudly that the prayer hadn't been said. So Mr. Acosta led them in prayer and after everyone made the sign of the cross, the eating and talking began anew.

Dylan helped herself to some of the tossed salad and a piece of chicken and began picking at it. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Mr. Acosta watching her. Then the phone rang and the usual debate about whether they should answer it during the meal ensued.

"It could be Mark," Miri said.

That settled it. Mrs. Acosta went to answer in the kitchen. She was gone only a few minutes before she returned and took her seat.

"Dylan, *azúcar*," she said. "Mark for you."

Dylan almost tripped getting out of her seat and Peter laughed at her. "Easy there," he said.

Dylan took a deep breath and went into the kitchen to answer the phone.

"Tried you early this morning," Mark said. "Did you stay over last night?"

"No, I was at the gym."

"How's the house coming along?"

"Fine, I guess. I haven't been up there in awhile. Cindy Hernandez found me a decorator. He charges by the square foot." Dylan told him the amount and waited for his reaction.

"Is that how that works?" Mark asked. "They charge per square foot to decorate?" "Apparently," Dylan said. "And the actual stuff is additional of course. So that's just his fee."

"That's more than my father ever made a year," Mark said.

"I know," Dylan said quickly. "It's crazy. Maybe I should do this myself."

"No. Don't worry about it. This is new territory for both of us, right? So talk to Cindy Hernandez or one of the other wives and make sure it's reasonable then do what you gotta do."

“Do you think Cindy Hernandez even *remembers* what reasonable is? Maybe reasonable is what we say it is.”

“Okay, so offer him what you think is reasonable.”

“If I did that he’d be insulted. And I don’t want to insult him; he’s been really nice to me.”

“It’s his job to be nice to you, Dylan. But listen, it’s up to you. Do what you think is best. So what else is going on?”

He’d lost interest already. It was a conversation that Dylan had dreaded, telling Mark about the exorbitant sum she was thinking of spending on decorating their new house. They were already up in the tens of thousands and she hadn’t even selected one stick of furniture or a single swatch of fabric.

“Well you have to have a number in mind for how much we should spend on the whole project,” Dylan persisted. “I mean, after we pay Stephen, we should think about how much we want to spend on furnishing and there’s the poolhouse as well.”

Mark said nothing.

“Mark, are you there?”

“Yeah I’m here. I don’t care how much you spend on furniture, okay? I’m sure you’ll use your best judgment. I miss you and I want to hear how you are.”

“I’m fine,” she lied. It was the first time she’d ever told him an outright lie.

The truth was she was far from fine.

Last week, she’d gone out to lunch with Stephanie Alfieri and been a little late getting back. She’d dashed up the stairwell and burst into her office to find Claire, the legal assistant coordinator standing over her desk writing her a note on a Post-it pad.

*We need to have a conversation*, Claire said, folding her arms.

*Okay*, Dylan had put down her purse and shrugged off her coat. *Now’s as good a time as any for me if you’d like.*

Claire indicated her chair and Dylan sat before she realized that Claire herself did not intend to sit. So she was standing over her as she spoke.

*I’m beginning to think that this job is no longer consistent with your lifestyle*, she began. She paused and pursed her thin lips, looking for a moment so much like a prissy schoolmistress that Dylan almost smiled. But it was impossible to smile when

she knew what was coming.

*What lifestyle is that?* Dylan asked.

*Dylan, you're late from lunch more often than not,* Patricia said. *And you have guests.*

The previous week, Stephen had stopped by unannounced with a large book of swatches and caused quite the stir at the reception desk because he was wearing a Kelly green suit, pale yellow shirt and polka dot tie with pointy-toed brown loafers. Stephen was the interior designer Cindy had introduced her to the previous week to decorate the new Westchester County house. It seemed some of the associates, who must not have ever ventured south of Times Square (unless they were going to the Financial District) were fascinated that someone would dress this way who was not in costume.

*And so I think you may want to reassess whether this position is in line with your long-term goals.*

*It's exactly in line with my goals,* Dylan said. *I plan to go to law school.*

Claire smirked. *Really.*

*Yes, really.*

*Perhaps that's your present intention ...*

*It is my ultimate intention. Nothing has changed that.*

*Well, be that as it may. In the meantime, I have to make sure that the work you're currently doing is up to par, and that you don't bring any undue disruption to the work of others in the firm.*

*I don't think anyone in the firm will say that I've brought undue disruption.*

*You're wrong,* Claire said with satisfaction. *Some people have said it.*

Dylan leaned back, deflating. *Who?*

She couldn't think of a single person other than Claire herself who would even suggest such a thing. She had good relationships with all her peers, and Grant was as much of a champion on her behalf as he had ever been. She searched her memory for anything that could indicate that someone had changed toward her and found nothing.

*I'm not at liberty to say.*

*Am I ... am I being let go?* Dylan asked.

*No,* Claire said as though she was being magnanimous. *But*



*I'm going to give you some time to think about whether you want to remain here. To think about whether that's the best thing for all concerned.*

*All whom? The only person 'concerned' would be me.*

*I'm sure it seems that way—that the only person is you—but I assure you ...*

*That is not what I meant,* Dylan said.

Claire blinked. *Well, you give some thought to what I've said and let me know.*

*There's nothing to think about,* Dylan snapped. *I'm not prepared to quit my job.*

*Nevertheless. I'll give you some time to reconsider. Talk it over with ... your husband.*

She turned on her heel and walked out of the room, leaving Dylan trembling in her seat.

As soon as she'd gotten home after work, she headed straight for the kitchen and opened a bottle of chardonnay, settling onto the sofa with a glass that was more than half full. The first sip caused her to grimace. It was a little too sharp a taste but she took another sip anyway and reached for the phone.

Things had been a little different, that was for sure. Her appearance was different, with her hair and all, and her clothes were definitely of a sharper more polished cut. And she got mani-pedis now and was waxed and buffed and threaded and coiffed at least once a week. But she felt like the same person; she *was* the same person. Why couldn't people see that?

Although her urge was to grab a bottle of wine and have her way with it, she instead grabbed her phone. Ava answered right away but sounded distracted and hurried.

*I'm still at work,* she explained. *What's wrong?*

*I think I may have to quit my job,* Dylan said.

As soon as the words were out, she burst into tears.

And she had quit. The very next day. Grant was perplexed and asked a lot of questions that Dylan managed to deflect. Claire looked triumphant. Dylan just felt defeated. She knew she was surrendering, but couldn't muster up the energy to fight. There were too many balls in the air and something had to be dropped, and she was damned if what dropped would be her duty as Mark's wife.

And it wasn't as though she *needed* to work, she consoled

herself later, and she could use all her time to concentrate on other things like taking Miri on a college tour. She could decorate the beautiful new 7,500 square-foot home she and Mark had bought in Westchester. But being without something gainful to do all day on most days was tough to get used to.

She was aching to talk things over with Mark but he was in the thick of the season now, and she didn't want to burden him with it. As it was, she still hadn't gotten around to confessing that she'd completely missed the deadline for getting all her paperwork in for law school. If she was set on going there, she would have to wait until the fall to apply again for next year.

"Dylan?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm still here," she said.

In the next room she heard everyone's voices amplify and then there was a new female voice greeting everyone. On the other end of the line, Mark seemed to have heard as well.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Someone came in."

Dylan peeked around the corner and into the dining room where standing on one side of the table, her hand on Wilfredo's shoulder was Patricia, Mark's ex-fiancée, dressed in jeans and a yellow parka, her auburn hair pulled back into a messy bun at her nape. Even though she wasn't wearing any makeup, Dylan recognized her right away from the photo in the paper. She was still very pretty and although by no means fat, she looked like someone who needed to be constantly attentive about her weight, Dylan noted with satisfaction.

Before Dylan had a chance to retreat into the kitchen again, Patricia looked up and their eyes met.

"Dylan. *Dylan*." Mark was repeating her name over and over again.

"I'll call you back," she said.

"Why? What's . . . ?"

She hung up on him and went out to join the family.

"Hello," Patricia said stepping forward with an outstretched hand. She seemed a little nervous. "I'm Patricia."

*Pa-TREE-See-AH*. She said her name with the Spanish pronunciation, which made it sound beautiful and exotic. Dylan noted that she had large and expressive almond-shaped eyes.

“I’m Dylan.”

“Yes,” Patricia smiled. “I know. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

Dylan tilted her head to one side. “Have you?”

Her tone was combative, surprising even her. Across the dining table, she saw Miri’s eyes open wide.

“Are you here for dinner?” Dylan asked, smiling. “I’m sure we can make room.”

“No,” Patricia blushed. “I’m here for my father, who likes to have two Sunday dinners. And his second one is ready at home, so my mother sent me to get him.”

She walked back to her father’s side and pressed a hand into his shoulder. Dylan resumed her seat at the table and picked up her knife and fork, beginning to eat once again as though Patricia wasn’t there. Around her, everyone else began eating as well. Patricia and Wilfredo stayed only a few minutes more and Dylan joined everyone else in wishing them a cheerful goodbye. Once they were out the door, Miri leaned closer and nudged Dylan in the ribs.

“Way to piss on the fire hydrant, Dylan,” she whispered, sounding impressed.

Dylan said nothing. Marking territory was important, after all.

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Even though she was no longer working, there seemed to be almost an endless number of things to do. Dylan started her mornings at the gym, having recently gotten into yoga, followed by a massage and then lunch with her decorator Stephen, Cindy, or Stephanie. Once in awhile, if she wasn’t too busy at work, Ava met her for a quick coffee. And the afternoon was spent working on details for the decorating project. Dylan spent countless hours, driving about the five boroughs with Stephen chasing down an elusive fabric or perfect little coffee table that he said was essential for the look she wanted.

Although it would have been possible in at least some cases to have things shipped, it gave her a sense of purpose to drive to Darien with Stephen just to visit a master craftsman and watch him carve and polish a piece of oak into what would eventually become an elegant side table for her new dining room. She didn’t think about the cost of the project anymore;

she knew it was ridiculous. And since Mark was no help, she just figured out a spending ceiling on her own and told Stephen to let her know when they were three-quarters of the way there.

The bitter cold had begun to give way to more fair days, and Dylan waited for her mood to lighten, the way it did every spring. But Mark's schedule had begun to heat up. He was playing a different team almost every other day, sometimes not calling her for as many as three evenings. And when he did call, he was quieter, distracted and sometimes a little short with her. He was posting great numbers and so far had more than lived up to the expectations people had of him, but still, he was a different, more moody man than she was accustomed to.

On Sundays, Dylan went to the Bronx for the day, arriving just before breakfast and staying well past dinner. Sometimes she fell asleep in Mark's old bedroom and awoke on Monday morning to the sound of traffic just outside the window and the pleasant noises of the family getting ready for the day. But Mark was her anchor and though his family was wonderful, she felt unmoored without him. Without him to help her make sense of things, she felt like she was making it all up as she went along.

Dylan paced the living room back and forth, chiding herself for her nervousness. Mark was due any moment, having insisted that she wait for him at the apartment rather than coming to meet his flight. His indifference about the press hadn't subsided, even though they were almost universally complimentary about his performance. So he planned not to do them any favors by giving them any what he called "money shots" of him greeting his new wife, or doing anything remotely associated with his personal life.

*All I ever agreed to do was play baseball, he said. For the rest of it, they've got Ray Hernandez.*

But even Dylan knew that was naïve. While he'd been away, she'd had her share of run-ins with photographers. There were a few who popped up every now and then to get shots of her as

she shopped or ate lunch. Most of the pictures never surfaced anywhere, but there had been a couple. The narrative they were beginning to construct was clear—that she was enjoying her new husband’s wealth a little too much. Anyone who knew her knew the truth – that she was decorating their new house and wanted it done by the time Mark got home—but it didn’t matter, the implication that she was a gold-digger still stung.

As soon as he got in they were going to have a quiet dinner alone and then head over to his parents’. That visit was likely to last very late into the evening or even later so they planned to drive up to the Westchester house in the morning. The decorating job was complete and she had arranged for almost all of their stuff to be moved a couple days ago. They would keep the condo as an *pied-à-terre*. Stephen, the decorator’s fee alone had been a whopping seventy-three thousand dollars and since he’d had to sign off on it, Dylan knew Mark was aware of the cost, but so far he hadn’t breathed a word.

In fact, he hadn’t breathed a word about any of the spending she’d done—not the increasingly frequent trips to Bergdorf’s that Cindy talked her into, nor the new trainer, nor the lunches or the obscenely expensive upkeep on her new hairdo. The only time money had come up at all was when he asked her to find out how he would go about paying for Miri’s tuition. She had gotten into Columbia and Mark was so proud of her he wanted to pre-pay her entire four years’ tuition.

The phone startled her and she jumped. It was Ernesto, the doorman. She’d asked him to call up when Mark entered the building. Dylan took a quick look at herself in the mirror. Her hair was a little different since the last time Mark had seen her, in a kinky curl that was a fair approximation of what it had looked like before she straightened it. Except now, it cost three-hundred dollars to look natural. She was wearing jeans and a white tank with a gold choker, deliberately not dressing up this time around. She took a deep breath, wondering why she was so on edge.

When she opened the door, Mark was standing there smiling at her, his huge leather bag at his feet, poised with his keys in

hand. Saying nothing, he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her, and Dylan felt her earlier trepidation melt away.

“How was the flight?” she asked when he let her go.

Mark kicked his bag inside and shut the door then looked at her, his head tilted to one side, a smile playing about his lips.

“How was the *flight*?” he repeated. Then he shrugged. “No idea. Long.”

He pulled her close again and began working on the button of her jeans, obviously having no patience for the preliminaries.

“Mark, wait,” Dylan laughed. “We have dinner reservations remember?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Mark said.

“No I’m not kidding. We’re having dinner and then going to the Bronx. Remember I told you I was making a reservation at ...”

“I remember. But you know my mother’s going to have enough food to feed the whole neighborhood, so ...” he unfastened the button and began pulling her jeans down and over her hips, “... I’d like to make love to my wife. If you don’t mind.”

Dylan looked up at him. There had to be another word for this. ‘Love’ didn’t quite cover it; no one else in the history of womankind had ever felt anything even approaching what she felt for this man.

“I don’t mind,” she said quietly.

“Good.” Mark picked her up, slung her over his shoulder and headed for the bedroom. Once there, he dropped her on the bed and stood over her, unfastening his belt and dropping his pants, and shuffling comically toward her, like a penguin. Dylan laughed as he fell forward on top of her. She cradled his head against her chest as he inhaled her.

“You smell so good,” he said. “Much better than the hotel rooms, stinking locker room, disgusting dug-out with chewing tobacco everywhere...”

“That’s a relief. To smell better than the dug-out,” Dylan pointed out, laughing.

“I missed you is what I’m trying to say.” Mark raised her tank top and nibbled across her stomach.

Dylan remembered in a rush what had been making her

nervous. She still hadn't told him about not going to law school in the fall. A couple weeks ago when she'd broken it to him that she'd quit her job, he hadn't had much of a reaction. He didn't like her working with Grant anyway. But law school would be something else entirely. He'd already lectured her in Montreal about focus and dedication and this pretty much proved she had neither. A knot formed in the pit of her stomach.

Mark was tugging at the waistband of her jeans and she instinctively lifted her hips to allow him to take them off. With it he removed her underwear so she was naked from the waist down. He nuzzled her between the legs and Dylan felt a pulsing heat begin there as her body anticipated receiving him, but Mark was in no hurry and raised his head, resting it on her stomach.

"I dream about this," he said, running his fingers down her hip. "When I'm in some hotel room in some city far away from home. I dream about being with you, just like this."

"Are you telling me I'm a dream come true?" she teased.

"Except for all the scheduling, you're pretty damn perfect."

"What're you talking about?" Dylan stiffened.

To her disappointment, Mark sat up, so she did as well.

"Dinner plans with guys from the team. The housewarming thing. All these events this week. I keep getting email and calls from Corey about you putting stuff on my schedule. What's gotten into you lately?"

"The other wives ..."

"I don't *care* what the other wives do, Dylan. Just make sure you leave time for us. For family."

Maybe she had gone overboard a little bit. But Cindy Hernandez had explained to her that the big endorsements didn't just fall from the sky. If you wanted your husband to get calls from the marquee names, you had to make sure he was out there, being photographed, seen attending events.

"Are you upset about the housewarming?" she asked carefully.

"I'm not upset, Dylan, but *I* haven't even seen the house. And now I have to think about entertaining people there. How many did you invite anyway?"

"I got a guest list from ..."

"Cindy Hernandez," Mark finished for her.

“Yes.”

“What about my family? My friends.”

“Of course, Mark. I asked Miri and we made sure we included everyone you would want there.” “How many people are we talking about?”

“Three hundred and fifty or so.”

Mark leaned in toward her, his eyes open wide in disbelief.

“*What?*”

“There was no way to get it down to less than that.”

“Yes there was. Keep it to family only. Close friends.”

“And no one from the Mets.”

“I could’ve lived with that,” he nodded, his eyes searching hers. “Could you?”

“Of course,” she said, looking away.

Mark studied her for a moment and seemed to decide either that he believed her, or that he didn’t care anymore. He reached out and pulled her tank top over her head. He paused for moment, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“You’ve lost weight,” he said.

“I’ve been working out with a trainer,” Dylan said. “I told you that.”

For a moment, Mark surveyed her naked frame and Dylan thought he looked troubled. She reached out to him and smoothed a hand over his face.

“Baby, what is it?”

She felt self-conscious, and fought the urge to cover herself. Mark ran a hand over her rib-cage, over her breasts, taking her in. He gave her a smile of reassurance, but she could tell that whatever it was that had initially disturbed him, was still not resolved in his mind.

He finished undressing and pulled her against him, just holding her to his chest for a moment, then turning his head to kiss her. Dylan could feel his erection against her hip, and suddenly wanted nothing more than for him to be inside her. She moved astride him and without waiting for her own readiness, lowered herself onto him, pressing her hips into his, bearing the discomfort for the sake of driving away the doubt in his eyes.



## 12

The house was beyond anything Dylan would ever have dreamt could belong to her. She walked through the rooms with Mark and Ava, taking it all in. The property was a six-bedroom colonial on four acres of land, surrounded by lush grounds with a pool out back in the shade of impeccably manicured foliage. The poolhouse had been converted to a gym to accommodate Mark's workouts while he was home.

"This. Is. Amazing," Ava said taking in the family room.

It was decorated in cool colors with Arts-and-Crafts era pieces that Dylan knew would be comfortable enough for the Acostas to feel at home. Everything was brand new but looked slightly worn and lived-in. Stephen had even taken the trouble of draping antique afghans over the back of the sofas in the reading room.

Upstairs the bedrooms were all decorated with the perfect balance of comfort and opulence, but the master suite was the most impressive of all. It was stark white contrasted by an enormous, custom-made sleigh-bed in a honey-toned mahogany that was the complement to the dark wood floors. The fireplace opposite the bed was flanked by twin white armchairs between which there was a plush white rug that begged you to dive into it.

The master bath was equally inviting. Stephen had extended the pale palate there as well, and everything, even the towels and fixtures were all white. Over the massive claw-foot tub, a picture window showcased the beauty of the grounds, and you could just see the poolhouse, covered on one side by Japanese clematis and flanked by white hollycocks and white tea-rose bushes.

"You did an amazing job, Dylan," Ava said, putting an arm about her. "Didn't she, Mark?"

Mark, who up until that point had appeared dumbfounded, nodded. "Yeah, she did." He turned and pulled Dylan into a hug. "It's beautiful, *amorcita*."

Dylan blushed. "We worked hard on it. I want you to meet

Stephen tonight. He'll be at the party."

"Tell him he did a great job," Mark nodded. "I'm going to go check out that man cave you fixed up for me."

When he left the room, Dylan turned to Ava and let out a sigh of relief.

"Okay, mission accomplished. Maybe now he won't have a heart attack when the final bills come in."

Ava laughed. "Why? How much are we talking about?"

"I'm too embarrassed to say," Dylan admitted.

"Well, you only do something like this once in a lifetime, right? So I'm sure it'll be fine," Ava said sitting on the edge of the tub and looking out into the backyard.

Dylan noticed for the first time how tired her friend looked. They hadn't been spending that much time together lately. Between this mammoth decorating project and Ava's new boyfriend, they hadn't had as many chances to catch up as they used to. That, plus the fact that Dylan had begun venturing out to various benefits around town with Cindy Hernandez, and to the occasional party with Stephanie Alfieri. It wasn't that she'd deliberately excluded Ava, but somehow the two parts of her life seemed to be organically separate. They didn't belong together somehow.

"So," Ava turned to face her again, her voice bright. "What do we need to do to set up for this party tonight?"

"Nothing, really," Dylan said. "Except look cute. The party planners should be here soon and they'll take care of everything. I have someone coming to do hair and make-up for us."

Ava looked disappointed. "But I like doing our hair and make-up."

"Yeah, but I can't do an amateur job tonight. I need to ..." she stopped at the look on Ava's face and realized how what she'd said must have sounded. "I don't mean ..."

"No," Ava held up a hand to stop her. "I understand. I am an amateur. And this is like your first big party, so what the hell? Why not do it up?"

Dylan nodded. "Exactly. And I thought it would be fun. Miri's going to be getting ready here as well, so we'll make a thing out of it. Have mimosas ..."

Ava nodded and smiled but Dylan sensed that she was trying

hard to manufacture enthusiasm.

“I have some outfits you can choose from,” she said, pressing ahead. “I didn’t know what to choose so I got a couple.”

“And we do wear the same size now,” Ava pointed out, looking her over. “I feel like you got really tiny since I saw you last. You’re not on some crazy new diet are you?”

“No,” Dylan said, pleased. “The trainer. And just being careful, you know.”

“You’re losing your ass,” Ava said dryly. “I would lay off for a little while, if I were you. Dominican men like asses.”

Dylan rolled her eyes. “Shut up. Let’s go look at the outfits I got.”

Later, when the house was bustling with the party planner’s staff the Acostas arrived and Dylan took them on the tour, taking pleasure in their exclamations as each room was revealed. Matt and Peter lost interest immediately when they saw Mark’s man-cave and only Mr. and Mrs. Acosta and Miri bothered to follow Dylan through the rest of the house. Then Dylan showed them to the room where they would be staying and hurried down to greet the caterers.

The party was starting in less than three hours and she was beginning to get a fluttery, unsettled feeling in the pit of her stomach. Cindy said the first one was the most important, that it would set the tone for how people viewed you. Dylan had opted for a casual atmosphere, tables set up around the pool and on the lawn just beyond it, with white linens, buffet tables and an open bar. For entertainment, she had hired a Dominican band that Miri told her was popular, and for good measure, she also got a jazz singer. She hoped it wasn’t overkill, that it didn’t look as though she was trying too hard.

Ava was in one of the extra bedrooms relaxing before the party, probably stretched out on the comfortable king-size bed, maybe watching television. It would have been the perfect time for them to catch up, but after an awkward twenty minutes looking over the outfits Dylan had bought, they’d gone their separate ways.

Ava had fingered the delicate fabrics of the Marc Jacobs and D&G dresses Dylan had arranged to be sent over, and had glanced at the price tags. Then she’d smiled and said she thought she was fine wearing the dress she’d brought along.

For a moment, Dylan was embarrassed. Was it thoughtless of her to have displayed her new wealth in this way? With someone else she may have considered that, but not with Ava. They'd never had to take precautions with each other before, never had to be so careful.

Instead of going to Ava's room, she went to find Mark. He was playing a football game on Wii with his brothers, and looked up when she came in.

"Hey," she said. "I need to see what you're wearing."

At that Matt and Peter looked up.

"You're dressing him now?" Peter asked, laughing.

"No," Mark said pointedly, looking at Dylan. "She definitely is *not*."

"You're not planning on wearing jeans are you?"

"I'm not planning anything," Mark said slowly. "I'll open my closet and see what moves me. And that's what I'll wear. Same as I always do."

Dylan considered arguing for a moment, but Mark was definitely not the kind of man who was about to let her boss him around. And if she tried, he would only dig his heels in.

"Okay. Well remember when you make your choice that you're the host, not some guy who's wandered in off the street," she said.

Mark nodded, clearly humoring her. "Okay. I'll keep that in mind."

"Thank you," she said.

Then she headed for the kitchen to make sure the catering staff had everything under control.

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*Perfect .*

That was what Cindy Hernandez had said when she walked in and looked around. She'd taken in the backyard, the decorations and had turned to Dylan with a pleased look on her face. Her protégée had done her proud, her look seemed to say.

"Thank you," Dylan said. "It's been a little nerve-wracking. But I think it's coming together well."

"Where's your handsome husband?" Cindy looked around.

"Probably upstairs still getting ready. Yours?"

Cindy's smile faltered just a fraction. "He's coming on his own

later.”

“Dylan, this is wonderful!”

Cindy and Dylan turned simultaneously to see Stephanie Alfieri entering with her husband Tim. Tim Alfieri was tall, blonde and beefy, with forearms the size of Christmas hams and steely blue eyes. He looked as though he’d come to the party under duress, but managed a smile as Dylan came toward him.

“Where’s the man of the house?” he asked.

“He’ll be down any minute,” Dylan said giving Tim a quick hug. “Thank you both for coming. The bar’s just out back ...”

Dylan dashed upstairs to the master suite where Mark was still sitting on the edge of the bed in his boxer briefs, playing with the remote that was supposed to open the panel above the fireplace and reveal the state-of-art flat screen television. He had dropped a wet towel on the floor at the foot of the bed, which she forced herself not to pick up immediately.

“*Mark!*”

He turned at the sound of her voice.

“Hey,” he said, sounding perfectly relaxed. “How does this thing work? I can’t get it open.”

Dylan grabbed the remote from him and tossed it aside. “I’ll show it to you later. C’mon, we have people downstairs.”

Mark grabbed her wrist, yanked her toward him, and in one swift movement had her pinned beneath him on the bed. His eyelashes were still wet from his shower and he had that look on his face, the look that said he wanted her naked and underneath him; the one that meant he was going to take more time than a little bit to be done with her.

“Mark, *no*,” she said, with finality. “We are not ...”

He heaved a sigh. “They’ve got drinks, they’ve got food ... we don’t need to babysit them too, do we?”

“You promised me you’d be a gracious host ...”

“And what are you prepared to promise *me*?” Mark asked, kissing her along the length of her neck.

Dylan felt her breath quickening. She loved him kissing her like this. She loved him kissing her every way he kissed her. She loved the way he touched her, and the way he looked when she touched him. She felt his hand slide down her thigh and up again, under the hem of the six-hundred and fifty-dollar

Philip Lim dress that was probably being crumpled beyond recognition as he lay atop her.

“Mark,” she protested weakly.

“What?” he slipped a hand along the seam of her underwear—La Perla Misaki briefs, onehundred and fifty dollars—and paused at the crotch. Just as he slid a finger beneath it, and she decided she could probably spare a half hour before going back downstairs, someone shrieked.

“Oh my god! I am *so* sorry!”

Mark rolled lazily away from Dylan and onto his back, looking up at the ceiling for a moment, sighing in defeat, then sitting up and heading into his closet.

“Knock next time, Miri,” he said.

“Hey.” Dylan smoothed her skirt and sat up. “What’s up?”

“Nothing. Just checking to see whether you needed help with anything.”

“Nope. Not unless you want to wrestle your brother into coming downstairs with me.”

“Looked like you were doing a pretty good job wrestling him all by yourself,” Miri stifled a laugh.

She was wearing one of the dresses Dylan had bought with Ava in mind, and she looked beautiful. Dylan would have to remember to keep an eye on her with all the Mets players wandering around, some of them single and looking for trouble. Hopefully they would all be smart enough not to try to make a move on Mark’s baby sister.

“Let’s head down,” Dylan said ignoring the comment. She paused at the door of the suite. “Ten minutes, Mark. I mean it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said from the closet.

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It was true what people said: enjoying a party if you were the host was just about impossible. Everyone seemed to be having a great time, the food was hot and the drinks cold, but Dylan remained hyper-aware. She walked through the crowd, smiling the same smile, trying to look relaxed, making small talk and keeping her ears peeled for snippets of conversation that would tell her a little of what people thought of the house, the food, her skills as a hostess.

Mark was apparently untroubled by the same concerns. She'd seen him about with a beer in hand talking and laughing with some of his teammates, sitting with his parents and once, dancing with his sister. Despite his reluctance to have the party, he had more than lived up to Dylan's demands of him, and was the very picture of the gracious host. In the end he'd chosen to wear jeans despite her asking him not to, but with a pale blue dress shirt, open at the neck and brown loafers. He looked amazing as always; far and away the hottest man there as far as she was concerned.

Once, when she'd taken a moment to watch him as he was deep in debate with a man Dylan didn't recognize, he'd looked up as though he felt her eyes on him. It only took him a moment to spot her, and he smiled and winked at her across the sea of people between them. She'd felt her stomach tighten, and another, lower part of her anatomy twitched in response as well. When the party was over, she would show him just how happy she was with how well he performed his hosting duties this evening.

"Great party," a voice next to her ear said.

Dylan recognized it right away.

"Hello, Ray," she said, keeping her voice cool. "How are you? I wondered whether you might

show."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," he said.

He leaned in to kiss her on the cheek, and Dylan was overwhelmed with a masculine, earthy scent

that was disturbingly erotic. She wondered if that was his signature cologne. If it was, it had to be leaping off the shelves.

"Cindy was one of the first to arrive," Dylan said, pulling back.

Her response to him was unsettling. She didn't even like him much, so why did she have this visceral, almost animal reaction to his proximity? It wasn't as strong, but it certainly had glimmers of the same reaction she had to her husband, and that bothered her. It bothered her a great deal. While the attraction she felt for him was just embers compared to the

inferno of her feeling for Mark, embers had the potential to create an impressive blaze if you let them.

“Mark’s around here somewhere,” she said breezily. “Have you seen him yet?” “Nope,” Ray said, his eyes fixed on hers. “But I think I’ll survive.”

“Well, Cindy ...”

“Saw her,” Ray cut her off. “We’re not exactly on the best terms right now, so I think steering clear of each other is probably what’s best for both of us tonight.”

Dylan licked her lips, feeling uncomfortable about his revelation, but also because she was the hostess after all, and couldn’t just walk away from him. And she didn’t want to *walk* away from him; it would be more accurate to say that she wanted to run. After Pedro Lima’s party when she’d suspected that he’d been flirting with her just to upset Mark, Dylan felt sure that she was inoculated against his charms, but apparently not. When he wasn’t talking about his considerable accomplishments, Ray Hernandez was still very attractive. Disturbingly so.

“Dance with me,” he said. “This music reminds me of when I was a kid.”

“Maybe a little later?” Dylan said. “I really have to go check on everything in the kitchen. They’ve been a little slow getting food out,” she lied.

“I hadn’t noticed that. I’d say everything’s run like a well-oiled machine since I’ve been here,” Ray observed. He pulled in his lower lip and looked straight at her in a way that made her want to blush for some inexplicable reason. “My wife will be green with envy at the success of this party.”

“Actually not,” Dylan snapped, surprised at her instinct to defend Cindy. “She was the first person to say how impressed she was with how well everything turned out.”

“I praise my opponents all the time,” Ray Hernandez shrugged. “And then I go out on the field and try to take their heads off with the baseball.”

Dylan opened her mouth to reply when she felt a hand slip about her waist. She turned and looked at Mark, her face warm, as though she had been caught doing something wrong.

“Ray,” Mark said, nodding, his voice cool. “Glad you could make it.”



“Me too,” Ray Hernandez said. “Quite a place. Quite a party.” He looked at Dylan and smiled.

“Thank you. My wife worked very hard on both,” Mark said, with slight emphasis on the words, ‘my wife.’ “But I have to steal her for a minute.”

Mark, who hadn’t seen the need to spend much more than a moment with her since he’d come downstairs, had to “steal her for a minute”? Dylan rolled her eyes, knowing full well what his true motive was.

“He has a habit of getting real fucking close when he talks to you,” Mark said between his teeth as he steered her in the direction of the living room.

“It’s probably because he’s so tall,” Dylan suggested. “He has to lean in.”

“Don’t make excuses for him,” Mark snapped. “And don’t spend any more time with him tonight either.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” she said, keeping her tone light.

Mark stopped and pulled her close, pressing her pelvis against him and leaning in to speak directly in her ear. “I’m entitled to be ridiculous when other men are after my wife.”

“Other men are not *after* your wife,” Dylan said, amused. “But seriously? You were like a ninja. I was talking to him for literally three minutes and you just crept up out of *nowhere*.”

Mark looked down at her, his face expressionless, clearly not seeing the humor. “Ray Hernandez can entertain himself some other way tonight,” he said. “Not by flirting with you. Stay away from him, Dylan. Don’t defy me on this.”

Dylan blinked. *Defy?*

She would have loved to chalk his choice of words up to a language barrier or something, but she knew all too well it was intentional. He didn’t often flex his muscles this way, but when he did, it was crystal clear that he wore the pants in their relationship and that she would do well to remember it.

“Okay,” she said, putting a hand to his chest. “If it makes you uncomfortable, of course.”

“It does,” he said firmly. “So we understand each other?”

She nodded.

“Okay,” he said, satisfied. “I’m going to go check on my parents.”

As a general rule, Mark wasn’t unreasonably possessive.

Where Ray Hernandez was concerned though, he seemed particularly wary and protective even though on the face of it, there was nothing about Ray's behavior toward her that should have raised any red flags. Was there something about *her* behavior toward Ray that had Mark agitated? Dylan had to admit, there was a forbidden fruit element about Ray. That and the almost freakish good looks ...

"Wonderful party, lady."

Dylan turned and smiled at Stephanie Alfieri. She looked more than a little tipsy, and her long, curtain of jet-black hair was a little disheveled, as though she'd run her hands through it one time too many.

"Thank you. I was so nervous about it but everyone seems to be having a great time."

"We are!" Stephanie said brightly. "But can I trouble you for one thing?"

"Sure," Dylan said. "Anything."

"I need a bathroom someplace quiet without people hammering on the door every five seconds. I look like shit and Tim is starting to get that look, like I'm embarrassing him or something."

"Okay, sure. Come with me. You can use the master," Dylan offered.

She led Stephanie upstairs to her and Mark's bedroom and showed her the master bath, sitting on the bed waiting for her.

"Thank you," Stephanie called from inside. "I just need something to ..." the unmistakable sound of Stephanie sniffing came from behind the closed door, "dull the edges a little." Another loud sniff.

Dylan's eyes widened. Was Stephanie Alfieri doing *drugs* in her bathroom? She remembered now Mark's warning that Stephanie was "notorious." But of all the wives, with the exception of Cindy, Stephanie had always been the nicest to her. It was tough to judge her, when she'd been such a friend.

Then the door was opening and Stephanie was coming out, her eyes strangely bright, her hair still awry.

"Stephanie," Dylan said. "Let me get you a brush. I'm not sure you look as pulled together as you were hoping."

Stephanie sighed as though she'd heard that line before.

"I know. I look a hot mess. I've been told. By the father of my

children, no less.”

“I’m sorry, Stephanie. Look, let me help you ...”

Dylan went into the bathroom and grabbed one of her brushes, bringing it back out to the bedroom. What she saw stopped her in her tracks. Stephanie had a little silver ampule in one hand and had emptied a line of powder on the back of the other. For a moment it was like something out of a bad movie.

“Stephanie ...”

“Relax, Dylan. In this quantity, it’s like a glass of strong liquor, no more harmful than that. You should try it.”

Dylan shook her head. “No thanks. Look, Stephanie ...” she held the brush aloft, wondering if it made sense to try to brush her hair at this point. She was clearly wasted out of her mind.

“What the . . . ?”

Ava was standing at the door of the bedroom and took in the scene in front of her, eyes wide. Dylan dropped the brush and Stephanie raised her hand to her nose, quickly snorting in the line of white powder.

“It’s about time for me and Tim to go home anyway,” she said.

“Thanks for the hospitality, Dylan.”

She flounced out of the room past Ava who stood like stone in the doorway and did not move, even after Stephanie was gone. Her eyes were fixed on Dylan’s face, silently questioning.

Dylan retrieved the dropped brush and cleared her throat, feeling accused by Ava’s stare.

“You were going to try it,” Ava said quietly.

“No I wasn’t,” Dylan said shaking her head.

“You were. I saw that look on your face. You were curious.”

“*Everyone* is curious about getting high. As you of all people well know.”

“We’re not talking about me. We’re talking about you,” Ava said, still not moving from her place at the door. “You’ve never wanted to be outside of yourself. Not like I did.”

“Stop accusing me!” Dylan snapped.

“Dylan,” Ava shook her head. “Who are you trying to be here? I don’t even ...”

“You don’t even *what?*” Dylan demanded.

“Recognize you lately. I mean, *look* at you. You’re like a size zero, your hair looks like someone pulled it out of a box and put it on your head, you dress like the very same women we

were making fun of not three months ago. And you're spending your husband's money like it's going out of style."

Dylan's head snapped up. "Are you kidding me?"

"No," Ava said quietly. "I'm not. You're changing, Dylan."

"You want me to stay the same because I look after you," Dylan said, shaking her head. "As long as I'm together, you get to be a mess. You get to date men who treat you like shit, and I get to pick up the pieces. You get to go out and get high, and I get to hold your hair while you puke into the toilet. And now I *look* at a line of cocaine and you have the nerve to *lecture* me?"

"Okay, you say you weren't going to do it, so I guess I have to believe you," Ava said. "But the fact that I wasn't sure, Dylan? What does that say about how much you've changed? About how uncertain I am of who you are now. Because I know for damn sure you're not the Dylan that ..."

"Shut up, Ava! You have no idea what you're talking ..."

"Does Mark even know that you have no plans to go to law school in the fall? That you didn't bother sending your paperwork in?"

"I ... he doesn't ..."

"I thought so," Ava said, turning to leave.

"Are you going to say anything to him?" Dylan asked her back.

Ava turned to look at her once again. "You think I would do that?"

"*Would* you?" Dylan demanded.

"I'm hoping you'll tell him. Soon."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Dylan, what are you talking about?" Ava said. "I'm your friend. Why would I threaten you? I want you to tell him because he cares about honesty. And because he thinks you walk on fucking water. And because you used to care about honesty too."

Dylan blinked. *That* hurt.

"Ava, I do care about honesty."

"Then be honest with yourself about what you're doing here," she said waving her hand vaguely. "And then be honest with your husband."

Dylan swallowed.

“I’m driving back to the city. I feel ... over-stimulated here.”  
She turned and left Dylan standing alone in the middle of her enormous bedroom.

# 13

Dealing with Ava's departure was more than Dylan felt like taking on with hundreds of people downstairs so she simply fixed her hair, tried to put the fight out of her mind and went back to the party. Walking over to the bar, she got a glass of champagne and decided to go in search of her sister-in-law. Miri was the antidote to gloom; the kind of person you couldn't help but love more and more each time you saw them. She had a deep confidence and joy that could only come from having known your entire life that you were loved deeply and profoundly by everyone around you. Dylan didn't think she'd ever had that. Except for now, she had to keep reminding herself. She had that now.

As she walked across the backyard, drink in hand, she spotted Mark, talking to two women. One of them was Patricia, who was wearing an emerald green pantsuit that hugged her figure and was very flattering. Dylan considered for a moment approaching the group. After all, if Mark was allowed to come and remove her from Ray Hernandez' company, then demand that she stay away from him, she should have the same privilege where his ex-fiancée was concerned. She had never been involved with Ray Hernandez in any way and this was a woman he'd once made love to, whom he once proposed to. Dylan stood there seething for a moment until she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"There you are!"

It was Lauren Morales, the blonde she'd met at Pedro Lima's house, who had warned her that the Dominican wives didn't like women who weren't Dominican taking their eligible men. Lauren looked spectacularly blonde this evening as though she'd gotten her hair recently highlighted. It fell about her shoulders in gently undulating waves.

"I've been looking for you all night," she said. "To congratulate you on a great party." "Thank you," Dylan said, glancing over at Mark again.

The woman who'd been with him and Patricia had left and so he was for all intents and purposes

alone with Patricia. Lauren followed her gaze.

"How was he about the party?" Lauren asked. "They're so uncooperative about things like this, aren't they?"

"Mark was pretty good, actually," Dylan said. "Except he wouldn't let me pick out what I wanted him to wear."

Lauren laughed. "Well, could you stand it if he did? You want a man, honey, not a poodle." Dylan tore her eyes away from Mark and looked at Lauren, smiling. She'd forgotten how funny

she was. "You're right about that. Mark is definitely no poodle."

"If you're not Latin, it takes some getting used to," Lauren said, shrugging. "All that raw machismo. None of that politically correct BS with most of these guys, I can tell you that." "So I'm beginning to see."

"When I married Manny, I spent the first year and a half shell-shocked," Lauren continued. Dylan smiled politely.

"I did some stupid things to assert my so-called independence," Lauren said, a dark look crossing her face for just a moment before it brightened once again.

"Anyway ... I saw you guys made your poolhouse into a gym. Smart move. Keeps them at home."

Dylan spent a little while with Lauren and managed to forget that Mark was with Patricia, so that

by the time she remembered to check again, they were both gone. As the party began to wind down,

she headed for the foyer to thank people for coming as they departed and after a few minutes Mark

joined her to do the same. Together they stood at the front door like the perfect team, exchanging

pleasantries with their guests until everyone was gone.

Finally, they were able to head into their enormous chef's kitchen and pick through the food that

they'd largely ignored all night. Mark's parents had long retired for the evening, his brothers were in

his den and Miri was someplace else in the huge house. Apart

from the caterers putting away food and the party planner's crew beginning to clean up, they were alone.

"So how'd I do?" Mark asked, grabbing a chicken drumstick and some roast beef, heaping it onto a plate.

"You were perfect," Dylan said. "Except for one tiny thing."

"What's that?" Mark took a bite of chicken, looking at her, mildly curious but clearly not particularly concerned about what she might say.

"Patricia," Dylan said coolly, finding a plate and beginning to put together a plate for herself. "I didn't like how much time you spent with her."

Mark looked at her, his eyes weary. "What is this, payback because I came to get you when you were talking to Ray?"

"You're uncomfortable with me spending time with Ray, so I won't. I'm uncomfortable with you spending time with Patricia, so you shouldn't."

"What does 'spending time' mean?" Mark took a bite of chicken and chewed slowly. "Spending time means anything beyond 'hello' and a pleasant five-minute catch-up," Dylan said. "For a woman I've known since I was six years old?"

"I don't care how long you've known her," Dylan said looking him in the eye.

Mark paused. He had the drumstick in his mouth, between his teeth and let it remain there while

he contemplated. Dylan watched him, her eyes never leaving his. Finally, he took the drumstick out of his mouth and chewed, eventually swallowing.

"Okay," he said finally.

Dylan struggled not to voice her surprise. Instead she nodded impassively.

"Good," she said.

"I'm going to hang out with my brothers for a little while," Mark said. "I'll be up to bed soon."

Then he kissed her on the forehead and taking his plate of food walked out of the kitchen. Dylan stood there for awhile, stunned and more than a little ashamed of herself. She wasn't even



sure she minded him talking to Patricia as much as she'd pretended. It made her *somewhat* uncomfortable, sure, but she never would have had an honest expectation that he draw the boundary she'd just demanded. It *was* inherently unreasonable—especially given how long Mark had known her family—that Dylan anticipated at least some resistance. But he hadn't put up much of it. He may even have concluded that even if it was unreasonable, if it was what she wanted, he would do it. After all, that was their rule: *they would never give each other reason to doubt.*

Being so suddenly in a relationship with an actual adult made her wonder whether she was being childish and petty. Mark asked her what she needed and generally gave it to her, so if he in no uncertain terms told her what he needed, it was impossible to say no. Demanding trade-offs like this was small of her. *And wasn't it all much ado about nothing in the final analysis?* It wasn't as though she cared at all about spending time with Ray Hernandez.

Later, as she was drifting in and out of sleep, Mark finally came up and crawled into bed next to her. The preparations for the party had overshadowed the fact that this was their first night together in their new house. It felt right to have his family there as well, and would have been even better if Ava had stayed. She'd managed to push deep into the back of her mind thoughts of their argument earlier that evening.

Fighting with Ava was not unfamiliar; they fought all the time, like sisters. But the accusations—even the unspoken ones—that had been leveled were so personal that Dylan could not imagine that this time she would first to reach out to heal the rift. Ava was wrong; she hadn't been about to try the cocaine. She'd just been dumbstruck when faced with it, because it seemed so incongruous with the charmed life that these women seemed to lead. Why would they want to do anything that took them

out of their reality?

Not that Stephanie Alfieri's life was perfect. People were accusing her husband of doping, after all.

And even the Hernandezes seemed to be having problems; the Mets golden couple couldn't even hold it together long enough to arrive at a party together. Dylan couldn't imagine things ever getting that bad between her and Mark.

Turning in the massive bed to face him, Dylan reached out a hand in the dark until she made contact. Mark moved toward her immediately.

"Didn't know you were awake," he said. "I thought you'd be dead after all the work you put into tonight."

"It wasn't that much work," she said. "At least not for me. Thank you for being so cool about everything."

"Well, whatever you did, it was a great job. Everyone seemed to have a good time." "Thanks." Dylan moved even closer, resting her head on his chest.

"I didn't see Ava afterwards though. Did she go to bed early?" Dylan stiffened. "She left."

"Why? What happened?"

"We kind of had a fight," she admitted.

"Must have been a pretty bad fight. You two seemed fine this afternoon."

"I don't want to talk about it just yet," Dylan said.

Thankfully, neither did Mark. "What do you want to do instead?" he asked, his hands already under her nightshirt.

"Hmm. I don't know," she said, playing along. "If we put our minds to it, maybe we can think of something."

She felt Mark lean away from her and then the dim light from the bedside lamp came on. He shrugged his shirt off and pulled off his boxer briefs.

"Strip," he said.

Dylan laughed. "I'm beginning to like this game."

But Mark was getting up and heading for their bathroom. Dylan stripped and followed him. He'd

begun filling the huge claw-footed tub and extended a hand to her. She went to him and they got in together, sitting at opposite ends as it filled with warm water. The only light came from the bedroom, so Mark's face was partially obscured.

"When were you going to tell me about not going to law school in the fall?"

The question, asked so casually, hung in the air between them. Dylan felt her heartbeat accelerate. "*Were* you going to tell me?" Mark continued.

"Of course I was."

"When?"

"I don't know," Dylan admitted. "Who ... how did you ...?"

"Dylan, law school used to be all you talked about. And you haven't said a word about it lately.

Didn't you think I might notice?"

She said nothing. The only sound was the gurgling of the water as the tub continued to fill. She wasn't sure what she thought.

"So Ava didn't ..."

"No. I guessed," he said.

"So you tricked me," she said, her tone accusatory.

"Is that how it is with us?" Mark asked, his voice quiet. "That I have to *trick* you into telling me what's really going on with you?"

"Mark, *no*," she moved from her end of the tub and went to him, kneeling between his thighs. "I just didn't want you to be disappointed in me."

"I'm disappointed you didn't trust me enough to tell me right away," he said. Now that she was closer, she could see the concern in his eyes. "I'm disappointed you could even think of doing anything *other* than telling me. What did you think I would do?"

"I don't know," she said quietly. She thought of the way he'd looked at her in Montreal, when she'd been photographed at that nightclub.

"I'm not your father, Dylan. If you don't want to be a lawyer, that's your decision. I'm here to support you, whatever *you* decide. Do you want to go to law

school?”

“Yes. Of course I do.”

“Then what happened?”

She shook her head, not knowing what to say.

What happened was that they’d gotten married, and there were parties and events and she’d been trying to make friends with the other wives; and they’d bought a house, and she’d wanted to make it look perfect, and then she wanted to throw the perfect party, and make sure everyone said good things about the party ... and somehow in the middle of all of that, and the new bustle of her everyday life, she’d lost track of some things. That was all. She could apply again next year; it wasn’t that big a deal.

“Being my wife,” Mark said slowly. “That’s not an occupation. You have a life to live separate from that. If you tell me you want to stay home, you can, but don’t do this because you think it’s expected of you.”

His words felt like a slap in the face. Not to mention being at odds with what he’d said once about Cindy Hernandez knowing how to *represent* her husband. That was what she was trying to do—make him proud of her.

As her chin sunk to her chest, Mark tipped it upward so she was looking at him. The tub was almost full to the brim, so Mark reached behind him and shut the faucet off.

“Dylan,” he began. And then whatever he’d been about to say, he seemed to think better of it and kissed her instead.

It started out as a soft, sweet kiss almost as though he was reassuring her of something. In the back of her mind, Dylan wondered how much he saw, how much he knew; whether her uncertainty was obvious to him. The truth was that in this house, in her new clothes, in her new life, she had never felt less sure of herself. And that was saying something. Between her and Ava, she only appeared to be

the responsible one. In fact she was just the meek, timid one. All her life, she'd felt as though just to keep up, she had to run harder than everyone else. Now, in this new life, keeping up was a much more formidable task than ever before. Every single day, she woke up wondering whether she would make some misstep, do something that would upset the apple cart. Not the apple cart of her *own* life—but that of the conglomerate that Mark had become. He didn't seem to notice, but practically overnight, it was about so much more than just the two of them. In some ways, he had a luxury she did not—ignorance. When he was playing, Corey didn't want to worry him with pedestrian concerns, and almost always looked to Dylan to answer questions about the dozens of opportunities that were coming Mark's way at lightning speed. It was her challenge to present these options to him piecemeal and in a way that wouldn't cause undue stress or take his head out of the game.

*Did you want to stop by that thing at the boys' home?* she'd ask, as though it was no big deal, never letting on that if he didn't, three hundred homeless pre-teens would be devastated. Or, *Mark, did you have time to sign those exhibition game programs?* Never mentioning that they were a crucial part of an auction block to raise money for a pediatric cancer ward.

So when Mark kissed her like this, like he sensed some of what she was up against and understood it just did her in. Dylan moved closer still and fit herself astride him, wrapping her legs about his hips. Almost immediately, Mark inched forward and Dylan felt his erection nudging against her, and her body softening to receive him.

"Let me in," Mark said his lips pressed against hers.

Dylan knew better than to take his playfulness to mean that he'd forgotten about her lie by omission about law school. They would revisit it, for sure. Sex could almost always distract him, but it could not control him. Her respite was only temporary.

“You’re so silly,” she said, but she flexed her hips so he was part of the way inside her. “Much better,” Mark said, heaving a sigh. He wrapped his arms tightly about her and Dylan pressed her lips to his forehead. He tasted salty, tiny drops of perspiration beading his face and shoulders from the warm water and having her wrapped about him. He was nibbling on her neck, and almost involuntarily, she pressed against him and he slipped even further inside her. Any other man would have pounced right about now, single-minded in the pursuit of his own pleasure, but not Mark. Even when they were making love, he was disciplined. He waited for her, he went slowly until she was ready, or like now, remained completely still until she thought she might go crazy with anticipation.

With his chest pressed against hers, she could feel the hoofbeats of his heart, racing because he was excited. But he remained motionless. She wondered how long he could hold out, whether he would move first and thrust himself deeper inside her if she didn’t lose her resolve and simply impale herself.

Dylan pulled back so she could see his face and he gave her a small, mischievous smile as though he knew exactly what she was doing. When his lips parted she lunged toward him, taking him by surprise as she thrust her tongue in his mouth, and finding his, pulled it in between her lips, sucking on it.

Mark may have been able to pretend to play it cool, but other parts of his anatomy could not and Dylan felt him practically leap to attention, jerking inside her. She rolled her hips, arching toward him, pulling him closer still. Mark’s chest was heaving now, and he unwrapped his arms from about her, instead gripping the edges of the tub.

“Why’re you holding back?” she said against his neck, then kissing him again.

“Not ...” he said, though he clearly was. “Are you ready for

me?”

“Always,” she said against his mouth.

Still holding the edge of the tub, Mark surged upward so he was completely buried inside her and

Dylan steadied herself by placing her hands atop his, their fingers interlaced. Water churned about

them as they moved, sloshing over the edges of the tub and onto the floor. The noises they made and

slapping sounds of the water made them wild in a way they hadn't been for a long time. Dylan's thighs began to tremble

and her hands fell away from Mark's, losing their ability to grip

anything, as the force of her climax overcame her. She could hear the blood rushing in her ears, feel

the water moving against her skin like wet silk and the musculature of her husband's legs, tense

beneath her. But the prevailing feeling, the most overwhelming sensation was of Mark's hard length

inside her, fitting perfectly, as though he was made for her. Dylan cried out at what felt like the top of

her lungs and Mark grabbed her close against him, kissing her to stifle the sound of his own noisy

release.

Always, after they made love he held her close and for a very long time, and this time was no

different though the water in the tub had begun to grow tepid.

Dylan looked at him and his eyes were

languorous, sleepy. She gave him a small smile and raised a hand, running it over the soft bristly hair

on his head.

“*Te quiero*,” she said, and Mark smiled.

Miri taught her how to say that. When Dylan asked her if there was one essential phrase she

understand, or know how to say her sister-in-law didn't hesitate.

*Oh of course*, Miri said. *You have to know how to say 'I love you.'*

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Dylan looked over at the massage table next to hers where Lauren Morales was having her back kneaded and pounded by

the masseuse in the white uniform. She occasionally groaned softly; Dylan couldn't tell whether it was in pleasure or agony.

"To be honest, I don't want another baby," Lauren said, continuing a conversation begun earlier at lunch. "But once they've popped one in there, try telling *that* to a Dominican man."

"So what's your plan?"

"There's no plan to be had. There'll be another little Morales running around in six or so months whether I like it or not."

Dylan couldn't imagine not wanting a baby of Mark's no matter what the circumstance of its conception, but they'd already decided that they wouldn't try for a few years, so she was scrupulous about making sure she took her Pill, leaving nothing to chance. Besides, who had time for a baby right now?

"But before I accept my fate, I've decided to plan a girls' trip," Lauren said. "To Palm Springs. You interested?"

Dylan thought for a moment. "What would we be doing there?"

"What does anyone do in Palm Springs?" Lauren said.

That was the problem; Dylan had no clue.

"We'll shop. Go to a real spa ..." she looked over her shoulder at her masseuse. "No offense. And we'll party. So are you in?"

"Who else would be going?"

"None of the Dominican wives, that's for sure. Except maybe Cindy if she's game. If enough of us do it, I'll charter a jet."

Dylan swallowed. She had never traveled by charter before, and had only what she saw on television to prepare her for what that might be like. And she had to admit, she was curious.

"Sounds good. But if Mark is home ..."

"No, we don't plan stuff like this when the guys are home," Lauren said laughing. "No way. This is for us to play while they're away."

Something in Lauren's undertone warned Dylan that she should probably refuse to participate, but she shoved it aside. After all, if Cindy was going, it would have to be on the up and up. Unlike Stephanie and some of the other wives, she was never in the paper after having done something embarrassing like slapping a valet parking attendant (Marjorie King) or



having a tantrum in Nordstrom's (Vanessa Lima). Cindy would help keep things under control. And as back-up ...

"Could I bring my friend, Ava?" Dylan asked. Her masseuse was pounding between her shoulder blades now, making it difficult for her to speak.

"Sure. Is she discreet?" Lauren asked.

"Of course," Dylan said. "Does she need to be?"

Lauren laughed. "Dylan, you'll soon find out how weird people can get, believe me. Selling stories to the tabloids, blogging about you, stealing from you. People you never would have expected it from."

"Ava would never do any of those things," Dylan said with certainty.

"Are you sure?" Lauren lifted her head from the massage table. "I've seen siblings sell each other down the pike."

"Ava's closer than a sibling," Dylan said.

On her way home, she thought about that. Ava *was* closer than a sibling in some ways, because their closeness was the product of choice and effort, unlike people born into the same family. Still, that closeness had not been in evidence for the past two weeks; not since the housewarming party. In fact, they hadn't spoken at all and she was beginning to think Ava had no intention of calling her. But a trip to Palm Springs ought to be a good olive branch, even for someone as stubborn as Ava.

On a whim, she reached for console and dialed Ava's cell phone number. Mark, before he left, had finally capitulated and bought her the Range Rover, admitting that the Jeep was probably going to die any day now. It was only the idea that it might die somewhere on the parkway when she was driving alone that had moved him to take her to get the one-hundred thousand dollar luxury, supercharged vehicle. It was such a smooth ride, it seemed to practically glide over the surface of roads, no matter their condition.

When Mark had signed the papers and tossed her the keys, Dylan had literally squealed in delight and jumped into his arms. That he loved buying her things was no surprise. What did surprise her was how much she loved getting them. Never considering herself materialistic before, Dylan still couldn't get over how breathless it made her when she slid her

American Express Centurion card across a counter toward a store clerk and in return got some exquisite thing. Like the soft as butter Fendi B Bag sitting on the seat next to her. Just looking at it gave her a thrill.

Ava's phone rang twice and then her voice echoed throughout the interior of the truck.

"Palm Springs," Dylan said without greeting. "Just girls for a few days of fun, drinking and whatever else people do in Palm Springs."

There was a long pause and then the sound of Ava sighing. "Is that how you want to play it?" she asked.

"I don't know what you me ..."

"Yes you do. You said some pretty shitty things to me, Dylan. And you think you can fix it by dangling a trip in front of me?"

"You said some pretty shitty things to me too, Ava. And yes, that's what I was hoping. That I could fix it by dangling a trip in front of you."

Ava laughed, as Dylan had known she would. "Fine. Well in that case it had better be good. And what they do in Palm Springs is gamble and go to the mineral baths, shop and golf. If you're going to turn into a high-roller the least you could do is know how to act like one."

And then she hung up.

Dylan smiled.

# 14

This was bad. This was really, really bad. Dylan lowered her magazine and looked through her eyelashes at Ray Hernandez, sitting a few seats away from her, next to Cindy.

What was supposed to be a girls' weekend had turned into something else entirely when he'd unexpectedly been placed on the injury list and flown home to New York from a series in Kansas City. As far as Dylan could tell, he looked perfectly healthy but apparently he had a sprained groin. You couldn't make this stuff up.

So he'd decided to hitch a ride on Lauren's chartered Gulfstream 200 to play golf in Palm Springs while his wife was hanging out with her friends. At the airport, when Dylan and Ava had entered the hangar, she'd almost tripped over her feet when she saw him. All she could think about was how angry Mark was going to be when he learned that Ray had been along for the trip. But surely he would have to see that it wasn't something that was anywhere close to being within her control. She would call him when she got there and tell him right away; casually of course, like it didn't matter. And of course, it didn't.

Next to her, Ava was still stroking the arms of her seat, marveling at the fact that air travel could be this comfortable. Dylan would have been doing the same, if she wasn't too busy pondering the Ray Hernandez problem. What bothered her most was that she was so *aware* of him. None of the others, not even his wife seemed to be. Lauren Morales was napping, Marjorie King was reading a novel, Cindy was working on a laptop and Stephanie Alfieri was idly twisting a long, dark lock of hair about her finger, staring out at the clouds.

Ray looked up briefly, and Dylan was not quick enough looking away, so his hazel eyes met hers and held. He didn't smile at her, but just held her stare. She tried to look away, but couldn't. Finally, one corner of his mouth rose in a tiny smirk. Having women staring at him was probably par for the course. How tedious it must become. Although if the way he was staring right back at her was any indication, he didn't seem to mind it when she was the one doing the staring.

Dylan jerked her head back down to look at her fashion magazine. These were dangerous thoughts. Very, very dangerous thoughts.

“What was *that* all about?” Ava leaned in and whispered.

“What?” Dylan whispered back.

“You making googly-eyes with that creepy Ray Hernandez.”

Dylan turned to look at Ava full on. “You think he’s *creepy*?”

Ava nodded. “*Yah*. His eyes remind me of a snake’s eyes. Gives me the chills.” She fakeshuddered.

Interesting. There was just no accounting for taste.

“I used to think he was cute, but in person, there’s just something about him,” Ava continued. “And the way he looks at you ...”

“At me?” Dylan said, surprised.

“Yes, at you,” Ava said, as though unconvinced Dylan hadn’t noticed. “Like he wants to ... throw you down to the ground and have his way with you. And he doesn’t make any effort to conceal it, even with his wife less than two feet away. Ick.”

Dylan’s brows furrowed. *Was that what Mark saw as well?*

She stole another glance at Ray. Then why was she the only one who *didn’t* see it? Ava was watching her closely, trying to read her expression.

“Dylan, don’t let your low self-esteem fool you into thinking you’re lucky for having him attracted to you. He’s obviously a lowlife who should be on his knees daily thanking God he has a wife who puts up with his bullshit.”

It was true that Ray Hernandez looked at every marginally attractive woman within ten feet of him as though they were lunch. And it didn’t help that most of them returned the favor.

“Lower your voice,” Dylan said.

Ava shrugged. “He knows he’s a lowlife. And why’s he even here? Most men would claw their own eyes out rather than go away for a weekend with his wife and her girlfriends. He has an ulterior motive.”

Dylan wondered whether Ava might be right, but hadn’t she heard somewhere that Ray Hernandez had a nineteen-year old mistress? Surely that had to be an incentive to stay home when his wife was going out of town.

“Or maybe he just wants to play a few rounds of golf. Just like he said,” Dylan said.

“Sure he does.” Ava leaned back in her seat and shut her eyes. “Because there’s no golfing in the state of New York, he has to fly across the country.”

When they landed, there was none of the usual hustle and bustle about luggage. Lauren had arranged it so that all of their things would be shuttled to the resort where they were staying. All they needed to concern themselves with was getting into the waiting limo and being driven in style and comfort.

Dylan looked out the window as they drove, taking in the desert and craggy terrain, the palm trees and otherwise barren landscape. So far, she couldn’t say she was particularly impressed. It reminded her too much of Arizona, where her mother lived; the severe absence of greenery was depressing.

Suddenly she was reminded of the things back home that she’d blown off to make this trip. Miri wanted to go shopping at an outlet mall in Connecticut, and she’d promised to take her. But the timing had clashed, so she’d postponed it.

The disappointment in her sister-in-law’s voice had been palpable when she let her know they’d have to make the trip another day, but she’d ignored it, feeling as always, perplexed and unworthy of the affection that Miri inexplicably had for her.

It was the same way with Mark. Even now that they were married, she sometimes wondered what she had done, how she had managed to get someone like him. The way he looked at her, the way he touched her, the way he loved her, seemed like a cruel ruse. Something that she almost couldn’t allow herself to relax enough to enjoy, because it still didn’t seem real.

But the other stuff—the car, the clothes, the jewelry—all of that was tangible, and every single time she bought something and Mark simply rolled his eyes in exasperation, she could almost make herself believe he was as crazy in love with her as he appeared to be. Each thing she bought, every dollar she spent was like a testament to his devotion.

The resort was secluded in a valley, surrounded by tall palms and a golf course that looked so clearly manufactured that Dylan found it difficult to appreciate its beauty. There were also lakes, and several pools that were expertly designed to *look* as though they hadn’t been designed but had simply sprung naturally from the arid earth. Dylan and Ava were

installed in their own villa, as were Lauren and Stephanie and Ray and Cindy. They agreed to get some rest and meet later for dinner parting in the lobby where attendants in golf carts transported them to their respective accommodations.

As Dylan took in the grounds, she wondered what Mark was doing and found herself wishing he was there. Not that Ava wasn't great company, but she was no substitute for Mark. Still, somehow Dylan knew he would hate this place as much as she did. He liked things rustic and authentic, and there was nothing about this resort that was either. Having Ava along, despite her earlier reservations about mixing the two parts of her life was like a dose of reality in the midst of fake, and would come in handy if Ray Hernandez decided that he wanted to ...

"I'm starting to get a little worried," Ava sang from her place next to Dylan. "This does not look like the happening town I was hoping for."

"If all else fails, we'll do some spa treatments," Dylan said. "Get our entire bodies waxed."

"My entire body's already waxed," Ava said raising her eyebrows suggestively. "My man likes it that way."

Dylan resisted the urge to remind Ava that her man was still actually someone else's man until he got a divorce, separated or not.

The villa was impressive, with adobe walls, terrazzo tiles and warm tones throughout. Ava immediately changed into her swimsuit to lay out in the sun, telling Dylan that her plan was to turn "nut-brown" in time for dinner.

"It'll set off my white dress," she said over her shoulder as she headed out to the pool.

Taking advantage of the privacy, Dylan retreated to her room to make the call she knew she had to make. She didn't have to understand Mark's jealousy about Ray, she just had to respect it. And after the housewarming party, they'd agreed that she would stay away from him. All she needed to do was explain that she had no idea he was coming and that he was likely to be off on his own the entire time anyway.

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"Go home," Mark said. "Get a flight tonight or tomorrow morning, and go home." Dylan held the phone away from her

ear for a moment, stunned. This she had not expected. “I ... but what would I say to Lauren?” she asked, her voice uncharacteristically high-pitched. “I don’t care,” Mark said, his voice flat.

She’d caught him just as he was checking in at the hotel where the team would be staying during the Kansas City series, and he was abrupt with her from the moment he’d answered the phone, irritable and exhausted from travel.

The news that the supposedly injured Ray Hernandez had somehow found his way on the same private jet flying Dylan to California had not helped his mood in the least.

“You’re not being reasonable,” Dylan said quietly.

She took the phone and went to the balcony. It overlooked the pool where Ava was already spread out on a chaise lounge, wearing a daringly brief yellow swimsuit.

“Actually I’m recalling a conversation where you promised to stay away from him.”

“But Mark, I haven’t broken my promise. He came on his own and from what I understand, has no plans to spend any time with the rest of us.”

She didn’t like the sound of her voice. Like a child, pleading with a parent. On the other end of the line, Mark was silent, waiting for her to reach the correct conclusion on her own—that she should honor their agreement.

“I’m staying,” she said after a moment when he still hadn’t spoken. “I had no idea he was coming and have no plans to spend any time with him. I’m not taking a six-hour flight back to New York just because you can’t trust me enough to ...”

“This has nothing to do with trust!” Mark snapped. “But if you want to make it about that, you should trust me and do what I’ve asked you to do.”

“And you should believe me when I tell you I’ll keep my promise, regardless of whether he’s in the same city as me, the same hotel or even the same room.”

“I don’t have time to explain this to you, Dylan. And I didn’t think I would have to. We had an ...”

“*Agreement*. Yes. I heard you the first seven times you said that,” she cut him off.

“So I’m confused that we’re even having this conversation,” Mark said, his voice dangerously soft. “By now you should be

on the phone with an airline, booking your flight back to New York, instead of arguing with me.”

Dylan’s breathing had become fast and shallow as her annoyance grew. Under normal circumstances she was only too happy to do what Mark asked of her. She never questioned his authority as her husband, never even questioned the notion that he should *have* that authority, as most women might. But usually, there was some reason to what he asked of her even if it was something she didn’t agree with. Where Ray Hernandez was concerned though, he turned into an irrational dictator.

“I’m sorry if this upsets you, Mark but I’ve made up my mind. I’ll call you when I get back to New York in a few days.”

“Dylan ...”

“Or you can call me later when you calm down,” she added.

“*Dylan ...*”

She ended the call and turned her phone off, tossing it back into her room and onto the bed. Her heart was beating hard and fast, because she’d hung up on him, and worse than that, had *defied* him. His word, not hers.

Dylan quickly calculated in her head the next time she could expect to see him. Two weeks. When he was in Philadelphia, she was supposed to drive down to meet him while they played the Phillies. By then, he would have gotten over this and realized that it was much ado about nothing.

“You coming down?” Ava called from poolside.

“Yup. On my way,” Dylan called back, eager for a distraction from her growing sense of dread that she might have made a terrible, terrible mistake.

After a couple of hours by the pool, Dylan and Ava had taken naps and awoken just as the sun set behind the mountains. They were meeting the rest of the group for dinner and then Lauren said she’d chartered a car to take them to some of the more hip nightspots around town. Ava greeted that news with enthusiasm, but all Dylan could think about was the Christmas trip to the DR when Mark hadn’t much enjoyed her dancing with other guys in the club even with him present. And of course there was the Montreal fiasco, and long before any of that, her run in with Matt at Liquid. Their history with nightclubs was not a positive one.

For dinner, Ava wore the white dress she’d been telling Dylan



about all afternoon with a gold belt, white stilettos and large gold hoops. Thinking it best not to look too sexy, or even like she was *trying* to look sexy, Dylan chose a black and white sleeveless pantsuit that was snug about the hip and thighs but billowy at the leg, and black high-heeled sandals. Her hair was a little wild from her swim earlier, and was a fair approximation of what it had been before she started getting it processed, but with all her expensive hair products, she was able to make it look somewhat intentionally disheveled.

As she and Ava entered the dining room, she noted with dismay that Ray was with their group, waiting with Lauren, Stephanie and Cindy for them to arrive. But of course he was. Where else would he be, when he had to eat like everyone else after all? He was wearing black slacks with a dark blue shirt that complemented his bronze complexion perfectly. Not that every single color she had ever seen him in hadn't been similarly flattering. When he looked up, there was no question that his eyes were following her as she made her way toward them.

"Snake eyes," Ava said under her breath, causing Dylan to smile.

Unfortunately, Ray thought the smile was for him and smiled back; a real eye-popping, beautiful, make-you-moist smile. How was it, Dylan wondered, that Cindy didn't notice that her husband was flirting right under her nose? And why was it that she was more annoyed with Cindy for not keeping him under control when her annoyance was more appropriately directed at him for being the kind of man who could not control himself?

"Got your beauty naps in?" Lauren asked as they approached. She was wearing a tight yellow mini-dress that in a few short months would be impossible as her pregnancy began to show.

"Yes, and we're famished," Ava said.

"Then let's go eat," Cindy smiled and looped an arm through Dylan's for which she was grateful since it effectively eliminated any chance that Ray would approach her.

Instead, Ray hung back with Stephanie Alfieri, who Dylan was trying not to behave awkwardly around. Since the cocaine incident—which she'd been struggling mightily to pretend hadn't happened—Dylan had been avoiding Stephanie's

invitations to lunch. Having her on this trip, especially with Ava there as well, was a little awkward but it also gave Dylan some deniability if Stephanie ever called her out for snubbing her.

Seated at a table overlooking the golf course, illuminated by pale lights under the palms, the group immediately ordered two bottles of champagne and began the idle and pointless chatter that always accompanied dinners with this many people. But soon after they'd ordered, the conversation splintered off into twos, and Dylan turned to Cindy who was sitting next to her and had tapped her on the shoulder.

"I hadn't realized you were so close to Lauren," she said, leaning a little closer to Dylan.

"We met at Pedro and Vanessa Lima's. Before Mark and I were married," Dylan explained, wondering why she was feeling as though she'd done something wrong.

"I was very surprised she even invited me on this trip," Cindy said. "We've never been exactly close, Lauren and I."

"Oh," Dylan said. "I didn't know that. So why did you . . . ?"

"I came because I heard you were coming," Cindy said.

"There are certain elements in our little Mets family . . ."

"My wife has a special talent, Dylan." Ray Hernandez had leaned in, a hand on his wife's shoulder, causing her to go tense for just a moment. "She can suck the joy out of a party like no one else."

"Have you been eavesdropping again?" Cindy asked her husband, her voice icy.

Dylan blushed, not especially enjoying being front and center witnessing someone else's marital discord.

"I didn't need to hear a word you said," Ray returned. "I'm familiar with your routine by now."

"As I am with yours," Cindy snapped.

Ray turned away again and rejoined a conversation with Lauren Morales.

Dylan smiled at Cindy in a way she hoped was reassuring and Cindy shrugged, touching her hand.

"We can talk some other time," she said. "Maybe this is a conversation I should have had with you over lunch back in New York."

Dylan had no idea what she was referring to, and quite

honestly, was more preoccupied with her earlier conversation with Mark than anything else at the moment. The night was young and she was already wishing for bed.

After her husband's rebuke, Cindy made no attempt to talk about anything deeper than the weather and the latest fashions, and dinner dragged on until around eleven, when Lauren announced that they were moving on to the next phase of the evening.

The 'next phase' involved a vulgar, white stretch Humvee limo and a drive through the streets of Palm Springs to a nightclub populated by people who looked young and carefree, the way Dylan remembered being, not too long ago. The loud music, strobes and faint smell of alcohol reminded her of nights she and Ava spent running around Manhattan, seeking out the best nightlife the city had to offer. As they walked into the club in a group, a man in a suit descended upon them, making a beeline for Ray and ushering them all to a semi-secluded section of the club, where comfortable sofas and a private bar awaited.

Cindy looked bored with the whole scene, but Stephanie and Lauren immediately headed for the dance floor, losing no time finding partners to join them. Ava held Dylan's arm and moved in.

"They act like they're single, don't they?"

Dylan said nothing. She could imagine how that could happen over time. Since the season had begun, she almost felt single herself. When she saw Mark, their time together was fleeting, and their phone conversations had grown more and more brief as he disappeared into the game.

And of course, their conversation today hadn't helped matters much. She wondered dully whether in refusing to go home she'd been trying to goad him into an argument, get a rise out of him. After all, what the hell did she care about being in Palm Springs? She wasn't even enjoying herself.

"I'm going to dance too," Ava said into her ear. "You want to come?"

Dylan shook her head, and watched as Ava sashayed her way toward the dance floor. She hadn't been the best friend to Ava lately, she thought now. But when they got back to New York, she would make it up to her somehow. And of course, there

was Miri and the canceled shopping trip. And Mark, of course. She had a lot of making up to do.

Directly across from her, Cindy and Ray Hernandez were studiously ignoring each other, waves of festering anger and recrimination roiling off them. And it suddenly became too much. Dylan stood and took a deep breath, heading for the exit. She needed some air.

Outside, there were young women in stilettos and short skirts, bubbly and excited for an evening out; and young men, preening and pretending not to notice them. Just across the street from the club was a small park, all lit up and aglow, with benches overlooking a small fountain surrounded by a wrought iron fence. Dylan crossed over to it and leaned on the fence, looking at the fountain. She shouldn't have come. That much was obvious now. She wasn't even sure why she had.

The past several weeks had been a frenzy of activity. She almost didn't know where to focus her attention. On making friends with the other wives, bonding with her new family, preparing for her career, or taking care of her massive new home? And then of course there was her new, perfectlygroomed self. Her hair, her body, her face. Everything was a project that required much more maintenance than she ever would have imagined. Who would have known that being one of the idle rich could be so time-consuming? And throughout it all, Mark felt so far away.

She didn't know how long she had been there when she felt a presence just over her shoulder. Thinking it might be a presumptuous stranger, she turned and saw that instead, it was Ray. Of course it was. Dylan tensed immediately, already thinking about how she might politely get away from him.

"What're you doing out here all alone?" he asked, his voice quiet and strangely soothing.

"Just thinking," Dylan said, glancing rather than looking directly at him.

"I do that occasionally," he said, leaning next to her.

In spite of herself, Dylan smiled. "Oh do you?"

"Yes. My wife will tell you differently, but I have been known to fire up the ol' brain cells."

"Where *is* your wife?" Dylan asked, trying not to sound unkind. "Isn't that where you should be?"

Ray shrugged, and when she glanced at him, noted with surprise that there was a flash of something almost like sadness in his eyes. “Cindy stopped noticing my absence a long time ago,” he said.

“How’d that happen?” Dylan asked, keeping her tone lighthearted.

Ray grinned at her, visibly snapping out of whatever genuine moment he’d had seconds earlier. “Who knows? Occupational hazard. Believe it or not, the same will happen to you soon enough.”

“Never,” Dylan said, shaking her head. “I miss my husband every second of every day that he’s gone.”

Ray smiled at her indulgently, as though she was a foolish child. “I’m sure you do, Dylan. I’m sure you do.”

She felt a spark of annoyance at him, for intruding when she obviously wanted some time alone, and for stoking one of the many areas where she had deep and genuine trepidation about her marriage. Mark and she had married so quickly, and knew each other so little that lately Dylan had reflected that the time they’d spent apart now exceeded that which they’d spent together.

When he was away, she found it hard to read him by his voice on the telephone alone. The plain truth was, she didn’t know him well enough to do that accurately. That lent itself to the potential for arguments and misunderstandings, based only on a misinterpreted choice of words, or a poorly placed pause. Or like now, flashes of insecurity as Mark doubted she could even be in the same city as Ray Hernandez and hold up her end of their bargain.

But wasn’t she breaking their agreement right now? Wasn’t this moment, her and Ray separated from their group, *precisely* the kind of situation Mark feared when he ordered her home? Dylan abruptly turned and was surprised when Ray grasped her upper arm. Leaning in, he spoke almost against her ear.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and Dylan realized he’d misinterpreted the suddenness of her motion as her about to leave in a snit at his sarcastic comment. “Don’t go. I like your company, Dylan. I didn’t mean to ... imply anything about your marriage. Lord knows it’s not an institution I know a thing about.”

Dylan looked directly at him, seeing once again that there was something true and real behind those unusual eyes just for moment. She said nothing, but looked down at his hand on her arm. Slowly, Ray removed it.

“The truth of the matter is,” he continued. “You’re the first real person I’ve met in a long while. So if I seem a little overeager to spend time with you, chalk it up to that.”

Dylan gave him a small smile. For whatever reason, she actually believed him. Being a superstar had to be an isolating experience; there was no doubt about that. She knew because she had already changed toward Mark—carefully editing the things she thought merited his time and worry when she spoke to him—and he had not yet become as big a star as Ray was. She could only imagine how much less of the pedestrian concerns of real life Ray was exposed to, and how he might miss those concerns.

Did Cindy share with him when their kids had to go to the dentist, or if they had problems in school? Did she tell him about the crowd at the grocery store, or her idle chatter with their neighbors? Or was Ray placed in a little bubble so as to keep him unaffected, his mind reserved for the game of baseball?

Dylan touched Ray’s arm briefly, feeling sympathy for him.

“I understand,” she said, finally. “But I still think we should probably return to the group. It was rude of me to duck out like this anyway.”

Ray looked regretful, but extended a hand to her.

“Okay,” he said, nodding. “Let’s see whether we can dash through this traffic without getting hit by a Bentley.”

Dylan laughed, and for the sake of goodwill, did not protest when he took her hand as they crossed back over to the nightclub.

Dylan watched with barely disguised pleasure as Miri tried on outfit after outfit, turning to check the front and rear of each item before deciding whether to add them to her growing pile. This was one time that the cost wouldn’t matter. Even if she spent an exorbitant amount of money, Mark would have nothing to say about it if it were for Miri. Not that he ever had much to say about it even when she was the beneficiary, either.

Recently though, Dylan had learned that no matter his silence, it hadn't exactly gone unnoticed.

Last week in Cartier, when she'd tried to use her Centurion card to buy an exquisite necklace, the clerk had discreetly called her to the side and handed her a telephone. She was certain her card hadn't been declined, so she was puzzled as she took the receiver. On the other end of the line was Wade, her and Mark's financial manager.

*Mrs. Acosta*, he said, his voice regretful. *I'm afraid I can't approve this purchase.*

*I wasn't aware that you were now in the position of approving my purchases*, Dylan had replied, mustering up all the haughtiness she could, more to save face in front of the Cartier clerk than anything else.

*Your husband has asked that I monitor activity on your Centurion card*, Wade explained. *To ensure that you stay within a reasonable budget. This item would put your considerably over that budget, Mrs. Acosta. I'm sorry.*

*Well my husband didn't breathe a word of that to me!*

*So perhaps you should speak with him*, Wade suggested. *Again, I'm so sorry, but I have to follow the instructions I was given.*

Dylan had almost felt sorry for the guy. Of course, it was something Mark should have discussed with her, and poor Wade was only doing as he was told. But by then she was thoroughly embarrassed at having been treated like a spendthrift teenage heiress, in front of Lauren Morales who was shopping with her. So rather than give Wade the courtesy he was due, she hung up on him and left the store in a huff.

*Oh don't worry about it, honey*, Lauren had said to her dryly. *It happens to all of us sooner or later; the dreaded 'wife allowance.'*

The allowance itself wasn't what bothered Dylan so much as the fact that Mark hadn't told her about it in advance. It meant that he'd had a concern—that he didn't see fit to share with her—about her spending. And though he never voiced that concern, he had certainly told Wade. Or maybe it was vice versa? Wade, after all, was the one who had spilled the beans about that first spending spree at Bergdorf's and he was the

one who saw the charge account bills. So Dylan had consoled herself that in all likelihood Mark never would have denied her the thirty thousand dollar necklace, it was Wade who was the ogre.

But Miri was a different matter altogether. Still, before ringing up, Dylan would place a quick call to Wade to make sure she wasn't crossing any lines.

"It's probably moot for me to go see UVa at this point, isn't it?" Miri was saying now as she twirled in a long black skirt.

"I mean, I may as well go to Columbia. It's such a great school."

"No harm in looking," Dylan said. "And since Mark's going to be home for awhile, I'm sure he'd love to take you."

"And you'll come too, right?" Miri asked.

"Of course."

"How long a drive is it?"

"Long," Dylan said. "But I'm not sure, precisely."

"I'll check in a minute. I have my iPad," Miri said going into the dressing room to take off the skirt and try the next item.

Though they still stubbornly refused to move from the old neighborhood, the Acostas now had some of the accoutrements of financial comfort. Miri had her iPad and a new desktop. Matt and Peter both had new cars and clothes and Mr. and Mrs. Acosta had agreed to have their kitchen remodeled and the smaller television set replaced with a large projection model.

Mark was still trying to get them to accept his offer to buy a house in the Dominican Republic, but thus far, they had resisted, still not convinced, he told Dylan, of the solidity of his financial situation. They had compromised by saying that when he was in his second season they would consider looking at places in Punta Cana, near where Mrs. Acosta was born.

While Miri was in the dressing room, Dylan pulled out her phone and called Wade, resenting that it was necessary. Their conversation was brief. She estimated how much she was likely to spend and let him know what it was for, and he assured her that "there should be no problem" sounding as though he didn't understand why she believed there might be. Dylan ended the call, wondering whether she dared broach the subject with Mark when he got home later that evening.



But the only way she would know about the spending limit would be because she'd almost exceeded it. And if Wade hadn't mentioned the Cartier episode, she would just as soon not have Mark know about it at all. So in all likelihood, she realized with a defeated sigh, she wouldn't say anything. And it wasn't as though they didn't already have some pretty big fish to fry. His night at home was an unscheduled stop, precipitated, Dylan suspected, by the Palm Springs trip.

Before Palm Springs, the plan had been for her to meet him in Philadelphia for the Phillies series, but he'd suddenly changed his plans, and was coming home instead. They would drive back to Philadelphia together in the morning, a breach of protocol during the regular season that he would probably take some flak for. Dylan could only imagine that he'd done it only because he wanted that time in the car with her to talk, and she was fairly certain the conversation would not be a pleasant one.

"Done!" Miri emerged from the dressing room in her own clothes. "I think I should have enough stuff to get me through all four years of undergrad."

Dylan laughed. "Shoes?"

Miri groaned. "Ugh. I forgot about the shoes."

"Must be because you grew up with only brothers," Dylan said, going to loop an arm through her sister-in-laws. "I never met a woman who didn't want to shop for shoes."

It was dusk by the time Dylan pulled up to the gates of the house. The lights on the gatepost were on and lights were visible in the windows of the house. Mark was home. She was both excited and nervous, wondering at the greeting he would give her. On the phone lately, things had been a little strained, ever since the ill-fated, totally-not-worth-the hassle Palm Springs weekend. Ava had a good time, as did Lauren, but Dylan spent the entire time worried and a little bored by the so-called festivities.

After the first nightclub, the others were a blur, and the remainder of the evening was spent avoiding Ray. The next day, she spent by the pool with Ava and then got some spa treatments done. That evening had been a repeat of the first, with Ray once again along for the ride, though it was perplexing that he would want to be there. Dylan had

eventually given in a spent some of the night talking to him, more out of exhaustion from the effort of pointedly sitting apart from him. And it wasn't that bad, she reasoned, because for much of the time, his wife was with them.

Now, as she pulled up and into the carriage-style garage, Dylan prepared herself for the conversation with Mark. She took a deep breath as the garage door shut behind her, and leaned back against the soft leather headrest. Next to her were four shopping bags, her own spoils from the afternoon with Miri. All things considered, she'd done well—all she bought was a pair of ankle boots, a cute Marc Jacobs purse and a couple of blouses. Altogether it amounted to less than three thousand dollars; not bad. Still, she would leave the bags in the car to avoid a completely pointless conversation about how she spent her time.

She entered the kitchen and was startled by the sight of Mark, right there, sitting on the counter, drinking a Corona from the bottle, almost as though waiting for her. As always, the sight of him made her heart leap for a moment, reminding her that though they were married, this was still a new relationship and all the initial excitement was still there. At least for her it was. Right now, Mark looked anything but excited to see her.

He blinked slowly as she entered. His expression was inscrutable as he looked at her. Dylan swallowed.

"Hi," she said.

"Hey."

He emptied his beer bottle and launched himself off the kitchen counter with remarkable agility and grace. He was wearing only sweatpants, his chest and feet were bare as was his preference when at home. Dylan forced herself to say nothing when he deposited the beer bottle into the garbage can, instead of the blue recycling bin and stood still as he approached her, apprehensive because she still could not read his expression. Mark came closer and closer until they were inches apart. She could feel him fighting the impulse to touch her, something he would not do unless he was still angry.

Dylan looked up at him, into his dark as night eyes, her heartbeat accelerating at his proximity and his overwhelming maleness. That quickly, she wanted him, a wanting that was only intensified by the knowledge that he was hers for the

taking. He had a unique scent that Dylan almost believed she could pick out from a roomful of strangers, even if she were blindfolded. It was earthy and set her pulse racing whenever she detected it, even if only on a shirt he had recently taken off.

She let her purse fall from her shoulder and reached out with both hands, placing them lightly on his hips, right at those amazing indentations where his abs ended. Sliding his sweats partially downward, she realized he wasn't wearing his customary boxer briefs underneath. She moved closer, her hands going around and cupping his firm buttocks. Dylan could feel him tense slightly. By now, the effect of her touch was apparent, straining upward beneath the fabric of his sweats. She fell to her knees, pulling his sweatpants the rest of the way down and holding him in both hands.

"I'm still not happy with you right now," Mark said. But his voice sounded a little choked, a little uncertain.

"I know," Dylan said, stroking him.

His skin was so soft, and yet he was so, so hard. Like polished stone sheathed in the smoothest silk. She bent to taste him, rolling the slightly salty taste over her tongue before lowering her head again and taking him almost completely into her mouth.

Mark emitted a sound that he'd clearly been trying to hold back, and his buttocks clenched beneath her palms. Dylan dug her fingers into him, pulling him deeper into her mouth, even as he tried to restrain himself from thrusting too far. She urged him forward, alternately moving fast until she could feel his excitement, and then slowing once again. Soon he was moving back and forth, touching the back of her throat, almost choking her, but she was determined to push through the discomfort and relaxed her neck muscles, giving him the freedom to go as far and as deep as he wanted.

Mark was moving in earnest now, helpless but controlling her with his hands on the back of her head, threading in her hair. Dylan prepared herself for his release, but he suddenly pulled back, and she gasped at the sudden void between her lips. Then Mark was crouched with her, lowering her onto the kitchen floor, right there in front of the stove, pulling her dress up, tugging her underwear aside, pressing her apart and diving

into her.

As impossibly good as it felt, she didn't want that. She hated that he thought he had to reciprocate every single time she took him in her mouth. She did it because she loved doing it, because tasting him and feeling him against her tongue, swallowing him gave her more pleasure than she would ever have imagined, or had ever experienced before with another man.

Dylan pulled him up to her and with her free hand, tugged her underwear down. Mark, impatient, ripped it off and in a shuddering motion, surged forward and buried himself deep in her. As he entered her, he sighed as though he had taken his first breath and lay still for a moment while they felt each other. Dylan felt herself fuse to him, holding him in, pulling him deeper, even though they were both motionless. That was when Mark kissed her for the first time, his tongue moving restlessly, frenziedly about hers, his hands going up to her chest, pushing her bra up so he could cup and hold her breasts. "*Dylan ...*" he breathed. "You feel ... you feel ..."

He couldn't seem to complete his sentence, because he didn't take his mouth from hers long enough. She reached down between them, her hand slick as she held him, urging him to move, shoving her hips up to meet his. Mark pulled her hand away and finally reared back, pounding into her energetically, their contact with each other and the kitchen floor making moist, slapping noises that only heightened Dylan's excitement. Then he was sitting up, pulling her with him.

Dylan shrugged her dress over her head so she was naked, except for her bra, shoved above her breasts. She sat astride her husband, hands on his shoulders, rolling into him, looking down at his face, loving the look of dazed pleasure softening his features. But in this position, she felt almost dominant, and that was not what she wanted. She had fallen to her knees before him not only to give him pleasure, but to let him know that she submitted to him; that despite her defiance of his wishes about her staying in Palm Springs, she accepted his authority as her husband.

So she lifted off him now, and turned, positioning herself on her hands and knees. Mark wasted no time kneeling behind her and entering her again from the rear. Dylan let her head hang

low, finding it incredibly erotic to open her eyes, watching between her arms and legs as he sunk into her and pulled back, a part of him disappearing into her.

Soon, the sounds of their moans filled the room and Mark wrapped one arm at her waist his fingers between her legs. Dylan screamed as she climaxed, her head raised like a wolf baying at the moon, and feeling equally as wild. Concentrating all motion in his hips, Mark pushed into her harder and faster, finally grabbing her into a bear hug, and pulling her back against him as he groaned out his own climax, jerking and twitching, Dylan's muscles clenching and unclenching about him.

She could feel his heart skipping an irregular beat against her back, his chest rising and falling. Dylan reached behind her awkwardly trying to hold him, and Mark moved her hair aside, kissing the back of her perspiration-dampened neck.

"Baby," she breathed. "I'm *sorry*."

She craned her neck to try to look at him and Mark leaned in to kiss her, his lips soft against hers. Then he was pulling out of her and standing, pulling his sweats back up. Dylan, though, was naked, her bra still askew. Mark held a hand out and pulled her up, his face marginally more relaxed. But only marginally. He was *still* angry with her.

Dylan removed her bra, now completely nude. When Mark tried to release her hand, she wouldn't let him.

"Let's go take a bath," she said.

After a moment Mark nodded and followed her upstairs.

If she thought the bath would complete the distraction, she was mistaken. Sitting opposite each other in the large tub Dylan was reminded that the last time they'd taken a bath together, when he'd confronted her about not following through on her law school application. Bathing together was quickly becoming associated with her deceptions and misdeeds.

"Palm Springs was boring and awful and I should have listened to you," she said, thinking it best to strike preemptively.

Mark raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"*Please*," Dylan said after a moment. "Mark, stop this ..."

"Stop what?" he asked, his voice cool.

"The silent treatment. I said I was sorry."

“You’ve been saying that a lot lately.”

There was no response to that, because it was true. Dylan slid closer to him, kneeling between his legs and pressing her face into his neck, pursing her lips to avoid apologizing yet again. It took a moment, but Mark’s arms came up and he held her against him.

When she was with him, alone, just the two of them, everything seemed so much clearer. The things she bought, the parties she went to were so obviously trivial when Mark was nearby, but when he was gone, everything became clouded and confusing again. But that was okay, she told herself. Because after the Phillies series, he would be home for a good long while, and then everything would be different.

# 15

“You need to stop whatever you’re doing and get to a computer *right now*.”

Dylan strained to hear Ava’s voice over the din of the game, pressing a finger into her ear. She was sitting in the section reserved for players’ families, surrounded by wives gossiping and the squalling of babies and toddlers.

“I’m at the game,” she said loudly.

“Dylan, believe me. You need to go check this out now.”

“Wait a minute. I’m going someplace quieter.”

Dylan stood and apologizing as she went, tripped over Stephanie and her kids, heading inside. In

the VIP suite, it was only slightly less noisy, so she instead made her way to the ladies room. “Ava? Are you there? What’s going on?”

“What *took* you so long?” Ava demanded.

“I was trying to find ... never mind. Tell me what’s going on. Is it something with Max?” “Max?” Ava sounded confused for a moment, as though she didn’t even recognize her own

boyfriend’s name. “No, this is about *you*.”

“Me? What do you mean?”

“Are you sitting down?”

“Ava, just tell me.”

“I wish you were at a computer, Dylan. It’s going to sound a lot worse than it ...” “*Ava!*”

“There’s a picture in the *Daily News* of you making out with Ray Hernandez.”

It took Dylan a moment to even comprehend what was being said.

“Dylan?”

“That’s impossible.”

“It’s from Palm Springs,” Ava began.

“I don’t care where it’s from. I’ve never made out with Ray Hernandez so it’s impossible.” There was a pause and Dylan realized Ava was considering whether to believe her. “Ava! Listen to me very carefully. I never made out with Ray

Hernandez.”

“Well, you two were a little chummy and the way he looked at you on the plane ...” “Tell me exactly what you see in that picture,” Dylan said, her voice trembling. “Okay. You’re standing in front of a fountain. There’s a gate, and ...”

Dylan closed her eyes. *Oh god.* That first night in Palm Springs, when Ray found her at the park

across from the nightclub. She tried to remember. For sure he hadn’t kissed her, but the photo ... “So I’m looking at it, and it’s kind of ambiguous,” Ava said. “The shot is from an angle where it

looks like he’s kissing your neck or something.”

“He was speaking into my ear,” Dylan said, her voice dull. “He wasn’t kissing my neck.” “Well ...” Ava let the word drag out. “It’s hard to tell that from this shot. And it doesn’t help that

there’s a couple others ...”

“Don’t tell me,” Dylan said, putting a hand over her face.

It all came back to her in flashes now. Ray holding onto her arm, holding her hand as they crossed the street.

“Honestly?” Ava said. “It looks pretty intimate. Almost like a lovers’ quarrel or something. He’s grabbing your arm.”

“Ava, you know better than that.”

“Yes, *I* do. But ...”

Yes, but. *Mark.*

“And what was going on there, Dylan? I mean, it looks pretty ... damning if you want to know the truth.”

Mark’s parents. Miri. The other Mets player. *What would everyone think?*

“Well, the good news is that they don’t seem to know who you are,” Ava said. “They’re calling you a ‘mystery woman’. Ray Hernandez is known to be a big cheat, so ...”

“Everyone who knows me will know who I am,” Dylan said, her voice lifeless. “That’s the important thing. Cindy. Everyone.”

“If you’re at the ballpark, Dylan, my advice would be for you



to go back to the hotel. Now. Call Corey.”

Corey. Mark’s agent. He was also Mark’s *de facto* PR guy because Mark didn’t believe in manufacturing a public relations image. And up till now, he hadn’t needed to—he was fast approaching Ray’s status as the most popular player on the team and the press loved him as well.

Now that ‘love’ was certainly going to be put to the test.

“Okay,” Dylan opened the door to the ladies room, looking about her guiltily, as though everyone knew what she had just learned. But everyone in the suite was still occupied by the game, or drinking and socializing.

Feeling like a fugitive, she headed for the exits, finding one of the security guards to get her a car back to the hotel. Once there, she washed her face clean of all her makeup and changed out of her expensive outfit and into sweats and a t-shirt. Her heart could not seem to stop racing. After about an hour of pacing the room, she plucked up enough courage to call Corey.

At first, she got only his voicemail, but after trying twice more, he finally answered. “Pardon me, Dylan,” he said, “but *what the fuck is going on?*”

“Corey ...”

“Are you sleeping with Ray Hernandez?”

“Corey, not that it’s any of your business, but no! Of course I’m not ...”

“It sure looks like you’re pretty chummy with him. These pictures, Dylan ...” Corey groaned. “It almost doesn’t matter what you say to try to explain them.”

“I will explain them. But only to my husband, and ...”

“Here’s what I’m going to do,” Corey cut her off. “As soon as the game is over tonight, I’m going to grab him and bring him back to the hotel. I’ll do my best to make sure he doesn’t talk to anyone, anyone at all, and then you’re going to tell him. And I mean *everything*.”

“Okay,” Dylan said, feeling her heart drop to her stomach.

“I don’t want Mark being waylaid by some smart-ass reporter who breaks the news that his wife was canoodling with the supposedly injured Ray Hernandez while he was out winning games for the glory of the Mets.”

“*Jesus, Corey ...*”

“Well that’s the story they’re going to write, Dylan. Like it or not.”

She kept her mouth shut after that, listening as Corey instructed her on how she should broach the subject. After all, she thought, Corey had known Mark a lot longer than she had.

Dylan spent the next several hours on the phone with Ava, purposely avoiding getting online to look at the pictures herself. She could only hope they were fuzzy and indistinct, and that she wasn’t smiling in any of them. She remembered being tense at Ray’s closeness and that once she recalled that Mark would hate her being alone in his company, even in a public place, she’d grown even more uncomfortable. Dylan prayed that discomfort would come across in the photographs.

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Somehow she’d managed to fall asleep. And when she opened her eyes again, the suite was dark, the only illumination coming from the skyline, outside, Philadelphia lit up at night. Dylan’s eyes adjusted to the inky blackness in the room and realized that she was still alone. It was late, just after eleven p.m. according to the clock on the desk across the room, and Mark still had not come.

Dylan turned on the television, checking local stations to see whether the game was over. She sat through the entire news broadcast until they got to sports and learned that way that the Mets had lost to the Phillies. Just as she was about to turn off the set, the sportscaster added an afterthought.

“But perhaps their luck will change,” he said, “when Ray Hernandez rejoins the team for the next game of the three-game series.”

Sitting up, Dylan reached for her cell phone and dialed Mark’s

number. There was no answer, and her call was forwarded almost immediately to voicemail. Feeling her heart pounding in her chest, she instead called Corey. After two rings he answered, sounding exhausted and irritable.

“Yes, Dylan?”

“I thought you said you were going to bring him straight here,” she said. But before Corey responded, she already knew what he was going to say.

“I was. Someone got to him before I did,” Corey said. “I’m sorry, Dylan but he didn’t want to ...”

“Okay,” she cut him off, not wanting to hear the rest of the sentence. “I understand. Can you tell him for me that ...”

“He just wants to get through the series, Dylan.”

“Of course,” she said, feeling the tears beginning to surface.

*He just wants to get through the series.* That was Mark. Disciplined. Focused.

All she was right now was a threat to all of that. So it made sense that he would want to stay away from her. She’d never been good for him, and now, because of those pictures, he would begin to realize it. She crawled back into bed and pulled a pillow against her chest, wanting to cry but not being able to produce a single tear. To cry, she would first have to get past the fear.

Now that Mark didn’t want to see her, there was no reason to stay in Philadelphia. She could go back home. And it was that word—*home*—that finally caused the tears to break free.

“I don’t want to look at them,” Dylan said turning over in bed and showing Ava her back.

“Well, it’s not that there’s anything to *see*,” Ava said. “It’s what they’re saying. Someone is talking to them, telling them things.”

Dylan glanced over her shoulder, afraid to know, but afraid not to. The pictures with Ray had gone on to become a full-blown scandal overnight. Now the entire tri-state area knew that the woman in the pictures was Mark Acosta’s wife of less than six months, and that they were taken in the resort town of Palm Springs while Ray was on the Mets injury list. Much was being made of the fact that Ray’s reported injury was to his groin. It had been grist for the late night talk show comedy

routine mill, that was for sure.

Tonight, all eyes would be on the second game of the three-game series with the Phillies because Ray was returning to the dug-out. Just the thought of it gave Dylan a stomachache. Mark still hadn't returned any of her calls and his voice mailbox was full. Over the last few hours, it didn't ring at all. Even Corey wasn't returning her calls, and all the while, the Acostas had been calling the house almost non-stop. Dylan had no idea how they were taking the news because she had been too scared to pick up.

"So, this has to be asked," Ava said, sitting on the bed next to her. "So I'm just going to come out and ask it."

"Go ahead," Dylan said, her voice muffled as her face pressed into the pillow.

"*Were* you interested in Ray Hernandez? *Are* you?"

"No, Ava. I'm not interested in Ray Hernandez."

"Dylan, I swear I'm not saying this just to torture you, but maybe you need to see these pictures. At least to see what Mark will or has seen. I mean, it's not ..."

"Fine," Dylan sat up, crossing her legs and heaving a deep sigh. "Show them to me."

Ava moved closer and turned the tablet so that Dylan could get a good look at it.

The pictures were surprisingly sharp and didn't look like they'd been taken with a cell phone camera by a casual passerby. Rather, they were the work of a professional, using state-of-the-art equipment and captured every tiny detail, down to the small dimple in Ray Hernandez' chin.

As soon as she saw the first photo, Dylan knew that things were going to be far worse than she had imagined. In the shot onscreen, it looked like Ray was nuzzling her neck, his hand gripping her arm. And the expression on her face did not disavow that interpretation; she looked slightly surprised, but not at all uncomfortable, almost like a woman receiving a surprise kiss from a lover.

Feeling her heart drop to her stomach, Dylan scrolled to the next shot, of her looking directly up and into Ray's eyes, her own eyes soft and attentive. She could only guess that the photographer had captured the moment when Ray had told her he liked her company because she was "real", when she had

felt a moment of deep compassion for him and his isolation. Another photo showed her with her mouth open, looking as though she was arguing with him, his mouth set in a hard line as he listened to what she was saying. And the final shot, the one that was least intimate but perhaps most damning, was the one of her crossing against the traffic with Ray, him holding her hand and both of them laughing.

Dylan slid the tablet off her lap and buried her face in her hands.

“Oh my god,” she said. “If this is what Mark saw. I can only imagine what he must ... And after the way I insisted that I stay in Palm Springs.”

“Wait. What?”

Dylan hesitated. She had never told Ava about that conversation, where Mark had basically ordered her home; she'd been too embarrassed about it at the time, being treated like a child. But she told her now and watched as her friends face changed.

“Christ Dylan. I'm all for the ‘I-am-woman-hear-me-roar’ bit, but was that really a battle worth fighting? If he was that uncomfortable with it, and you two had already settled that he didn't want you around this guy ...”

“You didn't hear the way he was speaking to me, Ava. Like I was a kid; like I was his kid. I couldn't just give in. And he doesn't even have a clear reason ...”

At this Ava's eyebrows shot up. “Have you seen the way Ray Hernandez looks at you? The way you look at *him*?”

Dylan blushed. “That means nothing. It's like meeting a movie star or something. It's all stupid, meaningless ...”

“Well apparently not so meaningless,” Ava pointed out, holding up the iPad. “And here's the photographic evidence to prove it.”

“But Mark has to know that ...”

“What did he say when you came back from Palm Springs? When you guys drove down to Philly?”

“Not much. He was still too angry. I said I was sorry, and ...”

*And that it was stupid and boring. And she hadn't mentioned a word about spending time alone with Ray Hernandez.*

“What?” Ava asked.

“He's going to think I lied to him,” Dylan said, her voice

lifeless.

“Did you?”

“No! I didn’t mention this because it all seemed so inconsequential. So I spent fifteen minutes alone in Ray’s company, so what?”

“*This* is so what. People take pictures. They make up stories. They spread rumors and innuendo. You can’t have been so naïve Dylan, could you?” Ava asked.

“You’re not making me feel better,” Dylan groaned, falling back against the pillows.

“Well, I’ll work on that,” Ava said wryly, “but honestly, right now, I don’t know how.”

She spent the afternoon in bed, drifting in and out of a restless sleep, not wanting to get up for any reason. By the time she relented to Ava’s insistence that she at least shower it was well after five p.m. and the Phillies-Mets game had begun. There was no point watching it from beginning to end, but Dylan found that she was unable to resist checking in. The commentators were, thankfully, sticking to discussing the game. There was no mention of the interpersonal drama swirling about the Mets’ two star players.

Sometime in the fifth inning, there was a shot of Mark in the dugout, sitting with his knees wide apart, his elbows on them, the brim of his cap low and obstructing his face. From the set of his mouth, Dylan could tell he was concentrating, but on what, she couldn’t even hazard a guess. While she wanted him to play well, there was a part of her that hoped he hadn’t been able to completely erase her from his thoughts, not even for the sake of baseball.

“Watching baseball is almost exactly like watching paint dry,” Ava said as she entered the master suite, holding a bottle of wine and two glasses.

She grabbed the remote control off the bed and changed the channel to a reality television show that seemed to consist of women in cocktail wear screaming expletives at each other.

“Gee, thanks,” Dylan said dryly. “This is *way* less stressful.”

“Well at least you get to watch people whose lives are much sadder than yours at the moment.” She handed Dylan a glass of wine which she happily took.

“I’m making us salmon for dinner,” Ava continued. “Which

we're going to eat at a table like civilized human beings."

Dylan said, sitting up in bed and taking a sip of her wine, grateful suddenly for her Ava, to whom she hadn't always been the best friend these last several months. "I haven't asked you a thing about how things are going with Max."

Ava sprawled next to her, facing the television and away from Dylan. "Which is just as well since things *aren't* going with Max."

"Ava, I'm sorry ..."

"You'll be happy to know that you were right. He isn't divorced because he doesn't really want to be."

Dylan reached out and touched her friend's leg. "No. I'm not happy to know that I was right," she said. "I just wish you would ..."

"Yeah, yeah, grow up. I know."

"No. I wasn't about to say that at all. I was about to say that I wish you would choose someone who's worthy of you."

Ava looked over her shoulder and gave Dylan a small smile. "I wish I knew what that means," she said sadly.

Dinner was eaten at the dining table after all. The enormous formal dining room was a stunning space and one in which Dylan and Mark had never eaten, even when his family was over. It boasted a table that could comfortably seat thirty people and was flanked by French doors leading out onto a patio with an outdoor brick oven and grill. When she and Mark had first toured the house, he had been particularly excited by that feature, imagining summer evenings when he, his father and his brothers would grill for the family and throw open the French doors to catch the breeze.

As Dylan picked through her salmon, Ava at her right, she thought about that, and about how all of those memories they had yet to make were now under threat. This was by far the most serious obstacle she and Mark had faced to date, and she had nothing to go on, no way of knowing how it might affect them, because their relationship was still so new. But she could hazard a guess.

"I know what he's thinking," she said to Ava now.

"What's that?"

"Mark. He's thinking that he doesn't know me. He's wondering whether he does, or whether I would do what it

looks like I did.”

Ava touched her hand. “I don’t think he’s thinking that Dylan. Don’t get yourself tied up in knots guessing. When this series is over he’ll be home. And you can talk to him, and hear firsthand what he’s thinking.”

Dylan laughed harshly. “I’m not sure I want to know.”

“Dylan, wake up!”

Dylan groaned and turned over, moving away from Ava who was next to her in the large master bed. They had been watching the game when she’d finally drifted off, convinced that there was nothing to see.

“Wake up!” Ava kicked her in the shin.

Dylan sat up and blinked to clear her vision. “What is it?”

The sportscast was on and the announcer was sounding animated, though it took a few moments

for the words he was saying to penetrate Dylan’s sleep-clogged mind.

“...appears—at least according to reports we’ve been hearing—to have been initiated by Mark

Acosta. And we don’t like to speculate but ahm, there have been press reports of late about a possible

personal relationship between Mark Acosta’s wife and Mets star player Ray Hernandez.” The

sportscaster paused as though regretful that he had to report on something so distasteful. “And again,

we have no information at this time to confirm what may have precipitated this incident but what we

do know is that there was an altercation in the Mets locker room immediately following the game,

during which we are told Mark Acosta—and this is the quote we are getting—‘rained several blows’

onto his teammate Ray Hernandez. We’re of course following this story closely but expect that the

Mets organization and MLB will be responding shortly.”

Dylan thought she could hear a roar in her ears and her body went completely cold. She wrapped

her arms about herself and turned to look at Ava, trying to formulate something to say. Ava, seeing



something in her face that obviously caused her concern immediately turned off the television. “*What are you doing?*” Dylan screamed at her, lurching for the remote.

Ava held it out of her reach. “Dylan,” she said quietly. “This isn’t happening on television. It’s happening in real life. *Your life*. You need to call your husband.”

Dylan nodded dumbly and felt the sudden hot tears streaming down her face. She wasn’t sobbing or making the noises of a cry, so it felt like she was bleeding. She wiped her face with the back of a hand and grappled by the bedside for her phone. With shaking hands, she dialed Mark’s number. It rang several times and went to voicemail, and when she called again, someone picked up but said nothing.

“Mark,” she said, her voice breaking. “*Mark ...*”

“It’s Corey, Dylan.”

“Corey, let me talk to him,” she said. Now the sobbing had begun in earnest, just knowing that she might hear his voice, that he was within reach in some small way was both painful and a relief. “He can’t right now, Dylan,” Corey said, sounding angry.

“*Why?* Is he hurt?”

“No. Look, he’ll be on his way back to New York tonight, okay? But he can’t come to the phone right now.”

“Corey, let me speak to my husband!”

“Dylan,” Corey said. “I’m sorry, but he just doesn’t want to speak to you.”

And then the line went dead.

Dylan looked at the phone, wondering why she would be surprised. Of course he didn’t want to speak to her. Now, because of her, not only his personal life but his professional life might be in shambles.

Mark Acosta was not this kind of professional athlete; everyone knew that. He was one of the steady and mature, the guy who didn’t bring anything to the game *except* the game. And she had

ruined that. Now he was just another hothead with a tawdry personal life.

Ava looked at her, her face pale. Dylan didn't need to say anything. It was obvious what had happened. Looking as frightened as Dylan felt, Ava opened her arms and Dylan went to her, crying quietly into her shoulder.

But there was only so much crying she could do. Though Ava held her until she was done, the unpleasant facts still remained once the tears were all shed. She lay on her side, her head in Ava's lap, ignoring the phone that had begun to ring. Somehow, she knew that it was not Mark, though Ava leaned over to check the caller id just in case.

"Do you want me to unplug it?"

"No! Mark might ..."

"Okay. We'll just keep checking it."

It rang on and off for the next several hours until Ava fell asleep. Next to her Dylan could only stare into the dark, wondering whether her marriage was over. Morning didn't look much better than the previous evening had. Dylan knew she had fallen

asleep again only because when she opened her eyes, Ava wasn't next to her. She rolled out of bed and took a hot shower, dressing in jeans and a long gray sweatshirt that fell almost to her knees. It was

one of her favorites because it was Mark's and was so well-worn that it felt as comforting as a hug. When she emerged from the bathroom, Ava was back, and had brought with her a tray with

coffee and a bagel. Dylan looked at both and shook her head, climbing back into bed. The shower felt

like about all she would be able to manage in terms of activity for the day. And she definitely wouldn't be able to get down anything to eat or drink.

"Under normal circumstances," Ava said, putting the tray aside, "I would be happy to encourage your pity party. Hell, I might even join you. But Dylan, you can't. Not this time."

Dylan looked at her, almost angry, prepared to argue. *How the*

*hell could she not feel like shit?* In case

Ava hadn't noticed, her life was falling apart around her.

"Mark might not want you around right now, but he needs you to be there anyway. You need to get over yourself for a moment and find him."

Dylan said nothing. She was usually the one doling out advice, but maybe Ava was right. "He doesn't know anything, Dylan. *You* know you didn't mess around with Ray Hernandez but he doesn't. Maybe even his family doesn't. How do you think it looks that you're not answering your phone, won't see anyone ..."

Ava was right. Wherever Mark was, he had to be feeling confused, angry, and maybe even scared.

For him to have lost his temper and actually hit Ray ... she couldn't even picture it. Mark, who was the very picture of self-control and poise. Even when he suspected Ray of flirting with her he had been unfailingly polite, a perfect gentleman

"I have no idea where he might ..."

But that wasn't true. He could only be in one of two places. At his parents' house, or the condo in the city. She could find him if she wanted to; if she was brave enough to face him.

"I want to check the news first," Dylan said, clearing her throat. She was hoarse from all the crying the previous evening, but what Ava said had galvanized her. She at least had a plan of action now.

Find Mark. The rest she would figure out once she had.

Ava found the iPad and turned it on, while Dylan switched on the television and found New York

1. There was a lot of news about a potential strike of sanitation workers, some other local spots and then the ticker tape ran across the bottom of the screen.

"A press conference," Dylan said, feeling a profound sense of dread. "In half an hour." "That's what it says online as well," Ava said. "Mark's going to speak to the press." "Oh my god ..." Dylan wrapped her arms about her abdomen. "What do you think happened?" "Maybe you could call his parents. I'm sure he would have called them."

"I don't think I could stand to speak to them right now," Dylan

said. “They must hate me.” “Dylan, I’m sure they don’t. They’ve been calling all night.”

“Maybe so they can tell me how much they hate me.” Dylan felt the tears coming again. She loved Mark’s parents, and his brothers. And Miri. God, especially Miri.

“I could call Miri,” she said, straightening up. “She’ll know what’s going on. And she’ll ...” “So call her,” Ava urged. “I don’t think I can last the half hour to Mark comes on either. This is excruciating.”

Dylan sighed and picked up her phone, dialing the number and waiting tensely through the ringing. Finally, there was Miri’s voice. But she was keeping it low.

“Give me a moment,” she said. Dylan heard sounds like she was walking away from a television and conversation in the background, and then the shutting of a door.

“Miri, are you there?”

“Dylan! We’ve been calling and calling!”

“I know. I’ve ...”

“It isn’t true, is it?” Miri asked, her voice both hopeful and accusatory.

“No, Miri, of course it isn’t. I love your brother more than anything. It isn’t at all what it looks like.”

“It *looks* pretty bad, Dylan.”

“I know,” Dylan said forcefully, surprised at the strength of her own voice. But it was important that Miri and the Acostas believe her. She could not equivocate with them. “And I have to answer to Mark for that before I answer to anyone else. But I did not kiss Ray Hernandez, I am not having a relationship of any kind with Ray Hernandez and anyone who says any different is a *liar*.” Miri sighed audibly. “I’ve been saying that for the last couple of days. Peter is pretty pissed at you.

Matt is a little bit too but I think he believes it’s probably a misunderstanding.”

“And your parents?”

“They just don’t understand why you wouldn’t come here. You should come over, Dylan.” “I’m going to. But I need to find Mark.”

“He’s on his way here,” Miri said.

It was Dylan’s time to sigh. “Oh good. Do you know when?”

“As soon as this press conference is over with.”

“Did you talk to him? Do you know what happened?”

“No, my father talked to him. It’s what they said; he beat the crap out of Ray Hernandez.” “And what’s the press conference . . . ?”

“That we don’t know. He wouldn’t say. I’m not sure he knew completely . . .”

“Look, someone’s coming on now . . .” Ava said from behind her.

“Miri, I’ll call you back,” Dylan said. “Something’s happening.”

Dylan hung up and turned her attention to television where a man she didn’t recognize was at the podium. He looked down and read from what appeared to be a prepared statement. “This morning, Major League Baseball and the New York Metropolitan reached an agreement which will result in the suspension of New York Mets player Mark Acosta for an altercation that occurred last night involving his teammate, Ray Hernandez. Mr. Hernandez will not be suspended as we have determined after speaking with several witnesses—including Mr. Acosta himself—that the incident was unprovoked.

“As a general matter, the league joins the Mets in their expectation that its players uphold not only the rules of the game, but comport themselves with the utmost of respect for teammates and members of opposing teams. Mr. Acosta did not meet that standard last night. His suspension will commence immediately, and will be for ten games. That concludes my statement. A printed copy is available, and I’ll take your questions now.”

There was a flurry of reporters all speaking at once. Dylan grimaced and let her head drop. *Ten*

games. This was the start of Mark's career in the Majors and he was being suspended. His rookie season would be tarnished and his stats would take a serious hit because of this. And it was all her fault. And now she was going to have to face his family. She thought of how proud his parents had been when they went with him to the Dominican Republic, and of all the people in his neighborhood who had come out to celebrate his signing with the Mets.

*"Was anyone injured during the fight?"* a reporter asked.

"There were minor injuries to both men," came the answer.

*"Game-threatening injuries?"* someone else called out.

"We feel the game was threatened by virtue of the dispute and certainly the Mets will be deprived of Mr. Acosta's talent and skills during his suspension. But in the physical sense, no, neither man sustained game-threatening injuries."

*"Will they be able to play together as teammates following the suspension?"*

"That will have to be a question you ask them. I understand Mr. Acosta will be speaking with you shortly."

*"Do you have any information about what may have caused this altercation?"*

Dylan held her breath and closed her eyes, waiting for the answer.

"Again, perhaps that's something to ask them. Mr. Acosta may be the best person to pose that question to. Thank you everyone."

The MLB executive exited the stage quickly, probably sensing that the turn the questions had begun to take would not be helpful. Certainly not to the image of baseball, and not to that of either of the players involved.

On television, the New York 1 sportscaster, Paige Allen, whom Dylan had met what seemed ages ago was onscreen. Her face was a mask of false solemnity.

"Well, this has been a swift and sudden fall from grace for Mark Acosta who swept into town with the mantle of ..."

Dylan hit the mute button, preferring not to listen to the

evidence of the damage she had done.

Ava was looking at her as though trying to decide whether she should speak or let her alone. Dylan

stood and went to her dressing room to find her tennis shoes.

Afterwards, she went to the bathroom and silently combed out her hair, pulling it back into a

ponytail and applying concealer beneath her eyes. When she re-emerged, Ava was looking at the

television screen. There was another flurry of activity which made it clear something else was about to

happen. She shot Dylan a questioning look as though asking whether she was up to watching. Dylan

nodded and Ava turned the sound up.

It seemed like forever before someone came out. It was Corey and moments later, behind him was

Mark. As soon as he came into view, Dylan's heart began pounding. She leaned forward as though she

might see some detail about him not revealed by the high definition television. He was wearing jeans

and a button-down shirt. His face was a mask, but he looked tired. Dylan felt a profound urge to touch

him, to hold him overcome her.

She didn't hear a word Corey said, she was so focused on Mark. When he blinked, it was slowly.

He almost looked medicated but she knew from experience that it was exhaustion and detachment. It

was a look that said he would do what was necessary of him in the moment, but was emotionally and

mentally elsewhere. She could only speculate about where that might be. Not with her, that was for

sure.

Then he was moving towards the podium, his face grave. It took him a moment to speak. He first

pursed his lips and took a deep breath, then he looked into the camera.

"Last night," he began. "I let myself down. I let my teammates down. I let the fans, Major League

Baseball and the Mets organization down. My behavior was outside of the bounds of what was

expected of me, and the penalty I suffered for it was fair and

appropriate.

“I also want to take this time to apologize to my friends and my family, to people who supported and were proud of me. Going forward, my focus will be on serving out the period of my suspension in a productive manner and getting my head back into the game. Thank you.”

*“Mark do you also want to apologize to Ray Hernandez at this time?”* someone yelled. Corey looked irritated at the question and seized Mark’s arm, trying to pull him away from the podium, but he was not quick enough. Mark leaned toward to the mike one last time. “No,” he said, his face and voice hard. “I do not.”

At that, a cacophony of questions were hurled in his direction, but Corey was already pulling him away and offstage, obviously giving him an earful as he did. Ava looked at Dylan, waiting.

“I have to go,” she said finally.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Ava asked.

Dylan smiled without humor. “I would love it. But I think it’s probably best that I go alone, don’t you?”

Ava nodded.



# 16

The hush was immediate as she entered the room. Dylan looked around at the faces of Mark's family—her family—and the only person who would meet her eyes was Miri. After a moment, she stood and came around from the dinner table, putting an arm about Dylan's shoulder.

"Just in time," she said, her voice a study in false cheer.

"Yes," Mrs. Acosta stood as well and indicated the place at the table that was customarily Dylan's.

"Come, come. Eat."

"Dylan surveyed the table, her eyes stopping at the end where Mark sat next to his father, his gaze trained at his plate of food. As she drew nearer, Peter didn't have any trouble meeting her gaze and his look was downright hostile. Matt seemed to be trying to read her, and Mr. Acosta was unreadable.

Xiomara gave her a small sympathetic smile.

Dylan's place at the table was directly opposite Mark, which was where she wanted to be, but dreaded being. Watching him ignore her would make the meal unbearable, but she also wanted to be able to see his face without having to be so obvious about it.

As soon as she was seated, everyone tried to resume the meal, but having been to countless

Sunday dinners, this one was atypical, to say the least. There was scarcely any conversation, and everyone seemed to be thinking of things to say. Dylan woodenly reached for rice and beans, spooning some into her plate, took helpings of chicken and vegetables, all the while stealing glances at Mark.

After an excruciating ten or so minutes of that farce, he was suddenly getting up from his place at the table and walking around to grab Dylan's arm and pull her up from her seat.

"¡Marcos!" his father snapped at him. "¡Cuidado!"

"She's fine," Mark said, pulling Dylan along behind him.

As humiliating as it was to be dragged away like a child, she was almost relieved because the silence that preceded it had been far worse.

“Mark,” Miri stood, her expression frightened. “Don’t ...” And only then did Mark let go of Dylan’s arm. Instead he nodded toward the stairs and she hesitated only a moment before going ahead of him up to the second floor. Dylan walked the hallway ahead of him, heading for his old room, feeling as though she was walking toward her execution. While she would certainly survive this conversation, it remained to be seen whether her marriage would.

Once in the room, Dylan sat on the edge of the bed on her hands because she didn’t know what she would do with them otherwise. Mark entered behind her and shut the door, leaning against it.

Afraid to look at his face, she instead picked a spot just above his left shoulder, but Mark wasn’t fooled.

“You’re not looking at me,” he said, his voice surprisingly quiet.

With some difficulty, Dylan shifted her gaze so that her eyes met his. When they did, he stared at her, searching. She knew he was looking for signs of deception, wondering whether he would know if she was being honest or not. It hurt to know that his doubt was that profound.

“Did you fuck him?”

Until he asked it, Dylan naively thought she knew what was at the heart of the matter, and that all Mark believed—and what had made him angry—was she had defied him and found herself in a

position where Ray Hernandez had the chance to make a pass at her. Foolish as it now seemed, she had never contemplated that he would seriously think she would willingly become involved with

Ray. *Sexually* involved. One of the pictures showed her smiling, but surely, he had to know that ... Her mind was still reeling when he asked the question again, this time not at all quietly. His voice

was loud, like the crack of a whip.

“*Did you fuck him?*”

Dylan sat motionless, numb. She could vaguely hear movement downstairs and then footsteps as someone came running up the stairs.

“*¿Por qué no me respondiste?*” And then as if only just realizing he was not speaking English, Mark shook his head, frustrated. “Answer me!”

“*No! Of course I didn't!*”

“You seemed to need to think about it,” he said, his voice bitter, as he advanced toward her. “Are you not sure what that entails, fucking? It’s what you did when you came home and found me in the kitchen. You fucked me so I wouldn’t ask you any questions.”

“No, Mark, that isn’t what ...”

“It isn’t?” he cut her off. “So what was it then, Dylan? You barely said a word to me before my dick was in your mouth.”

She flinched at his words, at how loudly he said them and how disdainful he sounded. She had never known Mark to curse before. Not at her, not at anyone. Not for any reason. Before she could respond, someone was knocking loudly on the bedroom door. As though to brace it against entry, Mark leaned against it again.

“Mark ...” It was Matt, and he sounded concerned.

“Can I talk to my wife? *¡Coño!*”

“*Cálmate ...*”

“Leave us alone, Matt,” Mark said, his voice slightly quieter.

“Matt, it’s okay,” Dylan managed to call out.

After a moment, there was the sound of him walking away and down the stairs, though very slowly.

“We’re a long, *long* way from okay, Dylan,” Mark said, lowering his voice.

“I know,” she admitted.

This acknowledgment seemed to unsettle him momentarily.

“Why?” he asked.

“Why . . . ?”

“Why were you with him?”

“I went outside to be alone. He followed me.”

“Did you want him to?”

“No, Mark, of course not, I ...”

“You let him kiss you.”

“*No!*”

“I saw the pictures, Dylan.”

“He’s not kissing me!” she insisted. “It looks like it, but he isn’t. I would never ...” “He was all over you. His hands were ...”

“I *know* what it looks like, Mark, but I was walking away from him and he held my arm.” Dylan

took her hands from under her thighs, leaning forward with the palms turned upward like a supplicant, pleading for him to believe her.

“You held his hand.”

“*No*. Yes. When he took my hand as we were crossing back to the club, I didn’t pull it away.

Maybe I should have, but it wasn’t anything like it looks, I swear.”

“What were you talking about?”

“Cindy, and then about you ...” and realizing how that sounded. “He was saying she never noticed when he was gone and that I would soon be the same. I told him I never would; and that I always missed you, that I always would when you had to leave.”

Something changed in Mark’s face, around his mouth. He wanted to believe it, but wasn’t sure he should. He closed his eyes, running his hands over his face.

“I rushed you,” he said, almost to himself. “I didn’t want to wait, so I rushed you into getting married ...”

Dylan felt a tide of panic. “*No*. I wanted to marry you. You didn’t ...”

“You couldn’t even tell me you loved me, Dylan. You weren’t ready. I didn’t want to risk losing you ... so I pushed you,” Mark was speaking with conviction now, as though he’d made up his mind. Feeling what was coming next, Dylan stood and went toward him, not sure he wouldn’t push her

away, but knowing she had to take the chance. She grabbed his shirt, gripping it tightly with both hands. “Don’t you *dare* say what I think you’re going to say.” “What do you think I’m going to say?” he asked wearily. “That you’re leaving me. Or that I should leave you.” He didn’t look at her, and she thought for a moment it might be because he was afraid, as afraid as she was. And that was Dylan’s first glimmer of hope since this whole awful ordeal had begun. That maybe Mark didn’t know how to leave her anymore than she would know how to leave him. Mark pried her fingers off his shirt.

“Don’t say it,” her voice shook. She sounded desperate and she hated herself for it. She sounded so weak. And she *was*. That was part of the problem, wasn’t it? She was too weak to simply walk away from Ray Hernandez in the first place; to stand up for herself and for her marriage. And that was why she was here and why Mark was in career limbo, suspended from the Mets.

*God, his suspension.*

She’d been selfishly thinking only about herself and hadn’t even given a thought to the fact that just that morning he’d been forced to walk away from a big chunk of his first season in the majors under a cloud of scandal.

“With your suspension and everything going on right now, it’s not the time to make rash decisions,” she said, shamelessly exploiting it nevertheless.

“Is it rash? You were with another man in ...”

*“I told you nothing happened!”*

“Why didn’t you go home when I asked you to? If you ...”

“You never asked me,” she snapped. “You told me. You *ordered* me.”

“And so you decided you would show me, huh?” He shook his head and put his hands up as though about to push her away.

“No, that *wasn’t* it.”

She grabbed his wrists and instead pulled him toward her so she was pressed against him and

looking up at him. This time he was the one avoiding eye contact. She could tell that having her so close weakened his resolve and diluted his anger, and maybe he *needed* to be angry at her right now.

Dylan let him go, but to her surprise, he grabbed her, keeping her close.

“Tell me what happened with him,” he said, his voice low.

“Nothing, Mark. *Nothing* happened.”

“Then why were you looking at him like that? Why was he looking at *you* like that?” Did she dare admit that there was an attraction there? That she was not completely *immune* to Ray Hernandez? But he knew that. He shouldn’t need to hear her say it.

“I can’t speak for him,” she said finally.

“Then speak for yourself!”

Dylan struggled to find the right thing to say, the least hurtful thing.

“You’re attracted to him ...” Mark said, his voice bitter once again.

“He’s attractive, but ...”

“... and that night you wanted him.”

“*No!*”

Dylan’s shoulders sagged. *No*. That night she hadn’t wanted Ray. She’d been sympathetic at first and then after awhile eager to get away from him because she knew Mark wouldn’t like it. But Mark wasn’t in the frame of mind to accept that. And those pictures certainly seemed to make a liar out of her.

She took his hand and noticed for the first time that the knuckles of his right hand were bruised and there were small abrasions crisscrossing it. She raised it to her lips, kissing it and he let her, his eyes closing momentarily.

“Look,” he said, finally tugging his hand away from her.

“Maybe it’s better for now if I stay here or at the condo, so ...”

“No,” she said, her voice solid for a change. On this she would not give an inch. Not even a fraction of an inch.

“Right now, it’s not . . .”

“No,” she said again. “Where you are, that’s where I’m going to be.”

Mark looked thrown by her unyielding tone. He hadn’t expected her to take charge of any part of this conversation. Things were not good between them right now, for sure, but this was where Dylan would not compromise. She had been foolish and irresponsible, and hadn’t understood what it meant to be the wife of a public figure and she would let him go through whatever he needed to go through to get past her stupid blunder, but that did not include shutting her out. No way was she going to lose him over this, over a stupid fifteen-minute conversation with *Ray Hernandez*. And there was also the matter of his being suspended. Ava was right; he might not want her around at the moment but he might need her.

“I don’t know how good for you I can be right now. I can’t get those fucking pictures out of my . . .” He ran his hands over his face.

“Those pictures are the worst of what happened, Mark. That’s all there was.”

He pressed his hands against her shoulders, pushing her away from him.

“Believe me, it was enough,” he said. And then he’d opened the door and was heading back downstairs, leaving her alone in his childhood room.

Dylan took a deep breath. It was bad, but there was something to work with. Not very much admittedly, but it was all she had.

Miri was the only one doing any talking. While Mark drove, Dylan looked out the window and stretched her legs across the back seat. She hadn’t been particularly enthusiastic about the trip to Charlottesville, Virginia but when Miri assured her that Mark would still make the drive with them, she had allowed herself to hope that it could mean the beginning of the thaw. But so far they’d been driving for three hours and he had yet to say a single word to her.

Even when they'd stopped in New Jersey for gas, he'd gone into the convenience store and brought out refreshments for them without asking what she wanted. He'd simply gotten her an iced tea, which admittedly she would have asked for anyway, but he just circumvented the asking altogether, as though he preferred not to speak to her under any circumstances.

And so now Miri was carrying the load trying not to make the trip completely unbearable by yammering away about everything under the sun. Dylan had a feeling that Miri had no more an intention of considering a college outside of New York than she had to fly to the moon. She simply wanted this time alone with both of them.

After dinner on Sunday, Mark had shown no inclination to leave for home so Dylan had—without comment—stayed at the Acostas as well. But while she slept in Mark's old bedroom, he had taken the sofa downstairs in the living room. Rather than try to talk him out of it, she just pretended it wasn't happening. A call to Ava had helped steel her spine.

*He's pissed at you, Ava said. So leave him be. Let him get through that. All you have to do is wait, and be there on the other side.*

And it made sense. There was no reason to be apprehensive. After all, Mark was her husband, and she had no intention of leaving him. So patience was the key. If only it didn't cause this god-awful ache in her chest when he looked right through her as though she wasn't there, or carried on laughing conversations with his siblings that pointedly excluded her.

For three days that had gone on, and Dylan found other ways to keep herself busy. She went with Mrs. Acosta up to the Grand Concourse to do grocery shopping, picking up jeans, underwear and a couple of shirts for herself so she wouldn't have to go all the way home. She learned how to make *pollo guisado*, planning for a time when she would cook it for Mark. And she helped her father-in-law prune his tomato plants in the backyard. On Tuesday she had the inevitable call with her mother, explaining that it was all a misunderstanding, and that it would be sorted out, hoping she sounded more convinced than she felt.



Mark, for his part seemed to have decided to veg out for the time being. He stayed in the basement apartment where Peter and Xiomara lived throughout most of the day and only occasionally left the house with Wilfredo, his former coach. Sometimes he talked on the phone with Corey, hushed conversations about what Dylan did not know. But no matter what, he avoided being where she was unless it was impossible, like during mealtimes. Still, sometimes, when she pretended not to be aware of him, Dylan caught him looking at her, though she could not read his expression.

Living in such close quarters with his large family wasn't easy. Almost from dawn, there was noise and activity resounding throughout the house, and seldom was there a quiet place or a moment when Dylan was alone with her thoughts. She wondered whether Mark was doing it on purpose, staying here until she couldn't stand it anymore and would have to leave, preferably without him. Well, if he thought that's what she would do, he was going to be sorely disappointed. She was in it for the long haul, no matter how long that turned out to be.

"Could we stop in Philadelphia?" Miri asked now. "I want to go to the Museum of Art."

"We'll lose too much time if we stop at a museum, Miri," Mark said.

"Well what's the rush? We could spend the night there and hit the road again in the morning."

Dylan waited for Mark's response. She knew what Miri was up to and she appreciated it, though it was unlikely to work. A night in Philadelphia would amount to nothing more than yet another setting in which Mark would ignore her completely.

"I think it's best if we just drive straight through, Miri," she said, her voice tired.

At that Mark looked over his shoulder at her and Dylan met his gaze, trying to give away nothing with her expression. If he wanted to be silent, she could be silent. She let her head fall back against the seat and shut her eyes.

When she opened them again, it was dark and they were pulling up in front of a small, quaint, inn-style hotel. Miri turned to look at her, yawning as the car came to a halt. Without a word, Mark got out and went inside.

"We're here," Miri said over her yawn. "It looks like a pretty

town.”

Dylan was too tired to care. Her exhaustion wasn't just physical, it was emotional as well. It was draining, trying to maintain her distance with Mark only feet away, and she was beginning to doubt she had the wherewithal to keep it up. Maybe, she wondered in defeat, it would be better for them to be apart for a little while? Moments later, Mark was back with keys, and was relinquishing the car keys to a valet while Dylan and Miri grabbed their bags.

“The hotel restaurant is about to close,” he said as they walked through the lobby. “If we want to get some dinner, we should probably go now.”

“You two go,” Dylan said. “I think I'll just go up to the room.”

“You don't want to eat?” Miri asked, looking concerned.

“No. Maybe I'll get something light from room service,” she said, and when Miri hesitated, she attempted a smile. “Really. I'm fine. I just need one of the keys.”

She held out a hand to Mark, not looking at him and he dropped a key in it.

Upstairs in the room, which was cute, quaint and decorated in Laura Ashley florals, Dylan undressed and filled the tub with warm water. When she stepped into it, she felt the tension begin to melt away. Strangely, being away from Mark right now felt better than being with him. The silence between them was oppressive. If she was going to wait him out, she would need many more moments like this—hot baths and quiet time to rejuvenate and steel her spine—because he definitely seemed determined to put her through the wringer.

Not that she expected to see him again until tomorrow. If she guessed right, he would probably take one room for himself and send Miri to spend the night in this one. And right now, that was perfectly fine with her. She couldn't imagine how she would get a good night's sleep if he was sleeping on the other bed, just a couple feet away and she couldn't touch him, or even speak to him for fear of being rejected.

Dylan closed her eyes and sighed, letting her head fall back. Her hair came loose from the sloppy knot she'd made to keep it out of the water but she didn't care. She was just so tired.

She opened her eyes again at the sound of the water running out of the tub, and the chill as it descended. What remained of

her bath had gone tepid. Now it was being let out and she had no idea how until she heard movement in the darkened bedroom. Miri was back from dinner and had probably found herself asleep in the almost-cold water.

“Thanks,” she called. “I guess I was more tired than I thought.”

Dylan stepped out of the tub and grabbed one of the fluffy hotel towels, wringing her hair out over the sink and letting it fall. Right now she couldn't care less what it might look like in the morning; all she wanted was a warm bed. But when she walked out into the bedroom, the sight of Mark, sprawled across one of the beds, wearing only his boxer briefs was enough to bring her to instant wakefulness.

She missed a step but quickly recovered and casually headed for her overnight bag. Happy as she was that he hadn't shunned the idea of sleeping in the same room, Dylan still didn't feel particularly like begging him to talk to her, so she decided not to. She would change for bed and get a good night's sleep because in the morning, Miri was going to wear them out with the campus tour and her generally indefatigable nature.

“I got you something to eat,” Mark said, the unexpected sound of his voice causing her to startle.

“Oh.” Dylan looked up and he indicated a white Styrofoam container on the table in the sitting area. “Thanks.”

She went over to investigate and found that he'd gotten her a burger. And with it, sweet potato fries, her favorite comfort food. In spite of herself, Dylan smiled. Mark had a way of doing things like this, reminding her that he paid attention to everything about her. Every once in awhile when she worried that they hardly knew each other, he would do something like this, reminding her that they were not total strangers after all.

Without bothering to change into her nightclothes, she sat at the table in her towel and began eating enthusiastically. As she ate, Mark got up and she was so into the delicious burger—which was thankfully still hot—that she didn't pay attention to what he was doing until he placed a glass in front of her filled with ice, and next to it a Coke.

Before he could move away, she put a hand over his and he paused, letting it stay there for a moment. It was his right

hand, the one that was bruised from his fight with Ray. Dylan lightly caressed the bruises and scratches on his knuckles until Mark pulled away and went back to his place on the bed, reaching for the remote and turning on the television.

Dylan finished her dinner and feeling her hunger comfortably satiated, went to brush her teeth, taking longer than necessary at the task, wondering whether she was brave enough to just go back out there and join Mark in his bed, or whether she should spare herself the rejection and take the other one. Then Mark was behind her, and reaching over her shoulder to grab the toothpaste, brushing his teeth as well, and she was painfully aware of him, and of wanting him to touch her.

Having him that close, his arm brushing her shoulder as he reached over her, seeing him reflected in the mirror, his chest bare, was enough to make her hold her breath. *How could she even have considered Ray Hernandez attractive?* Mark was what she wanted; and she had him, so why had she been so foolish to risk him for the fleeting thrill of another man's admiration?

When he was done and wanted to rinse, Mark rested a hand briefly on her shoulder so he could lean over the sink and finish up, then he returned to the bedroom. It was only once he was gone that she released the breath she had apparently been holding.

"Dylan."

The sound of his voice saying her name—and the way he said it—ignited a reaction like someone taking a match to gasoline.

"Dylan. Come here."

If she was feeling a little surer of herself and of them she would have dropped the towel and gone to him naked. But she instead tightened the towel and went out to the bedroom. As she approached, he sat on the edge of the bed, his legs apart. Dylan went to stand between them. Mark pulled her to him, pressing his face against her chest. The room was dark, except for the flickering of the television. While she'd been finishing up in the bathroom, he'd turned out all the lights. Usually, he wanted the lights on when they made love. He liked looking at her, and having her look at him. Dylan hoped his choosing darkness tonight meant nothing, but it pained her to consider that he might want her, but not want to *look* at her.

She stood still, afraid to move in case he snapped out of his unexpected need to hold her, and pushed her away again. She hesitated even to put her hands up to hold him back and break the spell. This was the first moment in days that she hadn't been just barely managing her fear that Mark might be thinking about leaving her.

Taking a deep breath, she raised her hands and loosened the towel just enough so that if Mark wanted it off, all he would have to do was move his head and it would fall. Dylan waited for it; hoping he would. He did nothing for what seemed a long time, and just as she was beginning to tremble from anticipation he lifted his head and pulled the towel aside, letting it drop to the floor.

Softly releasing a breath, Dylan looked down at him. She could just make out his face as the light from the television screen flickered across it.

"Before, I only had to hate the *idea* of him touching you," Mark said, his voice hoarse. "Now I have pictures of him doing it. And of you looking at him like ..."

Somehow, put like that, it hit her in a way it hadn't before. If those pictures had been of Mark and Patricia, and Mark was looking at Patricia the way she'd been looking at Ray, she wasn't sure she would have been quite as understanding as he was being. The word 'hysterical' sprang to mind to describe her likely response. And there was very little Mark would have been able to say to convince her that he didn't want a woman if he'd been looking at her in that manner. She would almost certainly have had to get away from him, at least for awhile.

"Tell me what you want me to do," she said

Mark pulled back and looked up at her. "Just ... come back to me," he said after a moment.

*What did that mean? She was here. She wasn't going anywhere and she never would.* But she was distracted because Mark had pulled her down to the bed and covered her body with his and she was so relieved that he still wanted her she could think of nothing else but showing him just how much she still wanted him.

# 17

Dylan increased her pace as they approached the hill and tried to concentrate on where she placed her feet. Trail running in Westchester was not like trail running in Central Park that was for sure. She only did it because of Mark. Now that he was home, he awoke with the sun and left for a run every single morning before lifting weights for another hour in their home gym, and finally eating a breakfast of six egg whites and a glass of orange juice around nine. Dylan joined him for the run but most often, they parted once again when he went to the gym while she made breakfast.

Since their visit to Charlottesville with Miri, they hadn't had any problems in the sex department, but other than that, he remained quiet and withdrawn around her most of the time. It was confusing to have been kissed, held and practically devoured under the cover of darkness and in their bed, and then awoken to a silent and uncommunicative man. Honestly it might have been better when he was ignoring her.

Running with him at dawn, sometimes working out afterward and eating breakfast was about as far as he would let her in.

Apart from the sex, of course.

They never talked as they ran, the trail was too challenging for that, and Mark remained focused on keeping in shape. He'd only missed four games of his suspension period, but with each one his mood worsened. Craig King was playing well and redeeming himself, so now Mark might be the one sitting in the dug-out, even when the suspension was over with. And there were other reasons for his mood as well.

While they were in Charlottesville, Dylan had hoped everything would die down but it hadn't. In fact, more pictures had surfaced, this time of Dylan and Ray talking in a nightclub, Ray leaning in to say something to her. She was listening keenly, seemingly engrossed in their conversation.

There was nothing intimate about the picture on the surface of it, but taken with the others, it seemed to tell a story of her spending considerably more time with Ray than she'd admitted to. And looking at that shot in isolation, it didn't

matter that Cindy was there as well, conveniently edited out of the frame. When Ava emailed her the link to the new nightclub photos, Dylan locked herself in the bathroom for a private panic attack then emerged to break the news to her husband and sister-in-law.

Mark borrowed Miri's iPad and looked at the pictures online and Dylan had the distinct impression that he wanted to smash the thing against the wall. But instead he hadn't uttered a word, tossed the tablet onto the bed and gone out walking on his own. He was gone for about an hour and when he returned had put her back in the deep freeze once again.

*It might be better if you tell him everything at once,* Miri had suggested gently. *I don't think it helps when there's little pieces trickling out every day.*

*I have told him everything,* Dylan said, hurt by the implication. *But now they're using perfectly innocent pictures and taking them out of context.*

The preferred context—and the story that the New York dailies were now selling—was that Ray and Dylan had been having an affair ever since they met, and had been taking advantage of Ray's injury to spend time together.

But what was interesting was that in the midst of all the inaccuracies, they had one key fact absolutely correct—Ray and Dylan had met for the first time at Pedro Lima's house. Ava was right; someone was definitely talking to the press, and possibly even outright fabricating things.

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The trail they were taking this morning was on the eastern perimeter of their property. They would follow the edge of the woods that bordered it and run south, looping around until the house came into view once again. This far back, the land hadn't been completely cleared, so they may as well have been somewhere in the wilderness. Dylan could feel herself beginning to grow tired, her lungs burning as she struggled to keep up the pace. Behind her, she could hear the sound of Mark's even breathing, his sneakers making contact with the brush and earth in an even rhythm.

Lately, he had taken to getting out of bed after they'd made love, going elsewhere in the house, spending time alone instead of holding her the way he used to. One night she'd

followed him, creeping downstairs and going to his den where she heard the television. He was watching the baseball game, leaning forward, all his attention focused on what was happening on the field.

As she stood there, he twitched and reacted as each player swung the bat, slid into base or jumped to make a catch. A wave of guilt overcame her and without thinking, she sighed. Mark stiffened almost imperceptibly and she knew that she'd been detected; but he didn't turn to look at her so she'd quietly gone back upstairs and climbed alone back into their bed.

Dylan closed her eyes against the memory and that one moment of inattention was enough to cause her to miss a step. Before she knew it, she was rolling down a small embankment, her bare legs scraping against twigs and rocks as she went. When she finally came to a stop, she was on her back and felt a burning, throbbing pain in her right knee followed by the sensation of a warm liquid running down the side of her leg.

"Fuck! Dylan!" Mark was next to her in an instant.

He looked down at her leg and she followed his stare. She had a pretty nasty gash on her shin that was already bleeding pretty profusely, and her knee was skinned. Brushing leaves and tiny pebbles off her shirt she blinked.

"*That's* going to leave a mark," she joked.

"It's not funny!" Mark snapped. "You could have ..." He reached under her thighs and put one arm at her back, effortlessly lifting her.

"Don't be stupid," she said struggling. "You can't carry me all the way back up there."

"Will you stop moving around? *You'll make me drop you!*"

She should have been pleased that he was carrying her. It was kind of a romantic thing to do after all, but all she felt was frustrated and foolish. He didn't even want her along for these morning runs, hadn't even invited her in the first place. And he never tried to speak to her, hardly even acknowledged her presence ... Even now he seemed pissed that she'd been dumb enough to fall on the trail, all because she wasn't paying



attention.

“Put me down!” she screamed at him.

Mark flinched but ignored her otherwise, climbing up the incline with her still in his arms and beginning the long walk back toward the house.

Dylan could feel the tears threatening at the backs of her eyes but blinked them away, instead looking down at her knee—which was really beginning to sting now—and her shin which was dirty and dripping blood onto Mark’s forearm.

“Thank you. I’m sorry I yelled. I think I can walk,” she said, forcing herself to sound calm, knowing that if she didn’t he would think she was hysterical and just keep ignoring her.

Mark paused and seemed to consider for a moment then kept walking. Dylan sighed and gave in, settling against his chest which was still heaving from the run. He was sweating as well, so much so that his shirt clung to his chest. She could smell him, a musky, masculine and not unpleasant scent; and she could feel the heat radiating from his body.

“You don’t have to come on these runs,” he said quietly. “It’s challenging enough for me ...”

“Without having to worry about me being such a klutz?” she said.

“I wasn’t going to say that. I meant it’s a hard trail for me, so I can only imagine how much more so for you. Especially since you’ve lost all that weight. You barely weigh anything, Dylan.”

“I’ve been trying to stay in shape ...”

“In shape? You’re a twig.”

She blinked back more threatened tears. “I had no idea I was so unappealing.”

“Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“*Trying to pick fights.* I never said you were unappealing. It’s not like we don’t fuck practically every night.”

“Since when has that been what we do?” she asked quietly.

“And since when have you talked to me this way?”

Mark sighed. “Sorry,” he said after a moment.

They were silent for the rest of the twenty-minute walk and Mark had begun to breathe heavily by then.

Inside, he carried her upstairs and into the master bathroom

where he put her to sit on the edge of the tub. He stripped off his shirt and went to the medicine cabinet, returning with hydrogen peroxide, bandages and tape.

Dylan looked away and bit the inside of her cheek as he cleaned her cuts, bracing herself against the stinging of the peroxide. Mark moistened a washrag and cleaned her leg, drying it and then applying the bandages, securing them with tape.

Watching him as he kneeled in front of her, concentrating on putting her back together, Dylan wanted to reach out and smooth a hand over his head, touching his bristly soft hair. When they were in bed, her hands were constantly all over him; on his head, on his face, his arms, buttocks and back. But right now, in the bright light of day, she was almost afraid to touch him. Their only intimacy now was in the bedroom.

“I’ll start you a shower,” he said standing.

Dylan waited, watching him from the edge of the tub. He was glistening with perspiration, his back muscles rippling as he reached in to turn on the water. He hadn’t been kidding; since Charlottesville they did have sex almost every night, but it still felt like they hadn’t connected in ages.

“C’mon,” Mark said. “Get in.”

It was only then that she realized she’d been staring at him like an idiot. Dylan stood and gasped at the discomfort in her leg. It was starting to swell; she could feel the stiffness about her knee making it difficult to put her weight on it and almost impossible to bend.

“You okay?”

Seeing that she could barely move without limping, Mark came over and helped her take off her shirt and sport bra, then he carefully peeled her shorts down over her hips, removing her underwear, her socks and sneakers. When she was naked, he looked at her and ran his palm lightly against her hip. She looked down and saw that he was examining the beginnings of a bruise.

“Get in. I’ll get you something for the ...”

Dylan stepped into the shower and shut her eyes and was surprised when a moment later she felt a hand on her shoulder gently massaging. She turned and opened her eyes. Mark was in the shower with her. He extended a hand to her with a blue

pill which she took without protest. Then he was bathing her, just as he had the very first time they'd been together; Dylan leaned back into his touch.

After the shower, he dried her, checked her bandages to make sure they were still secure under the tape then lifted and deposited her into bed still wrapped in her towel. Dylan watched through a haze of sudden sleepiness as Mark dressed. The pill was beginning to take effect. Her leg was just a dull ache now, nothing more.

"I'll make breakfast," Mark said.

That was the last thing she remembered before she fell asleep. When Dylan awoke much later, she thought for a moment that she was in the Bronx. She could hear her mother-in-law berating Matt and the familiar sound of voices arguing good-naturedly about something or other. Then she opened her eyes and realized that she was home. When she sat up, the towel she was wearing fell away from her chest and she remembered that she had fallen asleep immediately after showering that morning.

Swinging her left leg over the edge of the bed, Dylan was jolted by a sudden pain in her right knee. She looked down at it and saw that it was swollen to twice its normal size and the rest of her leg was marred by an angry purple bruise, from ankle to mid-thigh. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she hopped on the left leg, making her way toward the dresser, leaning against it to get herself some underwear.

"What the hell are you doing?"

She looked over her shoulder to see face Mark, standing at their bedroom door, an angry scowl on his face.

"Getting dressed," she said, her voice a croak.

In a few short strides he was next to her, scooping her back up and putting her on the edge of their bed. Then he was looking through her underwear, pulling a pair out along with a tank and lightweight lounging pants. Dylan didn't object when he came over and carefully helped her get the underwear and pants on, then pulled the tank over her head.

"I don't like the look of that leg," he said. "We 're going to the urgent care center in town."

"I thought I heard your Mom and Matt," she said ignoring his suggestion.

“Yes,” Mark said waving a hand dismissively. “I told them we couldn’t make it for Sunday dinner, so everyone came here. We’ll go over to the urgent care before we eat. I don’t think it should be looking this bad unless you dislocated something.”

Dylan didn’t listen to the rest of what he said. She was still stuck on the part where he said his entire family had schlepped all the way to Westchester County just because she couldn’t make it to Sunday dinner, in spite of everything, in spite of all they were being dragged into.

Suddenly she was crying, hot, silent tears blazing a path down her cheeks. She didn’t deserve these people, this family.

“It’s okay,” Mark said soothingly. “Let me get you another pain pill. Then we’ll go get this checked out. Maybe it’s just a bad sprain.”

“No,” she said grasping his shirt. “No ...” Then she buried her face in his chest, holding on tight, not able to put into words all she felt for him, for all of them.

The young woman who checked them in at the urgent care center seemed unable to keep her eyes off Mark as he stood in front of her, filling out the forms that she’d handed to him on a clipboard. Dylan watched as she watched him, her eyes travelling from his face to his arms and chest and back again. She was used to women looking at her husband and only now wondered at the fact that she had never really felt threatened by it. Even Patricia felt like a low level threat at best; random women like this not at all.

Ever since they’d gotten married, she had felt assured of his feelings for her. What she *was* insecure about was whether she could possibly live up to them. And now, with this mess with Ray, she’d proven that she couldn’t.

“Dylan. Allergic to any medications?” he asked looking over his shoulder at her now.

“No. None that I know of.”

Mark returned to the task of filling out the forms. The young woman at the desk looked at her, and Dylan knew she was not mistaken; the look in her eyes said everything: you don’t deserve him. Everyone knew who Mark was of course, and thanks to the New York dailies, they knew who she was as well; the stupid trampy wife who was cuckolding him with his teammate.

“How long will it be?” Mark asked when he handed the young woman the forms. “Before someone can see my wife, I mean. She’s in a little bit of pain.”

“Shouldn’t be too long,” the young woman said, her tone betraying that she couldn’t care less about Dylan’s pain. She had bleached blonde hair with the dark roots beginning to show, and black fingernail polish.

While they waited for the doctor, Mark sat next to her, one arm at the back of her chair, the other hand running lightly up and down her thigh. The pain of her injury was worth it to have Mark this attentive again.

After waiting another half hour to see the doctor, Dylan was diagnosed with a collateral ligament tear and ordered to ice and elevate the knee, and if possible stay in bed. For the time being, her trail running days were over, which meant that in all likelihood, she could not run with Mark again before his suspension was over. Dylan knew that meant that what little time they spent together outside of bed would be further shortened.

She was given crutches and her knee professionally wrapped, but Mark insisted on carrying her out to the car and once home, back into the house. Everyone was waiting for them to start the Sunday meal and made a huge fuss about Dylan having to use crutches, bustling around to make sure she was comfortable before they could all sit down to eat.

Much later when she and Mark were alone again, instead of leaving her and retreating to his den, he instead watched television in their bedroom. Dylan, sitting next to him with a magazine, pretended not to notice that this was a divergence from his recent habit of coming to bed only to have sex with her and going off alone once again.

Dylan watched anxiously as Cindy made her way across the restaurant, headed in her direction. She was dressed casually, in a black blouse and dark-wash jeans, but as always looked chic and well put-together. The large sunglasses she wore obscured her eyes, so it was impossible to read her expression.

Dylan had been expecting her call for at least a week, ever since the pictures surfaced, but it was only last night that it had finally come. She had been in bed, where Mark had insisted

she remain since she'd taken the fall on the trail, when her phone rang. Seeing Cindy's name flash across the console had made her heart begin pounding. She fully expected to be told off. She probably deserved it, having not made the call herself, as anyone who was innocent of what was being said would have done.

But Dylan had been too preoccupied with Mark and her in-laws to handle anyone else's anger or disappointment and with each passing day, she kept telling herself she would call Cindy, but never had.

"You and I need to talk," Cindy had said almost immediately. "And I don't think it's a conversation we should have over the phone."

"Of course," Dylan said right away, feeling her chest tighten. She could only imagine the other woman's feelings. What might she feel toward a woman who was photographed with Mark in the way she had been with Ray? And when Cindy suggested that they meet for lunch at a place in Manhattan, Dylan hadn't wanted to mention her injured knee. If anyone should incur the inconvenience, it should be her.

Mark hadn't liked the idea of her going all the way into the city just for a lunch with Cindy with her knee still bound, but agreed so long as she took a car and driver. And of course, though he hadn't said it, he knew that there was a reckoning with Ray's wife that would have to be faced, sooner or later.

Now, as she approached the table, Cindy removed her sunglasses and glanced down at Dylan's leg, propped up on a chair next to hers.

"Oh," she said. "I hadn't realized. Please, don't get up."

Dylan swallowed and nodded. "Cindy ..."

"What happened?" Cindy sat and put her Prada purse on the table next to her and indicated Dylan's leg.

"I was running on a trail near our house and took a spill," she explained, dismissively, not wanting to talk about her own injury when Cindy was clearly the wronged party in this scenario.

"I'm so sorry," Cindy said, sounding perfectly sincere. "It looks pretty painful."

Dylan shook her head "A little uncomfortable, that's all."

“So ...”

Dylan tried to read Cindy’s face and thought for a moment the other woman looked apologetic. But surely that couldn’t be right.

“I wanted to call you sooner,” Cindy said.

“Me too,” Dylan interjected. “Cindy, I hope you know that ...” Cindy reached out and covered Dylan’s hand with hers for a moment to silence her, then removed it.

“Dylan, don’t,” she said, her voice firm. “You’re about to apologize for something for which no apology is necessary.”

Dylan looked at her, surprised. Cindy didn’t know her very well. How could she be so sure there was nothing to apologize for?

As though she’d read her mind Cindy smiled.

“Dylan, I’ve known Ray since we were fourteen. We’ve been married for sixteen years. This is not my first trip to this particular carnival with him.”

Dylan knew she must look confused, but before she could speak the waiter had come to take their drink orders. Dylan requested a lemonade and Cindy a mojito.

“I need the alcohol,” she joked when they were alone again.

“But what it must have looked like to you,” Dylan said.

“It looked like my husband doing what he always does,” Cindy said, her voice a little bitter. “Exercising his considerable charm to convince a woman that he needs to be saved from his terrible life as the most famous man in baseball.”

Dylan said nothing, shocked by both Cindy’s words and tone.

“Dylan,” she sighed. “Since the third year of our marriage, Ray has never been faithful. Most of the time he restricts his conquests to women who clearly have more to gain than lose from the relationship—if that’s what you want to call them. But occasionally, he displays a stunning lack of judgment and ...” she broke off and shook her head.

“But Cindy, I hope you know I would never ...”

Cindy waved away her explanation. “I don’t know whether you would or not, honestly. But I do know that Ray is almost always the instigator of these things.”

“No,” Dylan said grabbing her hand. “It’s important to me that you know that I would never have done anything to

compromise your marriage or my own.”

Cindy laughed. Her face looked tired suddenly, under all that make-up. “My marriage *is* a compromise,” she said. “And it has been for a very long time.”

“I’m so ...”

“Stop saying you’re sorry,” Cindy said, looking directly at her again. “I can’t stand hearing it. It makes me feel pathetic. Do you know why I don’t go to those little gatherings at Pedro Lima’s house?”

Dylan shook her head.

“I know the other Dominican wives like to say it’s because I think I’m too good for them. But that’s not it. I don’t go because my husband’s behavior with women humiliates me. And somehow it’s worse when I’m among people from my own community than when I’m with the likes of Stephanie Alfieri. Who has *many* humiliations of her own to contend with.”

Dylan said nothing, and presently the waiter returned with their drinks and for a few moments they were occupied with considering what to order for lunch.

“And then there’s Lauren,” Cindy said, her voice hard.

Dylan looked up, remembering that when they were in Palm Springs, Cindy had tried to broach the subject of Lauren when Ray interrupted them.

“Ray and Lauren have been sleeping together on and off for at least five years,” Cindy said.

Stunned, Dylan’s mouth literally fell open.

“Yes, I know,” Cindy said. “Her husband, poor man. He lies to himself about it, just like I did at first. And I wonder sometimes whether he just simply allows it ...” she stared off into the middle distance.

“I would never have thought ...”

Cindy shrugged. “We’re one dysfunctional little family, aren’t we? And when someone new comes, it throws our crazy little system into chaos. Lauren probably befriended you because she saw Ray’s interest in you.”

Dylan thought back to Lauren’s campaign after the party at the Limas’ house to get her to go shopping and out to lunch, the constant phone calls ... her little warning, that Ray was likely to make her “feel special” just to get at Mark.



“Do the guys talk about this stuff?” Dylan asked, her mouth dry.

When she was in Palm Springs and Mark wanted her to go home, he said he didn’t have time to explain it to her, but that she should just do as he asked. She always assumed his insistence was about jealousy alone. But now she was wondering what he’d heard.

Cindy shrugged. “I don’t know. But before Lauren, Ray had other ... fixations. And like I said, he didn’t always show the best judgment. Wives of his teammates are not off-limits, as you know.”

“And no one ever did anything about it?” Dylan asked, incredulous. “I mean, they all seem to get along fine.”

“Well someone did something about it,” Cindy smiled, taking a sip of her drink. “Mark did, didn’t he?”

Dylan said nothing. Was it possible that other players on the team had sat complacently by while Ray Hernandez hit on their wives? And they did *nothing*?

“Ray *is* that team. His good favor means a lot with the management. They want to keep him happy,” Cindy said. “And if two consenting adults want to engage in a little extracurricular activity, and no one complains ...”

Their food came and Cindy began to eat but Dylan felt sick. It sounded almost as though Cindy was saying that some of the players chose the game over their marriages, that they ignored things that they should not have ignored as men, for the sake of playing professional baseball. But Mark had refused to go along with it and been suspended.

Dylan felt her eyes begin to fill with tears. When he kept telling her to stay away from Ray, and seemed so irrational about it, she thought he was being ridiculous. She hadn’t trusted him enough to just do as he asked.

“How’s Mark doing?” Cindy asked, pulling her back to the present.

Dylan shrugged. “He’s working out. Just waiting for the time to pass, I guess.”

“And absolutely livid with you, I would imagine,” Cindy said sympathetically.

Dylan nodded, the tears spilling out onto her cheeks. She reached up and quickly wiped them away.

“I could call him if you want,” Cindy offered quietly.

Dylan shook her head. “Thank you for the offer, but honestly, he would hate that. Mark is so ... private.”

“You should guard what you have with him Dylan,” Cindy said. “I remember when Ray signed. We were so excited. And such different people then ...” She stopped and took another sip of her drink, smiling at a memory. “He ... *worshipped* me. And I certainly worshipped him.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Dylan saw someone taking a picture with a cell phone. She wondered what story would be written about this lunch. Probably something that involved Cindy lambasting her for sleeping with her husband; or Dylan confronting Cindy with the news that Ray was in love with her. All of a sudden, she couldn't wait to get back home to Westchester and to Mark.

“It doesn't get better, y'know?” Cindy said. “The scrutiny. The rumors and the lies. For a really long time, every single bad thing people said about Ray, I assumed was a lie. I think he probably started cheating on me well before I started to believe it.”

Dylan didn't know what to say. She and Cindy had always been cordial, but their relationship had never progressed to a level of closeness that would explain why she chose now to be so forthcoming about her private life. And if she expected Dylan to reciprocate, she was going to be disappointed.

“I think there was a point where I became more like one of his ‘handlers’ than his wife.”

Cindy seemed to be almost speaking to herself now, and was no longer looking at Dylan at all. She reached for her fork and continued eating her salad. Dylan followed suit, wishing now for the meal to be over as quickly as possible. She didn't understand these people, this world. And more and more, she was sorry that she and Mark were a part of it.

“Well, anyway, I think I owe you a heads up,” Cindy said finally. “One of the reasons I asked you here today is that I'm about to file for divorce from Ray.”

Dylan, who had been holding her own fork with the intent to finally begin eating, dropped it so that it clattered on the edge of her plate.

“Cindy, if it's because ...”

“Because of you? No,” Cindy said. “Although honestly this latest little episode didn’t help much.” “I feel responsible though. If I had just ...”

Cindy looked at her and for the first time her expression was not completely friendly. “Well you should have immediately walked away from him, there’s no doubt about that. I’m sure Mark feels the same way.”

“He does,” Dylan said.

She owed Cindy that much—the reassurance that her expectations of Ray’s conduct had not been unreasonable, because Dylan’s husband had the same ones.

“But still, you’re not responsible,” Cindy said, her voice light again. “I just can’t anymore.” She shrugged.

“I’m sorry to hear it. But I don’t know why you think you owe me a head’s up. It’s ...”

Cindy gave a short laugh. “Dylan, don’t you get it yet? How this works?” she asked. “It doesn’t *matter* whether *I* hold you responsible or not. You’re going to be blamed in the court of public opinion. Ray is a hero and you’re about to become the most hated woman in New York.”

## 18

The chorus of boo'ing that greeted Mark as he walked out onto the field was hard enough to take, but harder still was the look on his parents' faces. They tried to remain stoic, but by now Dylan knew them well enough to know that they were proud people, weakened only by their love for their children. And seeing Mark received in this way was difficult for them. As luck would have it, his first game back after the suspension was a home game, so all of the Acostas had come out to support him, as had his old coach Wilfredo. But the fans were not quite as supportive.

Just two days prior, the news hit that Cindy Hernandez had filed for divorce and Ray had given a tearful statement about how much he loved his family, and regretted anything he may have done to hurt them. Cindy was right—the reaction had been swift to condemn not Ray but Dylan for being a temptress and a floozy, and Mark for fracturing the team by attacking Ray Hernandez rather than holding responsible his lying, cheating gold-digging wife.

Much was made of the fact that Mark and Dylan had been spotted in their Westchester County neighborhood grocery shopping and making doctor's appointments, daring to live their lives while the Mets fell apart. So Mark's less than positive reception was not altogether a surprise.

Sitting in the family section, Dylan struggled to keep her head up, braving the stares and the dirty looks of fans sitting nearby, pretending she didn't notice them. Down at the plate, Mark was rounding his neck, loosening up. Dylan kept her eyes on him, channeling only good thoughts and positive vibrations in his direction, praying that he played well.

*"Acosta, your wife's a whore!"*

The yell from the crowd, sudden and unexpected caused a ripple of gasps and a few nervous twitters. On the field, Mark looked up and his face was like stone. Dylan felt her heart begin to palpitate. The fan who had yelled was close to the field, closer even than the families. He was still shouting

something, and Dylan could just make him out from behind, a chubby thirty-something man holding a cup of beer, wearing Mets colors.

Mark's eyes narrowed and he turned, making a motion as though to charge toward the stands when security emerged from below and went to subdue the boisterous fan. Dylan heaved a sigh of relief when Mark, seeing that the situation was being handled, pointedly turned away and tried to refocus on the game.

But the damage had been done. He went on to play the worst game he had played since he'd been in the majors.

On the way out of the ballpark, everyone was quiet. Even Miri who could almost always be counted on to cut the tension had very little to say. They were all going to the Bronx for dinner, and Mark would meet them there, which was the only reason Dylan decided to go. It had been excruciating sitting there, watching Mark drop the ball time after time, being slow to react. And the worse it got, the more hostile the fans became. By the time he was pulled out, the hissing and boos were deafening.

One rowdy fan wasn't the reason for his slump; since Cindy's announcement, the press had been relentless. The stories just seemed to keep on coming. For such a casual, non-relationship with a man Dylan had only laid eyes on a handful of times, it was incredible how much material they were able to manufacture. Now they were saying that she had thrown herself at him, and that in a fit of weakness and despair over marital problems, Ray had succumbed to the charms of this former law student turned gold-digger.

It was surprising how little she cared about what they said about her. Dylan could think only about how differently Mark was being portrayed from the man he was—as a violent, reckless, selfish individual who was blinded by his irrational love for a deceitful woman who was going to ruin both him and the Mets organization.

As they rode back to the Bronx in the van they'd chartered for the game, Dylan felt her cell phone vibrating and reached for

it. It was Corey. Dylan answered right away, her heart racing, hoping that Mark hadn't done something to cause himself even more trouble.

"Corey?" she said, her voice urgent.

In the seat in front of her, Matt and Peter turned sharply, probably fearing as she had that something else had happened.

"Yes. Dylan, you and I need to talk," Corey said, his voice clipped.

"Sure, is everything okay?"

"No. Everything is not okay. Your husband's career is going up in smoke as we speak. And I think it's about time you stepped into the ring and helped me do something about it."

"Of course," she said. "Anything you ..."

"Meet me for lunch tomorrow. Can you do twelve-thirty at Anabelle's? You know where that is?"

"Yes. But is Mark . . . ?"

"He's fine for the moment. He'll be on his way to you shortly. Just ... don't mention this to him, alright?"

Dylan wrinkled her brow. Not mentioning something to Mark did not sit well with her. Especially now. They were already so fragile. Corey seemed to sense her reluctance.

"Look," he sighed. "I'm not going to lie to you. He would go nuclear if he knew I was calling you. But this is for him. You can hear me out and if you decide to tell him afterward, that's your decision. But for now, I'd rather you not say anything."

"Okay," Dylan said after a moment. "For now."

"Oh, and Dylan? Don't go blabbing to anyone else either. This is very sensitive stuff." And then he hung up.

Dylan held the phone for a moment, feeling chastened. Corey clearly did not care for her too much and she couldn't say she blamed him. Until she came on the scene, managing Mark had to have been in walk in the park. His client who had been a media darling, an even-tempered and uncomplicated guy from the Bronx who just wanted to play good baseball had turned into a lightning rod for controversy and the season's favorite whipping boy for the sports media nationwide.

"Is everything okay?" Matt asked.

"Yes. He said Mark will be on his way to us shortly," Dylan mumbled. As she looked away, her eyes met Miri's and she

knew her sister-in-law was aware that that was not quite the whole story.

At the house, everyone went their separate ways, Mr. Acosta upstairs, Miri to her room and Peter and Matt to the rear of the house where they'd set up a grill for the chicken that had been marinating since that morning. Dylan followed her mother-in-law to the kitchen where she helped her by making a tossed salad and pulling out the dishes to set the table. Since the scandal had broken, they hadn't talked as much as Dylan would have liked. She both wanted, and was afraid to have, a private conversation with Mrs. Acosta. But she had no idea how to start talking or what to start talking about.

"Should I start putting everything out?" she asked.

"No. Let's wait for Mark. He may take awhile, no?"

"Probably," Dylan said quietly.

She imagined that the reporters had descended on Mark like locusts after the game, wanting to get his reaction to the fans hostile welcome. He was probably in the locker-room being grilled, goaded into a response that would make the eleven o'clock news.

Suddenly there was a hand on her shoulder and Dylan turned. She had been standing, staring into space and her mother-in-law had come to revive her.

"Dylan, are you alright?"

She nodded, looking into her mother-in-law's kind eyes, wondering what lay behind them. How could she not be disappointed that her son had married this girl—not even Dominican—who had brought him all this trouble?

"Oh, I know you must wish for your mother ..."

Mrs. Acosta pulled her into a hug and Dylan relaxed, relieved to be held, feeling her tension begin to dissipate.

But her mother-in-law was wrong. She didn't wish for her mother, and had been avoiding her, not wanting to hear in her voice all the judgment and resignation that was sure to be there. She'd doubted Dylan's motives for marrying Mark and now was bound to be even more skeptical, just like the entire state of New York was skeptical.

For the next hour, everyone sat around and the house was uncharacteristically quiet while they waited for Mark to get there. Dylan waited in Mark's old room, wishing she had

access to a bottle of wine, or some other intoxicant. She had just begun to drift off into a light sleep when she heard voices outside. Relieved, she stood at the window, looking down to the front of the house. Maybe they would stay the night, but she was really hoping that Mark would want to go to the condo so they could be alone.

At the front gate she could make out Wilfredo's shock of white hair, and Mark with a sports bag over his shoulder. And Patricia was there as well, talking to him with a hand on his arm. Dylan could just make out her face, which was soft, and her expression almost tender. Dylan's reaction was strong and immediate. She felt like leaping out of the window and wrenching Mark away. But instead she watched, paying attention to the lean of Patricia's head as she spoke, the nods of assent Mark gave to whatever she was saying, and Wilfredo's grim face.

There was something intimate about the scene—people who knew each other extremely well and for a long time, commiserating. After a moment, Mr. Acosta emerged from the house, and putting a hand on Mark's shoulder, seemed to be urging him to come inside. Mark nodded and Patricia got on her toes, kissing him on both cheeks before turning and leaving with her father.

Mark, as though sensing he was being watched, looked up directly at the window where Dylan stood. She didn't bother moving away before he spotted her.

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After dinner it was too late to go anywhere, so they retired for the evening in Mark's old room, lying with their backs to each other on the small bed, not speaking and somehow managing not to touch either. Mark had already been in bed when she'd gotten out of her long shower, so she changed in the darkness, reaching blindly into his old dresser and pulling out a shirt that she shrugged over her head, not caring enough to feel for the tag to make sure she had it oriented correctly. Then she crawled under the sheets and grabbed a pillow, snuggling into it. They lay there for what seemed like a long time, and Dylan could not sleep, no matter how she tried, no matter how tired she was.



Though she knew that it was ill-timed and extremely ill-advised, she couldn't help herself. "What did Patricia want?" she asked, speaking into the dark.

Next to her Mark stirred. She could feel him turning over onto his back.

"Nothing," he said.

"It didn't look like nothing," Dylan said. "It looked like something. It looked pretty intense." Mark took a deep breath and spoke quietly. "She was telling me she was sorry for our trouble.

That I shouldn't worry about the game."

"Sorry for *our* trouble, or sorry for *your* trouble?" Dylan said.

"What's the difference?" Mark asked, sounding exasperated.

"The difference is that some people say that your trouble is me," Dylan said.

Mark exhaled sharply. "Dylan, I don't feel like getting into some pointless debate about Patricia

right now ..."

"It's not pointless!" she snapped.

Mark leaned over her and the room was suddenly flooded with light as he flipped on the bedside

lamp. He sat up and leaned back against the headboard.

"So what *is* the point? Get it out of your system," he said. "Say whatever it is you want to say and then let's go to sleep."

Dylan sat up as well. She turned and crossed her legs Indian-style, staring at him, arms folded

across her chest. Mark didn't look at her, instead staring across the room at the closed door. "You have to know I feel awful about this whole thing with Ray and the team and the terrible publicity. And I want more than anything for you to play well ..."

Mark blinked impassively, as though simply enduring the sound of her voice, waiting for her to finish.

"... but as awful as I feel, I want to make one thing absolutely, crystal clear. I am *not* going to stand by and let you fall into some other woman's arms. Not for comfort, not because you're old

friends, not because you're mad at me. Not for *any* reason. I don't feel so damn guilty that I'm willing to let her just ... have you."

She hadn't even been entirely sure what she was about to say when she began speaking but once the words came out, they felt strangely right. Like she was standing up for something, for herself. For them. For a change.

Mark turned and looked at her, and she thought she saw something in his eyes and around his mouth. Like he was surprised, and maybe even a little proud of her.

"Are you done?" he asked, his voice betraying no emotion whatsoever.

"Yes," Dylan said. "I'm done."

Mark leaned over her and turned out the light and once again they were enveloped by darkness.

But this time, when they lay back, he put his arms about her and pulled her back against him.

Corey was waiting for her at Anabelle's when she got there, and was in the middle of a conversation that he seemed in no hurry to end, even when Dylan sat opposite him and spread her napkin on her lap. Dylan took that time to study her husband's agent, taking in the crisp, impeccably tailored grey suit, the starched white shirt and expertly knotted tie. Corey was blonde and handsome, not as tall as Mark, but tall and trim. Dylan supposed there were women who might find him attractive.

She might have found him attractive herself under different circumstances, but over the past month he had become somewhat of a nemesis, barely concealing his irritation with her, which he managed to mask extremely well when Mark was around. There was an unspoken understanding that he perceived her as the worst thing to happen to Mark's career, and possibly his life.

As the minutes stretched by, Dylan signaled for the waiter and made no effort to lower her voice as she ordered an iced tea and chicken Caesar salad. Only then did Corey seem to

remember that he was not in fact sitting at the table alone, and end his call.

“Hey buddy,” he said to the waiter, without first acknowledging Dylan, “give me the same, would you?”

Finally, when he looked at her, his blue eyes were unreadable. He leaned back and placed his Blackberry on the table.

“I was arranging a public appearance for Mark,” he explained. “At a women’s shelter.”

Dylan nodded.

Corey unfurled his napkin and smoothed it over his lap. “For the moment he’s still in demand for that kind of thing.”

“That’s good,” Dylan said. Her voice was quiet. She was intimidated by Corey, and hated that she was.

“Yes, it *is* good,” Corey said. “But you know who’s stopped calling? Companies looking for endorsers. Y’know why?”

“Don’t be condescending,” Dylan said in a burst of irritation.

“Of course I know why.”

“Good,” Corey said. “So we can skip the preliminaries.”

“Tell me why I’m here, Corey,” Dylan said.

“I need you to help me save Mark’s career. Both on and off the field.”

“Mark only has one career. And that’s on the field.”

Corey waved a hand impatiently and then ran it through his hair. “Yeah, I know that’s what he thinks. But he’s wrong. What the public thinks matters, Dylan. Whether they like him or not isn’t just about him selling sneakers for Nike, or walking the red carpet at the ESPYs.

“If he becomes a pariah, no matter his talent, he will not be signed again once this contract is up. Not by anyone. Have you ever heard of Allen Iverson?”

Dylan closed her eyes and sighed. “Of course.”

“Big talent, big attitude, big drama, big liability. You know where he plays basketball now?”

“No. Where?”

“In Turkey, Dylan,” Corey said, nodding for effect. “In *Turkey*.”

Dylan swallowed. He’d made his point. “So what would you like me to do?”

“This is going to hurt,” Corey warned.

“Would you just spit it out?” she asked impatiently. The less

time she spent with him at this point, the better.

“I need you to lay low. Stay out of public with Mark. Let him rebuild his image separate from you.”

Dylan leaned back in her seat. This she had not been expecting.

“I know it sounds harsh,” Corey said. “But the public doesn’t dislike Mark; not really. They dislike *you*. And they dislike that he seems to be weak, because of you.”

Dylan blinked back tears. She wasn’t affected by Corey’s harsh manner—he always had a harsh manner—she was affected by the harsh truth that he was speaking. A truth she had denied to herself for the last several weeks, telling herself that her and Mark’s bond in the face of adversity would eventually win his fans over once again.

“Look, I know I sound like an asshole. But part of my job is to say the asshole things no one else will say. And what I’ve said is the god’s honest truth. And I think you know it is.”

Dylan took a sip of her water. Her stomach felt like it was in knots and there was a bitter taste in her mouth. She was almost convinced she might throw up.

“It sucks, but those are the facts,” Corey continued. “Every single time he’s photographed with you and then the Mets lose a game ...”

“Okay, I get it,” Dylan said.

“*Do you?*”

“Yes!”

“So will you do it?”

“I’ll need you to be clear about precisely what I’ll be doing,” she said.

“What you’ll *not* be doing is more accurate,” Corey said.

“Going to events with him, particularly where there’ll be press. Games, out of the question—you saw what happened yesterday. And as much as possible, even in his downtime, it would be great if you travel separately and not be seen together.”

“Essentially create the impression that Mark’s and my marriage is in distress,” Dylan said incredulously.

“Well isn’t it?” Corey asked evenly.

Dylan felt her face grow warm. *How much did Mark confide in his agent, anyway?*

“Not to such a degree that ...”

“Maybe he needs the space anyway, Dylan,” Corey said looking at her. “Your being the devoted, clingy wife right now might be having the exact opposite effect than what you intend.”

“*Excuse* me, but ...”

“Okay, okay, that wasn’t called for,” Corey acknowledged quickly seeing on her face that he was moments away from causing her to walk out altogether.

“Mark would never go for ...”

“I don’t see Mark here, do you?” Corey looked around the restaurant theatrically. “This is why I asked you not to say anything. You’re right; he would never go for it. He loves you and seems to think you’re *worth* all the shit he stirred up on the team. This is how you prove it.”

“Why on earth would I need to prove anything to *you*?” Dylan demanded.

Corey laughed, his eyes hard. “Not to me, Dylan. Prove it to yourself.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I saw those pictures and I don’t care what you say. Given time and opportunity, you would have become just another Ray Hernandez conquest.”

Dylan felt all the blood rush out of her face and her breathing become shallow. Corey was studying her, assessing her. He looked so sure of what he’d said that she wondered. The fear that he might be right was the only thing that kept her from throwing her glass of water in his face.

“But call me stupid, I don’t think you actually were a Ray Hernandez conquest. Those pictures might have been the best thing to happen to you in that sense, because they just may have stopped you from doing something dumb.

“But they also led to a shit-storm for your husband and his career. This might be a way to redeem yourself, Dylan. And help him in the process.”

Dylan said nothing, feeling exposed. Ray’s attention *had* been exciting. First Mark and then him— she had never had such attractive men interested in her before. Men whose interest she never believed she could have gotten or maintained. Every single day, she still wondered what it was Mark saw in her,

why he was sure he loved her. Now, with all the trouble she had caused him, she wondered it even more frequently. And Ray's flattery, the looks he'd given her ... she felt like she mattered somehow. It hadn't hurt either that it made Mark so jealous.

"Look, the way I presented this was crass," Corey said, as if conceding a point she herself had made. "I freely acknowledge that. But no fucking around now, Dylan, this is the fork in the road. This is Mark's rookie season and he will be forever defined as a pro baseball player by how this shakes out. And if you know anything about Mark, you know that he doesn't just want to be *adequate*. He doesn't just want to be *good*. He wants to be *amazing*."

"And he has the talent and the drive to be amazing. Not just on the field but as a community symbol, as a real presence in sports. Everything that happens in this season will set him up for life, even after he's no longer playing and wants to be a sportscaster or something. It's *that* important."

In spite of herself, Dylan had to admit that it made sense. And if she was really hindering that, she owed it to Mark to step back.

"I have to give this some thought," she said quietly.

Her stomach was roiling now, and she seriously doubted she was going to be able to get down a Caesar salad or anything else.

"You do that. But don't take too long. I have plans for him to do some events and if you agree with me, I'll expect you to bow out of his suggestions that you accompany him. I'll expect you to be scarce at the games."

Dylan swallowed hard. She could feel herself about to be sick.

"Excuse me," she said quickly before shoving away from the table and running into the Ladies Room.

Once inside she barely made it into a stall before retching into the toilet. There wasn't much in there, since she hadn't been eating too well lately. This low level nausea had been with her for awhile. Now it was full-blown. She gagged again and waited it out. Confident that it was manageable, though not completely gone, she went to the sink, washed her mouth out and patted a cold paper towel on her forehead and cheeks.

When she returned to the table, Corey was eating. The sight of

the food, and the smell of the garlic from the salad threatened to make her ill again.

“Was there anything else you wanted to discuss?” Dylan managed.

“Nope,” Corey looked at her. “That was it.”

“Okay, well I think I’m going to take off then,” Dylan said. She reached for her pocketbook and Corey grabbed her hand.

“One more thing,” he said. Dylan looked down at his hand and he quickly released her. “Do you doubt that what I’ve said is true?”

Dylan swallowed and after a moment shook her head.

She didn’t just believe him she *knew* that what he said was true. Mark would be fine. The fans would love him again because he loved the game and he would play well when free from distraction. Without feeling like he had to protect and shield her from unwelcome speculation, insults from fans, the press ... when he could stop worrying about all of that, he would be great again.

“Okay then,” Corey said. “I’ll wait for your call.”

As she left he didn’t remark on the fact that she had left her uneaten salad sitting there across from him on the table.

Instead of having the driver take her all the way back to Westchester, she went to the condo where she was able to take a nap, holding her stomach, waiting for the nausea to subside.

When she awoke, feeling marginally better and a little hungry, she realized there was no food in the refrigerator because she and Mark hadn’t stayed there in awhile. So she called for take-out and when it came was surprised to feel her stomach turn at the sight of it. By then it was beginning to get dark, and she could see that there had been several missed calls while she slept, most from Mark. Calling for the driver, she slipped her feet back into her shoes and headed downstairs to go home, tossing the uneaten food in the trash as she went.

“You’re not coming?”

Mark had emerged from his dressing room towel still wrapped about his waist, carrying the shirt and pants he’d chosen for the Trevor Project event and looked surprised to find Dylan still in bed. She’d propped herself up with a pile of magazines

and turned on the television, wanting to illustrate, rather than say that she wasn't accompanying him.

The first few events had been difficult enough. Mark had been willing on those occasions to accept her excuse that her knee was aching, but now she'd run out of reasons. And for this event in particular, he was understandably be puzzled because the Trevor Project was one of her favorite charities that she'd urged him to support.

"Not this time," she said, barely looking at him, hoping to avoid his eyes.

No, she wasn't okay. And for more reasons besides this deception she was conspiring with Corey to pull off. But that was yet another thing she didn't want to trouble him with.

"Are you sure? Is everything okay?"

Mark came to sit next to her on the bed. He put a warm hand on the side of her face and Dylan leaned into it.

She prayed she was doing the right thing. Ava said she was, but now she realized that the person she trusted most—Mark—was the one person she couldn't ask for guidance. He was beginning to worry about her. She could tell he thought she was pulling away and was confused about why, especially after all of her impassioned speeches about them staying together and weathering the storm as a couple, living in the same house no matter the tension between them. After all that, how could he not be confused when she wouldn't so much as go to the local diner with him for breakfast on a Sunday morning?

Dylan reached out now and put a hand to his chest, running it over the smooth, silky dark hair she found there. Mark took a breath, and placed a hand over hers so she looked directly at him. She could see the puzzlement in his eyes, all the questions he had.

"That shirt's a great choice," she said by way of distraction.

"You always look so handsome in it."

"You haven't been out at all lately," Mark observed, leaning into her line of sight again so she would look at him.

Dylan shrugged. "I don't miss it."

It was true. She didn't. Stephanie and Lauren, her two most frequent partners in crime before the scandal still called to



invite her shopping and to lunch and she'd accepted their invitations a couple times, but all the talk seemed to be about *other* shopping trips and *other* lunches. And when that failed, about other wives. Dylan wondered why she hadn't noticed before how small their worlds were, how limited.

"But you're turning into a little hermit," Mark said, stroking her hair affectionately, trying to keep his voice light.

"I've got plans with Miri tomorrow," she said truthfully. Dylan ran her hand down the center of his chest and tugged at the towel at his waist. "What time does the car get here?"

Mark looked at her. "In about forty minutes."

"I only need ten," she said.

"Speak for yourself."

Mark gently pushed her back against the pillows and shoved aside the sheets that covered her. Dylan bent her knees and raised her hips to allow him to pull her panties down. When she was naked from the waist down, Mark ran his hands along her thighs and placing his palms on the insides of each, pushed them apart.

"This was my idea," Dylan reminded him. "I think that makes it lady's choice ..."

"And what does the lady choose?" he asked, lowering his head between her thighs and kissing her.

In spite of herself, Dylan pressed her hips upward toward the pressure and warmth of his mouth. The feeling of his tongue, delightfully hot, seeking entrance, was enough to make her forget what she'd been about to say. She propped herself up on her elbows and watched Mark's head as it moved, resisting the urge to grab it and press him harder against her.

With slow, long strokes, he seemed to be caressing rather than just tasting her, then a well-placed finger raised the stakes, so that Dylan felt herself moving rapidly toward release. She squirmed and circled her hips against him, feeling the slight burn of his rough chin and jaw against the most delicate parts of her.

But even through her pleasure, the mindless, weightless feeling, the rolling, undulating waves of his tongue against her, she wondered why it was that whenever she started out thinking she would give him something, she ended up taking.

"Mark," she breathed, grabbing his head. "*Mark* ... let me ..."

He looked at her, and his eyes were sleepy and heavy-lidded, like someone intoxicated. Dylan throbbed with the sudden absence of his attention where she still wanted it.

“Get up here,” she said, opening her arms.

Mark moved up her body and she felt him against her inner thigh, incredibly hard. He slid effortlessly into her and she tightened about him, grasping his hips, holding him still inside her for a moment.

“I love you,” she said, her lips pressed into his shoulder. “I love you so much.”

When he was gone, she got out of bed and went to her closet where she retrieved a brown paper bag she’d stuffed into one of her jewelry drawers that afternoon. Once she had it in hand, she grabbed her phone and dialed Ava’s number.

“He’s gone,” she said when her friend answered. “I wish you were here with me to do this.”

“The whole deal should only take a few minutes,” Ava replied.

“Do you have it?”

Dylan took the pregnancy test out of the packet. “Hold on,” she said as she ripped the plastic that covered the wand. “Okay I’ve got it.”

“So here goes,” Ava said on the other end of the line. “Time to pee.”

Walking with the phone in the crook between her shoulder and neck, and the wand in her hand, Dylan headed for the bathroom.

“So this is going to be a little too much information, but do you think semen affects the accuracy of the test?”

“Okay, so *yes*,” Ava said, her voice even, “that was too much information. And no, I don’t think semen affects the accuracy of the test. It looks for a pregnancy hormone that I sincerely doubt occurs in semen.”

“Except it might neutralize it, or ...”

“*Dylan!* Just pee on the damn stick already!”

Dylan put the phone on the bathroom counter and took the stick over to the toilet. Her bladder was positively bursting as she’d been holding it since Mark left.

It had taken her awhile to suspect she might be pregnant. The stress of the last several weeks coupled with her weight loss had all help feed her denial about why she hadn’t gotten her

period. She'd been sloppy about taking her contraceptive pill, sometimes missing for a day and doubling up the next. And a couple times she'd even started spotting before she remembered to resume taking it. But the sickness almost every morning before she ate, and the nausea that accompanied certain smells, the metallic taste of her coffee ... it all finally came together for her.

Now, looking down at the stick in her hand she took a deep breath and peed. After a moment, she wrapped it up in toilet tissue and dropped it in the trash, taking the time to wash her hands before picking up the phone again.

"Hey," she said to Ava.

"Well how long do we wait? Three minutes?"

"No need," Dylan said, feeling surprisingly emotionless. "All it took was five seconds. It's definitely positive. I'm pregnant."

# 19

All of the usual suspects were at Pedro's house for dinner, except that this time Dylan and Mark had brought Ava along. As they entered, all heads turned and Vanessa came toward them, hands extended, taking Dylan's.

"So good to see you," she said, kissing both Dylan's cheeks. Then she turned to Ava and greeted her, then kissed Mark as well. "The men are outside," she said to him.

"Okay, thanks." Mark squeezed Dylan's shoulder before leaving them alone.

"Let me get you both something to drink," Vanessa offered. "We'll be sitting down in a minute. What can I get you?"

"White wine for me," Ava said.

"Water's fine," Dylan smiled.

As Vanessa walked away, Ava turned to Dylan. "I wonder if Ray will make an appearance tonight. Do you know if they invited him?"

"They did. Vanessa called me to give me advance warning. And who cares? I have to see him sometime," Dylan shrugged.

"Yeah, but this is where the mole is," Ava said, referring to the leaks to the press that had revealed that Pedro's party was where Dylan and Ray first met.

"I don't care," Dylan shrugged. "They can say whatever they want about me at this point."

And she meant it. Since learning that she was pregnant, everything else seemed trivial all of a sudden. She still hadn't told Mark because her doctor told her she was only ten weeks or so along. But more importantly, if he knew she was pregnant, it might be a lot harder to justify spending as much time apart as they had been. She never went to games, and scarcely even left the house with him anymore. His game and travel schedule lately had made that much easier to pull off than she expected. Only when he had appearances in New York did Mark notice that she had pulled back somewhat.

And best of all, it seemed as though Corey may have been correct in his analysis after all. The press was softening their attitude toward Mark, giving him strong coverage for his charity work and being much more complimentary of his

performance on the field, even on his rare off-days. “Wine,” Vanessa said, handing a glass to Ava when she returned. “And water.”

“So Ava’s not met everyone,” Dylan said. She was feeling another wave of nausea and knew a quick run to the bathroom might be in the offing. “Vanessa, maybe you’d like to introduce her?”

“Of course.”

As she walked off with Vanessa, Ava shot Dylan a quick look and winked reassuringly at her friend. Taking a sip of her water, Dylan nodded her greetings to a few of the other women and turned to head for the powder room.

“*Hey there, lady,*” Lauren approached, a generous glass of red wine in hand.

Dylan tried not to judge but Lauren was visibly pregnant after all.

“Holding it for someone else,” Lauren laughed, reading her expression. “Or at least that’s my story and I’m sticking to it.”

Dylan gave her a little smile back. Lauren’s relentless cheer was difficult to take sometimes. What used to seem like a fun, upbeat personality now came across as superficial. Would she even have been friends with someone like Lauren, had they not been in the same peculiar circumstance, married to men who played a professional sport?

“Have you seen Ray yet?” Lauren asked, her eyes bright. “I just saw him greet Mark outside. They seem to have put their differences behind them.”

Dylan shrugged. “It was all a big misunderstanding to begin with,” she said vaguely.

A bitter taste in her mouth had her taking a sip of water and looking desperately in the direction of the powder room.

“More than a misunderstanding I would say,” Lauren said, a thin smile on her face. “There was no misunderstanding the fact that he did actually seem to be attracted to you.”

Dylan studied her face, remembering what Cindy had told her about Lauren having an on-again, off-again affair with Ray. Maybe for Lauren it was more than an affair.

“Whatever it may have been for him, it was nothing to me,” Dylan said pointedly. “Excuse me a second, Lauren ...”

She turned and found a place to set her water glass and headed

toward the powder room. Trying the door, she found it locked and took a deep breath, turning to head for the other one. She had to walk through the rear where the men were gathered to get to it, and noticed out of the corner of her eye that Mark seemed to be comfortably in conversation with Pedro. And Ray was there as well, standing nearby, handsome as always, wearing a suit jacket and white shirt over jeans.

In the bathroom, Dylan checked her make-up and rinsed her mouth with cold water. She had stopped straightening her hair, and it was in that in-between stage where the roots were thicker than the ends. She'd taken to wearing it back now, no longer favoring the high-maintenance pin-straight style that had so offended Mark when she first got it. As her pregnancy progressed she might cut it, getting all the relaxer out once and for all.

Her pregnancy. Dylan ran a hand across her abdomen, smiling. It was still so new, thinking of herself as pregnant. Apart from the illness, it seemed unreal. She and Mark were going to be *parents*. It was much, much sooner than they intended, but she had no doubt he would over the moon at the news. She was too, when she permitted herself to be excited about it.

She had stopped the frenzied workouts and begun eating a little differently lately. Even though it was difficult, she forced herself to have eggs, milk, other things that were essential for a healthy pregnancy. And she had a prescription for prenatal vitamins that Ava had gotten filled for her. Dylan couldn't wait until she began to show, until the baby began to kick.

It had been almost impossible keeping the news from Mark. So many times she'd forced herself not to say anything, feeling the words on the tip of her tongue. When he'd gotten back from an away game the evening before and she watched him walking into the master suite toward her, Dylan pictured him carrying an infant, holding a baby bottle, bringing their son or daughter to their bed so she could do a feeding.

*What're you smiling like that about?* he'd asked, grinning back at her.

*Girl's gotta have her secrets,* she said.

Still smiling at the memory, Dylan opened the powder room door and stopped in her tracks when she came face to face with Ray Hernandez. Not too long ago she might have been

giddy or uncomfortable, but now all she felt was exasperated.

“Ray,” she said, her voice flat.

“Dylan,” he said. “I’ve been hoping for a chance to talk to you.”

“What about?” she asked, brushing by him.

As she headed out to the party, he followed and it was only when they were in full view of everyone else that she stopped and turned to face him. There was no way she would give anyone— especially not Mark—ammunition to say that she’d done anything inappropriate.

“I owe you an apology,” Ray began.

“What for?” she blinked, uninterested.

“A lot of what was being said. I could have ...”

“All of those things are still being said,” Dylan pointed out.

“And your silence about it has been less than helpful. As you probably know.”

“A lot of other things are going on,” Ray said, not meeting her eyes. “Cindy ...”

“Yes, I spoke to Cindy. She and I had lunch awhile back,” Dylan said.

Ray looked surprised, but before he could respond, Mark approached. Dylan reached out and took his hand, holding it in both of hers. She could feel a coiled tension in him, a readiness to switch from inquisitiveness to aggression if the situation warranted.

“Anyway, Ray it was great talking to you,” she said dismissively.

She leaned into her husband and looked expectantly at Ray so he would know that it was time for him to take his leave; and when he had, she looked up at Mark and smiled.

“I hope they serve dinner soon,” she said. “I’m starved.”

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Dylan was in the kitchen when Mark came in from his run, still breathless and perspiring, looking like the cover model of a men’s health magazine. She looked away, wondering how long it would take before she stopped panting after her husband. Probably not until they were octogenarians, if then.

“Hey,” he said, kissing her on the forehead and then heading to the refrigerator for a bottle of water.

He took a long swig and leaned against the counter watching

her as she worked on her laptop. “How come you never want to go running anymore?”

“As I recall, it didn’t work out too well for me last time,” she said looking up at him for a moment. “That was a fluke,” Mark said. “Are you afraid of falling again? Is that what’s going on?” Only in part. She definitely didn’t want to risk a fall because she had so much more at stake now

with the baby, but there was also the fact that her tagging along had been about desperation before, not exercise. He hadn’t been talking to her then, or connecting with her outside of the bedroom so she’d felt the need to force herself on him. Now things were so much better.

“You were right when you said that the trail’s a little too challenging for me,” she said. “You did okay,” Mark said quietly. “I was being an asshole.”

Dylan looked up at him and something occurred to her. “Do you *miss* me running with you?” she

asked.

Mark smiled at her, that almost shy smile that she recalled from when they first met; the smile of the guy who still didn’t get just how amazing he was, and that she was the lucky one to have him, not the other way around.

“You never really talked to me at all,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, but I liked knowing you were there,” he said, his voice quiet.

For a moment, those words just hung there, bringing them both just a little closer to each other

than they had been just moments before. Then Mark was coming to stand behind her, looking over her shoulder to see what she was working on.

“Law school stuff,” she explained a little shyly. “I might be able to start in the spring.”

Mark placed a hand on her shoulder and leaned in, looking at the monitor but not commenting. Dylan knew he probably didn’t want to pressure her, remembering all too well as she did, that the last time she’d made a big deal out of school but not followed through.



“I’m about to take a shower,” he said, and then added, “there’s room for two.”

“No thanks. I think I’ll stay here and finish this up before I have to leave to pick up Miri at the train station. If I get in the shower with you ...”

“True,” Mark said as he left the room. “You can’t seem to keep your hands off me.”

For whatever reason, her self-enforced exile seemed to be working for them. Mark was the one seeking her out now, made curious, intrigued, and maybe even a little insecure by her new willingness to just let him be.

Not too long ago when he had a free weekend and suggested they go out to dinner, she’d turned him down and been floored by the look of raw disappointment on his face, something bordering on hurt. Dylan had made herself sound uninterested in the suggestion, but that was only because she wanted it so much.

Rare had been the times in their relationship when they’d just had a night out together, just the two of them. They’d never dated in the traditional sense; there had always been family around, and fans or his agent, always someone looking for him, and somewhere else for him to be. Dylan could tell when he suggested dinner, he had something romantic in mind. He’d played well while he was away and probably felt like celebrating; celebrating with her. Just knowing that touched her.

Her husband wanted to woo her, she realized, and it broke her heart to have to turn him down. But she couldn’t chance it. Corey’s strategy was working and except for passing references, the sports media seemed to have moved on from the scandal with Ray. But it was too soon to be sure, so she would wait until the end of the season before reasserting herself.

Checking the time she got up and grabbed the keys, heading out the door to go meet her sister-in-law’s train. The drive was only a few minutes long and when she got there, Miri was already waiting for her, wearing jeans and a backpack, looking every much like the college student she was about to become. She got in the truck and gave Dylan a quick kiss on the cheek, taking off her iPod and reaching for the USB port to instead

play her music through the Range Rover's speakers.

"So I'm about to pass out, I'm so hungry," Miri said. "You think you could stop at MacDonald's on the way?"

"Sure," Dylan said, maneuvering away from the curb. "But your brother may want to take you out to dinner or something."

"Nope. My only plan is to veg out and enjoy the quiet," Miri said.

She was beginning to yearn for more alone time than her parents' house in the Bronx offered and more often was inviting herself up to Westchester to spend a couple days here and there with Dylan. Maybe UVa would have been the best choice for university for her after all. It was going to be difficult for her to convince her folks that she should get her own place when she started at Columbia.

Dylan looked at her and smiled, resisting the urge to reach out and move a lock of Miri's hair from her cheek and treat her like a little girl. Maybe her maternal instincts were kicking in early.

As soon as they pulled up at the drive-through, Dylan could smell the odor of cooking oil and salt. Her damned sense of smell was so acute these days that she'd switched out all of her and Mark's bath products for unscented varieties. It was so bad that if a banana sitting on the kitchen counter was more than a day old, she thought she might start retching at the scent of it.

"D'you know what you want?" Dylan asked Miri, swallowing the saliva that seemed to rise to her lips out of nowhere.

"Maybe ..." Miri perused the menu, taking her time about deciding and took deep breaths, trying to channel her thoughts in the direction of something that would soothe her stomach. The only thing that didn't make her ill these days was lemon flavored Italian ices.

"Miri," she said, feeling herself grow dangerously closer to vomiting. "C'mon, what do you want?"

Miri looked at her strangely. "A number three with a Coke would be ... Dylan, are you alright?"

"No ..." Dylan barely managed to slide the gear into park and get out of the truck before running over to a nearby bush and upheaving into it.

She retched a few times more until it was clear that she had

completely emptied the contents of her stomach and stood there, grasping her abdomen, feeling the muscles ache. She had been throwing up more lately, not just feeling nauseous, and it was no picnic, that was for sure.

In a moment, she felt Miri's hand on her back and she took a napkin that was offered to her.

"Could you move the truck?" she asked her sister-in-law. "I'm going to run inside to the bathroom. Come inside and order your food."

Dylan avoided her eyes and ran inside, finding the bathroom thankfully unoccupied. She tried to ignore the filthy floor and concentrated instead on the flowing cool water which she used to pat on her face, and rinse her mouth, then she got out of there as quickly as she could, lest another wave of nausea hit her, this time from the faint smell of urine.

She didn't linger in the restaurant, but instead went to wait outside where the air was fresher. Soon, Miri emerged with her MacDonald's bag, but looked reluctant to get in the truck with it.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "Was it the fast food smell that got you?"

"Yeah," Dylan said weakly. "Maybe you should eat it out here?" She indicated the picnic seating.

Miri nodded her agreement and they sat down, Miri on one side, and Dylan directly across from her. As she ate her fries, one by one, Miri studied her and Dylan wondered whether she should have ordered lemonade to take the metallic taste out of her mouth.

"You're pregnant aren't you?" Miri said after a moment.

Dylan didn't know why she should be surprised. Her sister-in-law had always been so perceptive, and not to mention that there were very few other reasons women spontaneously vomited.

"Yes," Dylan said, her voice quiet. "But ..."

"Oh my god," Miri said, a smile spreading across her face.

"Mark must be ..."

"He doesn't know," Dylan said hastily.

Miri looked confused.

"I can't tell him right now," Dylan said.

"Why not?"

There was no choice but to pour out the entire story, reminding Miri about that awful day at the ballpark during Mark's first game back, telling her about the lunch with Corey and everything he'd said, pointing out how much better things had been for Mark since she'd decided to "lay low" as Corey put it; and finally, having her admit that if Mark knew she was pregnant he would never be able to act like anything other than a proud father-to-be and would at every possible opportunity want to take Dylan with him wherever he went, to games, charity events and all the appearances arranged for him by the Mets and his agent.

But when she was done, Miri looked far from convinced.

"But you're robbing him," she said shoving aside her burger, seemingly without an appetite all of a sudden.

"*Robbing* him?"

"Dylan, this is the only time in his life he'll have a first kid. The only time. He doesn't even get the privilege of knowing it the moment you know it? How is that not robbing him?"

"The alternative might be to rob him of his career."

Miri rolled her eyes. "You don't really believe that, do you? The public has such a short memory. They could loathe him today and consider him a hero tomorrow. He can get his popularity back, but this, once it's gone? It's gone for good."

Dylan said nothing.

"How could you have let Corey convince you to do this thing?"

"I didn't know I was pregnant then ..."

"So tell Mark tonight. As soon as we get back, tell him."

Dylan shook her head. "I can't. The season is almost over. I'll tell him then."

"How far along are you?"

"Just thirteen weeks now."

Miri closed her eyes, shaking her head. "He is going to be so angry with you, Dylan." "When I explain ..."

"No," Miri said adamantly. "I know my brother. He is going to be *pissed*."

Dylan shrugged. "I'll take that chance. I caused enough damage to his baseball career ..." Miri shook her head and stood, tossing the remains of her meal into a nearby trash can.

"I don't understand why we're even talking about baseball,"

she said.

When they got back to the house, Miri quickly stuck her head into Mark's den to say hello and then bounded up the stairs leaving him looking at Dylan quizzically.

"What's with her?" he asked.

Dylan shrugged.

He patted his lap. "C'mere."

Dylan went over to sit on his lap and he reached around, turning her legs so that they rested on the sofa, pulling her sneakers off her feet and massaging each one in turn. Dylan smiled. Soon enough, she would need foot massages like this daily.

"You're gaining some of your weight back," Mark said, and she tensed, wondering what else he noticed. "At least that knee injury got you to ease off on the crazy workouts for awhile."

"They weren't 'crazy'. I was trying to be as disciplined as my husband is and stick to a routine," she said, running her fingers along the collar of his shirt.

"Your husband isn't disciplined at all when it comes to you," he said. He kissed her on the collarbone in a way that made her lean in closer, wanting more. "That day in the locker room with Ray, I wasn't ..."

Dylan held her breath. They had never talked about the incident before and she had always been too afraid to ask.

"What happened?"

"I didn't play well that night, so I was already frustrated. And I'd just seen the pictures the night before and ..." Mark ran his hand over his head. "And I was watching Ray being interviewed by a woman reporter and he was doing that thing he does, with the all-out charm offensive. And I pictured him doing that same routine with you and I ... I just snapped. I don't even remember those few seconds ... the next thing I knew I was just whaling on him ..."

Dylan bit in her lower lip, not knowing how to feel about what he did, but knowing that she didn't feel as badly as she probably should.

"Pedro and a couple of the other guys pulled me off or it could have gotten a lot worse. "

"I broke our rule," Dylan acknowledged. "I made you doubt me." She touched the side of his face and leaned into him,

pressing her lips against his neck. "I'm so sorry."

Mark squeezed her thigh. "I never doubted you as much as it seemed, Dylan. What I asked you at my parents' house ... about whether you'd ... I never thought that. Not really."

She nodded, unable to speak. That, more than anything, had been the most painful part of this whole ordeal.

"I was jealous," he shrugged. "I'd never seen you attracted to another man before. And he has a reputation of going after other players' wives, so ... I lost my head."

"I don't want you fighting anyone," Dylan said softly. "But I love that I can make you lose your head."

Mark smiled and she leaned in to kiss him. His tongue pressed between her lips and she inhaled him, tasted him, fell into him, feeling tenderness, arousal, closeness all at once; wanting to open up completely and lay herself bare. It would be the perfect time to tell him about the agreement she'd made with Corey and to tell him about the baby.

But perhaps this was what discipline was about: foregoing what you wanted, your most basic impulses in favor of a greater good. So for now she would say nothing. Mark had only one more night with her before he hit the road again, and the season seemed likely to come to an end without the Mets making the playoffs, so he would be home soon and she would tell him everything.

*Then, she promised herself, then, finally there would be no more secrets.*

## 20

“I can’t tell you what a pleasant surprise it was when you called me,” Grant said, smiling at her from across the table.

“Jenn and I had been wondering about you, if you’re okay.”

Dylan smiled at him, thinking how much she’d missed him.

He seemed so ... normal. Like someone from a very different, very average, very attractive world that she’d long since left behind. Ava had been her only emissary from that side, and even she was being drawn more and more into the rarefied world of baseball, having recently begun dating a guy from the Mets front office whom she’d met at Pedro Lima’s house.

“I’m fine,” Dylan nodded.

She glanced at the menu but already knew what she would get. They were in a Chinese restaurant not far from the firm—a place Grant had taken her to many times before when they were working hard on a case and needed to get out for an hour, just to see that the world was still there and functioning. When the waiter took their orders, Grant too, was able to give his without looking over the choices.

“The news there for awhile,” Grant said wincing. “It was pretty brutal.”

“Yeah, it was. But none of it was true, Grant, I ...”

“Dylan, please,” he leaned forward and grasped her hand for a moment. “You insult me. Of course I knew it wasn’t true.”

Dylan smiled and shook her head. “How would you know? You knew me as an employee. For all you knew, I was a little bit of a floozy as well.”

Grant laughed. “I’m a man, Dylan. We can sniff out a ‘floozy’ as you call it, a mile away.”

Dylan laughed with him. “So how is Jenn? And Kennedy?”

“They’re great. Kennedy started K4, she’s wearing a uniform. I bawled like a baby when I took her to her first day.”

Dylan smiled. These were the talks they used to have all the time, Grant telling her about his family, Dylan bemoaning the lack of a sense of direction in her life. But Grant had helped give her one when he suggested law school. Just sitting across the table from him, being in his company, reminded her of why the idea had excited her in the first place.

“So law school fell by the wayside, I understand,” Grant said after a few minutes. “I called a friend at Columbia and they confirmed that you weren’t registered. What happened, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I messed up,” Dylan shrugged. “I got sidetracked.”

Grant touched her hand again. “Dylan, you were always so hard on yourself. You got married to a mega-sports star. You had a new life to contend with. You had different priorities for awhile. And nothing is irrevocable. If you still want to do it, it’s there for the taking. You just have to reach out and grab it.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” Dylan admitted. “I want to go in the spring. But it seems like it’ll be somewhat of an abrupt transition so I was wondering ...”

The waiter came out with their lunch and she stopped for a moment while Grant dug in.

“Go on,” he urged. “You were thinking . . . ?”

“That I might come back,” Dylan said. “On a volunteer basis,” she hastened to add.

“Why? Our money’s no good anymore?” he grinned at her.

Dylan blushed. “Well, I just meant that it’s not about the money. And I don’t even know that you need anyone. I just ...”

“I’m kidding,” Grant said shaking his head. “Of course, Dylan. Anything. And if you want to do it on a volunteer basis, that makes it that much easier to clear with HR. You can be my legal intern or something.”

Dylan brightened. “I would love that,” she nodded.

Grant shrugged. “Great. Just let me know what you have in mind when you get a chance to think about hours and days, that kind of thing.”

“I’ve thought about it,” she said quickly. “And I think it might be good for me to do full-time. Or as many hours as you can give me. I’ve been a little idle lately so I want to get a good routine going again, y’know? Have some place to be, some purpose ...”

Grant extended his hand across the table and Dylan shook it.

“Welcome back, Dylan,” he said.

“But there’s one minor wrinkle,” she said when she released his hand. “It shouldn’t cause any complications at work, but I



thought you needed to know.”

“What? There’ll be paparazzi staking out the building?” Grant joked, his mouth full of chicken and broccoli.

“No. Well, I don’t think so, anyway,” Dylan said. “It’s just that I’m ... I’m pregnant.”

Grant laughed out loud. “You’re full of news and surprises aren’t you?” he said. “Congratulations, Dylan that’s amazing!”

“Yes, but it’s also kind of a secret,” she said, looking about the restaurant. “So please don’t ...”

“My lips are sealed.” Grant shook his head and grinned at her again. “It’s a long way off from the days when you complained to me about feeling like your life hadn’t even begun yet, huh?”

Dylan nodded.

She’d forgotten she’d ever said anything like that. Despite the ups and downs of the last several months, she couldn’t complain about feeling like she wasn’t living life. It wasn’t always what she wanted it to be, or what she expected it to be, but she felt alive for sure. And all because of a stupid party downtown when she’d wandered out onto the fire escape with a joint in her hand.

“So your husband’s playing pretty well these days,” Grant said. “Honestly if it hadn’t been for his kicking Ray Hernandez’ ass, those damn Mets might have ...” He stopped as though realizing that he might have offended her.

Dylan shook her head and dug into her own lunch. “There’s always next season,” she said.

.“*¡Eso es perfecto!*”

Dylan smiled when her mother-in-law tasted her chicken and pronounced it perfect. It was probably her hundredth attempt at *pollo guisado*, and the very first time she believed that it was being received with sincere pleasure rather than polite acceptance.

“I’ll make it for Mark when he gets home on Friday,” she said beaming and giving herself a round of applause. “But for now I’ll be satisfied if Peter and Matt eat it. Can we not tell them I made it?”

Mrs. Acosta laughed. “Of course. We’ll get an honest review.”

“Exactly,” Dylan said winking.

She'd been in the Bronx for two nights now, ensconced in the warmth of Mark's family, her family. She'd driven into town to have lunch with Grant and to drop Miri back home after yet another visit and somehow she'd just stayed. She lazed about the house in sweats and Mark's old t-shirts, considering the visit a mini-vacation of sorts because on Monday she was starting work again, which felt strangely exciting.

For the past three days, she'd been ignoring calls and voicemail messages from Lauren Morales and Stephanie Alfieri, feeling exasperated that they wouldn't just leave her alone. Her interest in them and their lives had waned over the past several weeks and though she knew she would have to call them sooner or later, she didn't feel like doing it. Mark's last trip home had been close to perfect. They'd spent almost no time apart—not to shower, not to eat; never.

He'd even skipped trail-running, instead waking up late with her, having breakfast with her and Miri in the kitchen and later working out in the gym while Dylan walked a slow pace on the treadmill. In the afternoon, they lay about in his man-cave, watching television, Mark's head in her lap while she raked her nails across his scalp and he ran his hands up and down her thighs, making her incredibly excited even though his sister sat just feet away.

They took baths together—which Dylan was careful not to make too hot on doctor's orders—and Mark talked to her about his teammates' funny and quirky pre-game rituals and the pranks they played on each other in the locker rooms and dug-out. He had reached a detente with Ray Hernandez, it seemed, mostly because they silently agreed to avoid each other and he shared that at least once, Cindy had showed up at a game with their kids.

In every city he played in, Corey had been relentless about organizing charity appearances, which he complained about half-heartedly and then went on to describe how much the events touched and humbled him when he saw how much they meant to people. The distance, his absence and Dylan's reluctance of late to go out with him seemed to have made him more determined to make the most of their time together.

And so they did. They locked their bedroom door and made slow, languorous love, spending hours just touching, feeling

and tasting each other before Mark finally entered her.

One morning, Dylan awoke to the sound of raindrops on the roof and the comforting feel of Mark's hand resting on her stomach, smoothing over it, feeling, pressing. It was beginning to grow slightly rounder, but interestingly, harder as well, and she held her breath wondering if he would figure it out. But he'd simply looked at her when she opened her eyes and pressed his cheek against it.

*Your skin right here*, he said with puzzlement in his voice. *It's so much warmer than the rest of you. Almost hot.*

Dylan had rolled over atop him and opened her legs, sliding her pelvis against his morning erection, successfully diverting his attention elsewhere.

The two days until he was home again could not come quickly enough.

Across the dinner table, Dylan and her mother-in-law exchanged smiles and secret looks as the rest of the family enjoyed the pollo guisado, even taking their customary second helpings, none the wiser that they'd had a new cook for this particular meal. Only Miri seemed to notice, but that was only because she noticed everything.

When everyone was done eating, and there were no leftovers of the dish she'd made, Dylan proudly broke the news and watched as eyebrows rose in surprise. Even Peter graced her with a smile and a nod of approval. He'd been the last to come around when Mark first introduced her to the family, and the last to recover from the Ray Hernandez debacle. He still regarded her with something less than warmth, more like cordiality, but Dylan was counting on the baby, a cousin for his son, to further break the ice between them. It didn't much worry her, because she had a lifetime to change his mind.

"You cooked, so Xiomara and I will do the washing up," Miri offered.

"Thanks," Dylan accepted, knowing that the real reason was that Miri was constantly on the lookout now, making sure she didn't over-exert herself or do anything that might be threatening to her pregnancy.

Upstairs, she stripped for a shower and wrapped a towel about her, leaning over to check her phone before making the trek down the hall to the shared bathroom. There were two more

calls from Lauren Morales, and one from Stephanie. Sighing she sat on the edge of the bed and decided that this might actually be the best time to call. She could rush them off the phone by saying, truthfully, that she was visiting her in-laws. She called Stephanie first, because the interval since she'd spoken to her was the longer of the two, and because she was easier to talk to. Lauren had become a little sharper with her lately, a little less warm, and she thought she knew why but didn't much care. The last thing she needed was to get into a catfight with someone about a man who was available to neither of them, and whom Dylan did not even want to have anything to do with.

"I wondered whether I'd offended you in some way," Stephanie said, her voice was shrill when she answered. "It seems like it's been ages."

"It has been," Dylan acknowledged. "But I've been so stretched. And I've decided to go back to work, so ..."

"Oh really," Stephanie said. "Huh."

Dylan rolled her eyes, recalling how all the women had reacted similarly when she first met them, like gainful employment was some quaint and antiquated concept.

"So I don't suppose you'd be up for going to Saks to do some damage on Friday," Stephanie finally said.

"No," Dylan said, trying to sound regretful. "The team's back on Friday, remember? So Mark will be here ..."

"Home, away, makes no difference to me anymore," Stephanie said.

Dylan didn't respond. It had always been this way. Stephanie had always talked about her husband and about MLB with such cynicism. But it was beginning to get old. *If you didn't like your circumstances, didn't there come a point that you had to decide to change them?*

"Well it still does to me," Dylan said. "So I probably can't do shopping on Friday." And when only silence greeted that. "But maybe another time."

"Yes, maybe," Stephanie said, her voice false and bright.

"So you called quite a few times," Dylan prompted. "Was there something in particular . . .?"

"Nope," Stephanie said briskly. "I just wondered whether you'd fallen off the face of the earth."

“Feet planted firmly on solid ground,” Dylan said. “But thank you for thinking of me.”

“No worries. Look, I can hear my kids in the next room. Or more accurately, I can’t hear them so I’d better go see what the hell’s going on. You call me when you’re freed up a little more, okay?”

“Sure.”

But when Dylan hung up, she already knew that it would be a long time before she called Stephanie again.

Lauren was next. Dylan took a deep breath and hit the ‘call’ button, waiting through three rings before Lauren finally answered.

“Dylan,” she said sounding a little over-excited. “I’ve been trying to reach you for ages. What the ...”

“Sorry,” Dylan said as though reading from a dialogue sheet.

“I’ve been a little tied up.”

“Have you spoken to Steph lately?” Lauren interrupted her.

Dylan’s brow furrowed at Lauren’s tone. “A few minutes ago, why?”

“You’ll need to sit down for this.”

“I am sitting down.”

“Stephanie’s been talking to the press, Dylan.”

It took a moment for it to sink in. And even when it did, she had to be certain that she understood precisely what Lauren meant.

“What ...do you . . . ?”

“All of that stuff about you and Ray. She’s been the source.”

“How . . . ?”

“A friend of mine at the *Daily News* told me. We were having a completely unrelated conversation about a charity I support and she blurted it out. I think she thought I knew. I think she thought *everyone* knew.”

Dylan felt her heart begin to race. Her decision to distance herself from Stephanie hadn’t been born of suspicion. If anything she would have suspected Lauren more so than Stephanie. Her decision to distance herself from Stephanie came from a completely independent realization that they had nothing whatsoever in common besides being married to professional baseball players on the same team. It still seemed incredible. That Stephanie could smile in her face and even

court her friendship and yet ...

“But some of it was made up. Lies.”

“So she lied,” Lauren said, her tone cavalier. “Wouldn’t be the first time. But I’m afraid there’s more, Dylan.”

Dylan gave a short bark of a laugh. “More? Isn’t that enough?”

“Are you pregnant?” Lauren asked.

Dylan bolted upright. Her heart was hammering against her ribs now. “Where did you hear that?” The only people who knew were Miri, Ava and Grant. And she would bet her life that none of them would breathe a single word unless maybe Grant told Jenn and then ...

“Someone took a picture of you leaving your doctor’s office and did some poking around and got confirmation. And then they checked with Stephanie who’s been feeding them information all along. And now they have a story.”

“*What story?*” Dylan practically shrieked.

Lauren sighed. “So looks like they revived the Ray angle. And apparently they’re going with you possibly being pregnant with his love-child. And since you haven’t been photographed with Mark for a long time, they’re speculating that he left you, and that’s what the fight between Ray and Mark was about ya-dah, ya-dah ...”

Dylan felt herself sag into the mattress. She closed her eyes, squeezing them tightly shut. “And *Stephanie* gave this to them?”

“Now that I don’t know,” Lauren said quickly. “All I know is they’ve been talking to her to fill in some holes all this time. And I guess they think they’ve got it all filled in.”

The tone of Lauren’s voice, as casual as someone reciting the plot of their favorite soap opera, was almost chilling. Almost as though it had no consequence in the real world and for real people.

Dylan could feel her hands beginning to shake. She’d done as Corey asked, staying out of the public eye, doing nothing other than living her life, and being careful to live it without her husband, no less. And still, they found ways ... maybe there was never a strategy that would have worked. It only slowed them down; it didn’t stop the innuendo and odious speculation. She could feel herself becoming just something short of hysterical, her hands’ trembling travelling to her shoulders and

arms until her entire body shook.

“Dylan? Are you there?”

“Yes ...”

“I called you because they’re running it in tomorrow’s paper. It’ll be on the stands and online at midnight tonight. I’m sorry

...”

Dylan hung up on her, not caring what she thought, wanting only to get as far away from those women and their mean, small lives as she possibly could. She had intuited a long time ago, one quiet night when she and Mark were home all alone that when she focused on him and on them, on their life together, things made sense. The insanity happened when she allowed herself to be seduced by shiny new things and glittery new people, not allowing herself to see what was so clear to her now.

Now how the hell was she going to explain this to her husband? Things were just beginning to get back to normal, to the normal she would have had all along if she hadn’t been so swayed by the glitter that accompanied her new life. Now Mark would see this story and would learn that she’d hidden a pregnancy and he would wonder if maybe, *maybe* there was some truth to the implication that it might not be his.

Picking up her phone again, she dialed Corey’s number and when he picked up repeated everything Lauren had shared with her. He listened almost without interruption and when she was done remained completely silent.

“Corey!” she said, her voice shrill. “Tell me what I should do!”

“Dylan, we talked about a lot of things,” he said finally, sounding distant and resigned. “But the decision to conceal a pregnancy from your husband? That one’s all on you.”

And that was it.

That, *finally*, was the moment when it began to sink in that all this time everyone had been looking out themselves. Lauren, Stephanie, and even Corey who was supposed to be looking out for his client—all of them were motivated by self-interest. Corey was looking out for his cash cow, not for Mark; not really. And she’d allowed him to convince her to withhold material information from her husband, convincing her it was part of some genius media strategy that would ‘save’ him

when all it had been was a clever ruse.

In listening to Corey she'd failed Mark yet again. She hadn't trusted him to make his own decision based on what *he* valued most. She'd decided for him that his career should be that thing of most value, and bargained away their right to have a life like any other couple. She'd traded the right to hold her husband's hand in public for the possibility that he might *one day* want to be a sportscaster on ESPN.

Dropping the phone once again, Dylan ran down the hallway toward the bathroom, grasping her towel about her, falling to her knees and retching into the open toilet. She sat there for awhile, on the bathroom floor, wanting to cry but not being able to produce a single tear. At this point, they would be tears of self-pity and there was no time for that. Not now.

She took a shower and brushed her teeth, then dressed and combed her hair, steeling her spine for the difficult conversations that were ahead of her. Then she called Miri and told her everything, watching as her sister-in-law let her head chin drop to her chest, knowing that she was just barely restraining herself from saying 'I told you so.'

"I need to borrow some clothes," Dylan said. "A pair of jeans and a top, and then could you call Peter and Matt up here?"

Miri looked at her. "What're you planning to do?"

"It's ten-thirty now," Dylan said. "I was thinking we'd wait until midnight and get a copy of the paper. And then I was going to have your brothers take me to Pittsburgh where Mark's playing the Pirates."

Miri nodded. "Okay," she said.

Dylan tried to sleep, but for much of the drive she couldn't. Matt and Peter were up front and she was alone in the backseat of her truck, leaning against the door, the offending newspaper on the floor at her feet. Miri had remained behind with her parents to explain everything to them when the news broke in earnest in the morning.

She closed her eyes, listening to the hum of Matt and Peter's voices, speaking Spanish. Occasionally she heard her name or Mark's but she honestly didn't much care what they were saying. When she told them back at the house several hours earlier, Peter had looked exasperated at first, and as he eyes



fell to her stomach, his expression turned sympathetic. At least he seemed not to have given any serious consideration to the idea that the story about to be printed might be true. It was better that he think her a complete idiot than an adulterer who was making a fool out of his brother. Matt, who had always had a soft spot for Dylan had hugged her right away and told her he understood why she thought she was doing the right thing.

*That's bullshit, man,* Peter said. Then he looked directly at her. *My brother loves you, with his whole heart. Holding nothing back. It's about time you decide whether you love him the same way, Dylan.*

The ways in which she had failed Mark ... Jesus, the list only grew longer every single day. If he wanted to leave her, if he wanted to be with someone else, like Patricia, she almost couldn't blame him at this point.

She must have drifted off at some point because when she opened her eyes again, the sky was gray and Dylan could see the first splashes of orange in the horizon. It was almost dawn. Peter had stopped at a Dunkin Donuts and shook her awake, asking whether she needed the bathroom, which she did. She used the ladies room while he went to the counter to order. In the truck, Matt, who had been driving earlier, slept.

When she got out of the bathroom, Peter wordlessly handed her an orange juice and a warm sandwich and they got back on the road. Dylan ate, looking at the back of her brother-in-law's head, thinking about how he'd dropped everything—how they both had—to help her fix the latest mess she'd gotten into. All along, they, her family, were the only ones she should have trusted. All the parties, the stupid little gatherings that she'd arranged, wondering guiltily whether she should even include them ... she was embarrassed to think about it now.

"How far away are we?" her voice croaked when she spoke.

"Not too far. Less than a half hour, I think," Peter said without looking back at her.

He was angry at her again and would be for a long, long time. She couldn't say she blamed him.

"Peter," she said.

"Yes."

"I do love you brother," she said. "I do love him with my

whole heart. *I'm* holding nothing back.”

“Except for the news that he’s about to be a father.”

Well. That was entirely deserved. Dylan said nothing more until they arrived at the Crowne Plaza where the team was staying. They would be on their way to Baltimore to play the Orioles after tonight’s game. Given the hour, Dylan guessed that Mark was working out or would be shortly. Peter shook Matt awake when they’d parked and he stretched and yawned, looking around and taking in their surroundings.

“So what now?” he asked rubbing his eyes.

“I’ll get the manager or someone to let me into Mark’s room so I can wait for him. You two should get a room to get some sleep ...”

Peter shook his head. “We’ll get some sleep once we make sure you’ve found Mark.”

Inside, it wasn’t nearly as easy as Dylan anticipated getting the manager to assent to letting her into Mark’s room. He explained that he wasn’t at liberty to let anyone in except for the registered guest unless that guest expressly gave him permission to do so. All he could do, he told her, was leave the message light on so that when Mark returned to his room he could call down and be told that she was waiting for him.

So they left the message and got their own room, making it clear to the manager that when Mark returned, he could be told the room number. Once upstairs, Matt and Peter spread out fully-clothed, on one of the king-size beds, leaving the second one for her, even though she couldn’t begin to think about sleep. As she watched the sun rise in earnest, she listened to Matt and Peter’s snores and reached for the newspaper, allowing herself for the first time to look closely at the picture that accompanied the headline. But the headline itself was quite the attention-grabber.

‘More Drama!’ it declared in bold type, and underneath, ‘Acosta-Hernandez baby news?’

The picture was of her leaving her doctor’s office with her head down. Dylan couldn’t recall why she was looking so somber. Perhaps she’d been looking for her car keys. But the story inside suggested that it was because her pregnancy was unplanned (true) and possibly with the man to whom she was not married (of course, false). It went on to say that she was

spotted having lunch with an attorney friend (true) because she was wanted to ascertain her financial rights should she get dumped by her now completely fed up husband (false).

Dylan had just finished with the story and set the paper aside when the knock on the door came. It was loud and insistent, and she could only imagine that Mark would be beside himself, wondering what tragedy could have brought her and his brothers to Pittsburgh. Taking a deep breath, Dylan went to open the door. Behind her, Matt and Peter stirred.

Mark was in workout gear, a close fitting Lycra muscle shirt that was soaked through with perspiration and sweats. Dylan hugged him and let him hold her a moment, finally pulling away to lead him into the room.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, his eyes frantic. “Are my parents . . . is Miri . . . ?”

“Everyone’s fine,” Dylan said quickly.

She put a hand on his arm and then removed it, keenly aware that once he saw the paper he might not want her anywhere *near* him, let alone touching him.

Mark heaved a sigh of relief and then looked confused again, his eyes flitting over to the bed where his brothers were now sitting up, only partially awake.

“So why . . . ?”

She handed Mark the newspaper, turned over to the back page, so he could read the sports headline. He looked at it for a few moments and slowly lifted his head so his eyes met hers. Dylan could already feel the beginnings of a good cry but took another deep breath. She could do her crying later because there was sure to be plenty of reason to.

“Is it true?” he asked quietly.

She couldn’t help it. All it took was those three words, and the tears spilled out onto her cheeks and began running in rivulets. She wiped them away, but they kept coming until she gave up and just let them flow.

“*No*,” she shook her head emphatically. “No, Mark, it’s not true.”

He bit in his lower lip and his brow furrowed. “So you’re *not* pregnant.”

“Yes, I am, but I mean the part about it maybe being . . .”

Mark sat up ramrod straight, his eyebrows raised. For a

moment he said nothing but just stared at her. He exhaled then got up from his position on the bed and kneeled in front of her, taking both Dylan's hands in his, and there were tears in his eyes as well.

"Do we know each other so little?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

"That you think I would ever believe that about you?"

Dylan looked up at him, stunned. Again. She had underestimated him once again.

Mark shook his head and turned her hands over so her palms were facing up. He pressed his lips to them, kissing them.

"Dylan," he said. "For you to think that I would ever ..."

"But I never told you I was pregnant, so maybe you would think it was because ..."

"Nothing would make me think that," he said, and his dark, dark eyes were so steady as he stared into hers that all Dylan could do was dissolve into even more tears.

"I never *earned* your trust," she began.

"How can you say that?" Mark asked, but there was a sad smile on his face. He used his thumb to wipe the tears from her face. "All of those long hours, when we talked on the phone before I signed my contract? When we fell asleep talking and I'd wake up to hear you still there, just breathing on the other end of the line?"

Dylan smiled as well in spite of herself.

"We talked about *everything*," Mark said. "Do you remember? Things you told me? Things I told you? You became my best friend, Dylan. My best friend and my heart ..."

He opened her arms and rested them on his shoulders, leaning in to press his lips softly against hers. Then he pulled away and raised her shirt, just enough to expose her stomach and kissed her there too. He pressed his open palm against her, rubbing it from side to side and smiled.

"I'm going to be a father?" he said grinning.

Dylan nodded and braved another smile of her own. "Yes. I should have tol ..."

Mark cut her off by standing and took her hand.

"Come," he said. "We'll go to my room so you can get some rest; we'll let these two get some rest. We can talk when you wake up."

In Mark's room, they said nothing more while he pulled the

blinds, plunging the room into almost complete darkness. The bed, already unmade from his previous night's sleep was soft, comfortable and smelled like him. When he led Dylan to it and gently pushed her back, sliding off her shoes, it was only moments before she felt herself begin to give in to sleep; sleep of a different kind than she'd had in the truck, real sleep. She was awake only long enough to hear Mark start the shower, but within moments the sound of the water sent her toward total mindless slumber.

Dylan opened her eyes to the sight of her husband staring at her. His eyes were soft, and as soon as she opened hers, the corners of his lips turned up in a smile. There was a dull glow from a lamp across the room that was on, but the curtains were still drawn so she could not tell what time it was.

"I need to pee," Dylan said and he smiled wider.

As she sat up, she realized that the sheet had been pulled down and her shirt pulled up. Mark had been touching her abdomen while she slept, probably as amazed as she was, to think that inside her a new little life had begun. One they'd made together.

She used the bathroom and brushed her teeth with his toothbrush, looking at herself in the mirror. Her hair looked unkempt and wild, and her eyes had dark circles beneath them. How could he smile at her the way he had, with her looking like a crazy woman, with her having driven here like a crazy woman and dragging his brothers along for the ride? And beyond all of that, how could he smile at her at all when she'd kept something so important from him so deliberately and for so long?

When Dylan walked back out into the bedroom, Mark was still in bed and she saw now that he was fully dressed in sweats with a t-shirt, socks on his feet. Glancing at the time, she saw that it was much later than she thought, just past two p.m. He would need to leave soon for the game and had probably just been waiting for her to wake up before heading over. She sat on the edge of the bed and Mark turned over onto his back, arms folded behind his head. His expression was unreadable, but not angry for sure, not even upset.

"I've been nothing but trouble for you," she said finally.

Mark actually laughed at that, and then he leaned over to grab ahold of her shirt, tugging until she lay back and scooted closer to him so that her back was pressed against his chest.

“Never a dull moment,” he said against her ear.

“I can’t ... I don’t understand why you’re not insanely pissed off at me,” she admitted.

“I’m too happy about the baby,” he said shrugging. “Maybe I’ll get really angry later.”

“Mark, I’m being serious.” She pulled out of his arms and sat up cross-legged facing him.

“I had lunch with my brothers,” he said, his face serious.

“While you were still asleep. They told me. About Corey and that stupid set-up you agreed to where you’d pretend not to be my wife ...”

“I never agreed to pretend not to be your wife,” Dylan said.

Mark’s face grew serious then. “That’s what it amounted to in the end though, didn’t it? You pulled away from me in exchange for me getting ... what?”

“Your career back,” Dylan said. “Your *life* back.”

“Dylan, *you’re* my life. You.”

She stared at him dumbfounded. Did men even *say* things like that, really? And mean it?

Mark always had. From the night they met, when he said they were “kindred” this was the kind of thing he said. The kind of thing women fantasized about hearing from a man.

And she had a man who said them all the time, but Dylan had never been able to make herself believe it, accept that she was worth that. No matter how many times he told her how important she was to him, it just never, couldn’t seem to, penetrate. Even now as her heart leapt out of her chest, wanting to grab onto his words and hold them close, she doubted.

Mark seemed to read her mind, and sighed.

“I have to head over to the ballpark,” he said. “Go back home, Dylan. Go to my parents’ house. Stay there until I come home on Friday. Don’t spend any time thinking about all this.”

“How can you *say* that?”

“Because now I know everything,” Mark said reaching up to touch the side of her face, then dropping his hand to her stomach. “That my wife is pregnant with our baby, and that

she did something foolish and misguided to try to save my career. Those are facts I can live with. All of that stuff in the papers? That's just noise, Dylan. It's someone else's alternate reality; we don't have to make it ours."

## 21

Dylan idly stroked her naked belly, as was her habit lately when she was in a moment of contemplation. Today had been the season's final game and a bittersweet occasion for the Mets. They had the best numbers they'd had in almost seven seasons and everyone acknowledged—some of them grudgingly—that Mark Acosta was a huge part of the reason. Still, the rumbling among the fans and sports press was that had he not been distracted by his personal life, the team would have done much better.

A reporter even had the temerity to ask him to his face whether he thought his marital difficulties may have been a factor in where the team wound up.

Mark had laughed good-naturedly at the question and shook his head. *Where the Mets ended up*, he said, *was better than where the team's ended up in almost a decade. So if my so-called marital difficulties had something to do with that, maybe a divorce will put us in the World Series.*

The room had erupted in laughter, signaling their approval of the way he had cleverly put an end to questions about his personal life. But press conferences were one thing. It was quite another to try to silence the tabloids. It was now well into the fall, and they had not tired of documenting with painstaking detail, Dylan's growing midsection and every single trip to her OB's office, making much of the time when she was without her wedding and engagement rings, and similarly speculating about when Mark was with her and when he was not.

Now, as Dylan watched the silhouette of her husband walk naked toward their bed, her admiration was not just for his physical beauty but for the man he was. He had weathered it all with such equanimity, it was incredible to witness. She aspired to his self-confidence, his certainty.

Mark lowered himself on the bed next to her and turned on the light next to the bed. Dylan had recently put in a very low wattage light bulb because her husband had begun to do the opposite of everyone else in the world and wanted the lights on when he came to bed, enjoying the ritual of falling asleep



while looking at and stroking her pregnant belly.

She was just past the five-month mark and her stomach was taut and solid to the touch, a fact Mark found endlessly fascinating. He pressed it tentatively, rubbed it with the heel of his hand or smoothed his cheek against it. Dylan was fascinated with his fascination and stared down at the top of his head as he fidgeted with her new body, smiling to herself.

Tonight he kissed her stomach, a kiss so feather-light it caused goosebumps to rise on the surface of her skin, and without a word, he looped an arm just beneath her abdomen and turning her on her side, pulled her back against him. Immediately, Dylan felt her body soften in anticipation. This was the position in which they most frequently made love. Mark had admitted to not wanting to risk any physical configuration that had him hovering above her, or penetrating too far, too hard, or too deep.

Frustrated that she could not feel all of him, Dylan had taken to the internet, looking for visual depictions of safe for pregnancy sexual positions. She had stifled her smile while he looked them over with all the seriousness of someone studying the dimensions of an atom under a microscope.

Finally he “approved” two other positions, but this remained his favorite, and Dylan had to admit, there was something sexy about the slower, sensuous and more restrained movement that it made necessary. Still, she was sure that as soon as she’d given birth and had the go-ahead from her OB, she was going to attack him like a wild woman. She missed the kind of sex they’d had that left her aching for days afterward.

Mark’s hand came around and he lifted her leg pulling it back so that it rested on his and she was open to him, and cupping her breast, gently because they were already fuller and much more sensitive. Dylan felt him press against her and heard him inhale between clenched teeth when he realized she was already wet, ready for him even without foreplay. It had been like this for about a month now, now that the morning sickness was over with. She seemed to be *always* ready. If Mark so much as looked at her in a certain way ...

As he slipped inside her, Dylan pushed back against him, flexing her leg that was hooked over his, using it to pull him even closer.

“Okay?” he breathed. “Is this okay?”

“Yes, Mark ...” Dylan reached back, gripping his buttock, pulling him towards her, wanting him to take her harder, the way he used to, knowing that he wouldn’t.

*But this still felt good, so, so good.*

Everything was so much more sensitive since her pregnancy. All he had to do was put a finger in that magic spot between her legs and she would explode so she shoved his hand away when he tried now, wanting it to last, this delicious silken feeling of him stroking the deepest parts of her as he moved slowly back and forth. Dylan threw her head back and angled it so he could kiss her, craning to reach his tongue.

“*Dios mío,*” he gasped into her mouth. “You’re ... so much softer, so much hotter ...”

His hand on her breast moved so he was holding a nipple which he squeezed between two fingers and that quickly, damn him, she was coming, one wave after the next, after the next and Mark tensed, feeling her tighten about him.

“*Shit,*” he said. “*Coño.* I can’t ... I can’t ...”

While she was still on the wave, feeling it roll over and throughout her, Mark had pulled away and spread her legs, lowering his mouth over her, probing with his tongue, kissing her the way her did her mouth, tasting her, drinking her, owning her.

“That’s ... that’s cheating,” Dylan managed over her moans.

“Come back inside me ... *oh god, Mark ...*”

And so she was gone again, pulled under by the force of yet another orgasm, her senses splintering into a million incoherent tiny pieces. When she opened her eyes and felt like she might be able to make sense of her surroundings once again she realized that Mark was kneeling between her legs, sitting back on his heels. He pulled her up toward him so Dylan was arched backward her buttocks resting on his thighs, and drove into her. The angle caused him to strike a spot inside her that was sensitive almost to the point of being painful and she panted, acclimating herself to newness of the sensation.

Mark pulled her back and forth, simultaneously swirling his hips and then he pressed his thumb against her clitoris and she exploded yet again, screaming this time, not sure she could take anymore. He removed his hand, placing it instead on her

stomach, making gentle circles, caressing her, almost soothing her as though to reassure himself that their energetic lovemaking would bring no harm to their baby. Touched by the gesture, Dylan forced herself to open her eyes and they met his which were unfocused and heavy-lidded.

“I love you,” she breathed.

And it was as though her words had pulled a trigger inside him because that was when Mark began to spasm, and she felt his release deep inside her, filling her, making her whole.

They were both still for a few moments until he slowly, almost carefully pulled out, collapsing beside her and locking an arm just beneath her breasts at her ribcage pulled her close against him.

“Okay?” he asked, his breathing still uneven.

“Yes. Perfect,” she said.

Dylan felt softly content, like someone floating away on a cloud. She stroked the smooth hair on his forearm. If she were a cat, this is when she might purr. Mark reached around and down between her legs, pressing two fingers gently into her and then holding them up to look at them.

Dylan laughed softly. “Every time we have sex lately you do that. What are you doing? Checking your semen for proper consistency?”

“No, the baby ...” Mark said holding her close again.

“Checking for blood. Making sure I didn’t ...”

Dylan turned so she was facing him, feeling one of those scary-strong waves of love that sometimes hit so hard they left her breathless.

“Didn’t what?” she asked, kissing him. “Break something?”

“Yeah,” he said seriously, his voice hoarse.

“*Mark ...*”

Dylan’s heart swelled. Sometimes he just rendered her speechless. All she could do was burrow close, burying her face in his neck.

As she lay in bed, windows open, trying to get comfortable for a nap with the increasing pressure and weight of her distended belly, and hoping to catch some of the ocean breeze, Dylan could hear Mark and his cousins, noisy and boisterous, arguing over yet another card game. And amidst all the male voices,

Ava's higher pitch. The entire family was back at the same villa in La Romana where they'd stayed in last Christmas, but this time, Dylan insisted that her friend come along, telling her that she would never forgive her if somehow she went into early labor in the Dominican Republic and Ava was not there to see her goddaughter born.

But in truth, Dylan was very unlikely to go into labor. She was only eight months along and her OB said everything was progressing nicely, even though he'd advised against the plane ride to a foreign country. Dylan had neglected to share that particular bit of information with Mark who had thankfully missed the doctor's appointment that day—a highly unusual occurrence—because he was helping Miri move into her new apartment near the university.

Finally giving in to the knowledge that she would never get to sleep with all the racket outside, and the unrelenting heat in the room, Dylan forced herself up into a sitting position and grabbed the remote, switching the television on, not much caring what she watched. The overhead fan was producing what seemed like a strong enough gust but these days she seemed to be hot all the time, no matter whether no one else was.

Even now, she was wearing the thinnest of thin cotton tanks and boy-shorts and she still felt as though the room was sweltering. They'd been in the DR for five days and for most of that time, all Dylan wanted to do was sleep, and even that she didn't do too well. Now she would give anything to be able to go to sleep on her stomach. After this pregnancy, she was pretty sure she would never, ever want to go to sleep on her back again. As if to rebuke her for her complaining thoughts, the baby squirmed inside her, shifting enough that Dylan could make out what looked like an elbow or a knee rising on the surface of her abdomen. Smiling, she propped herself up to witness it.

The first time he'd seen the baby move, Mark's eyes had grown wide in wonder and for the next several weeks, he tried various tricks to get it to happen over and over again just so he could watch. From feeding Dylan spicy and sugary foods to

playing music with headphones pressed to her stomach, he was relentless until Dylan began swatting him away. Even more than she was, he was eager for her to give birth and speculated endlessly about who their baby daughter would look like.

A familiar voice and face onscreen caused Dylan to turn her focus back to the television and sit up. *Ray Hernandez*. She hadn't thought about him in ages. The television was tuned to ESPN because it was the first and last channel Mark watched each day. Ray was being interviewed in what looked like the living room of his New York apartment. The apartment Dylan had first visited when Cindy invited her over just after Mark left for his first spring training.

*Did that mean he and Cindy were back together?*

That question was promptly answered when the camera frame widened and Cindy came into view. She was sitting next to Ray and their hands were clasped together. Dylan's eyebrows shot up and she reached for the remote, turning up the volume. ... *to lose perspective*, Ray said, finishing a thought.

*And what about you Cindy?* the interviewer, who was out of view asked.

*I would echo what my husband said.* She nodded, looking at Ray who smiled back at her, his eyes earnestly affectionate. *We've had quite a time of it, but I think it was all for the best in the end.*

Dylan studied them, these two people whose lives she had become so intimately familiar with, and realized that she still had no idea whether the sentiments they expressed were genuine.

"Hey, do you want . . . ?"

Miri had come walking in and stopped in her tracks when she saw Ray Hernandez on the television screen. She kicked off her flip flops and folding her legs beneath her, settled on the bed next to Dylan, leaning back against the headboard.

*There had to have been a seminal moment, a time when it all came together for you,* the interviewer said. *For each of you. Ray, you want to go first and tell me what yours was?*

Ray looked at Cindy who Dylan now noticed seemed to be less carefully put-together than she normally was. She looked

less severely ‘constructed’ and more like a woman who had the means to take care of herself and did. Her hair was darker, and she wore less make-up. She looked almost pretty.

*For me it was when I had to go to my lawyer’s office and I saw the stack of papers that would dissolve my marriage, Ray said, shaking his head. And I thought, my family, my life means more to me than this. This stack of papers couldn’t be all I let it come down to. That’s all I kept thinking.*

*But there had to be more to it than that, the interviewer probed. To make you and your wife reconcile, I mean. After all, there were some pretty serious allegations out there ...*

Dylan held her breath, knowing what was coming.

*... that you were engaged in an affair with a teammate’s—Mark Acosta’s—wife and that the affair had produced a pregnancy.*

At this question, Ray turned to Cindy who straightened in her seat and pursed her lips for a moment.

Dylan waited and felt Miri’s hand on hers.

On the television screen Cindy took a deep breath.

*One of the most regretful things about this whole period, she said, for me at least is that there was so much collateral damage. There was never an inappropriate relationship between my husband and Mark Acosta’s wife. She’s a friend and someone who was hurt ...*

*But those pictures that surfaced, the interviewer said, sounding skeptical.*

*Were taken entirely out of context, Ray interjected. We were all in Palm Springs. My wife was there as well ... He looked at Cindy who nodded. And we were going through a tough time. Dylan Acosta was a friend. To both of us.*

Dylan exhaled and looked at Miri who was smiling. But it was strange. She was supposed to be feeling more ... vindicated. And she did feel that, but not with the intensity she might have expected.

Even after she was content that Mark and his family did not and could not believe about her all the things the tabloids and sports rags were saying, Dylan convinced herself it was important “to set the record straight” for the public. Corey had tried for a time to convince Mark that they should do an interview, much like the one she was watching right now, that

would clear the air; and Dylan had supported the idea. But Mark had been adamant.

*Dylan, he'd said. No. They don't get to have that much of us. We're not going to give them that.*

And she'd tried to understand what he meant even while she didn't entirely agree with it. After everything that had been said, she wondered, how could he not want people to know it was untrue? Especially since it was said about his wife.

But now, watching Ray and Cindy, submitting their marriage for public analysis and inspection, Dylan understood Mark's misgivings. Having to sit there and explain their struggles, justify them, somehow cheapened those very struggles, reduced them to something just short of a reality show spectacle. Dylan could not imagine wanting to do that to what she had with Mark. Her life with him and their family, their soon-to-be born baby—that was all too precious to expose to strangers who at the end of the day still would not believe ...

And as if to underscore her point, onscreen the interviewer's face came into view. He was a brisk young man with rigid television hair, clear blue eyes and a face practiced in fake empathy.

*Well Ray, you do know there will be doubters, he said. You've had quite the reputation over the years ...*

*Much of it deserved, Ray acknowledged. I'm not a perfect man.*

*No man is, Cindy said, smiling at her husband.*

At that moment, Mark came walking in. He was shirtless and barefoot, wearing wrinkled white linen shorts that hung on his hips, his skin dark from hours on the beach, with a hint of sunburn on his shoulders and nose. Over the past five days he hadn't bothered shaving and had a shadow across his face that made him even sexier as far as Dylan was concerned.

Seeing his sister and wife reclining on the bed, he came toward them smiling, his face relaxed and happy. Dylan smiled back at him. He threw himself on the huge bed, between Miri and Dylan.

"Mark, be careful!" Miri said, protectively reaching out to shield Dylan's abdomen.

Mark moved up to place a hand on his wife's stomach, replacing it with his lips, pressing a kiss into the fabric of her

tank top and then gently resting his head there.

“How’s she doing?” he asked.

“Good. Active today; turning somersaults...”

Mark made a move to turn toward the television. “What’s on?” he asked.

Dylan picked up the remote and casually switched to another channel before he could see the familiar faces onscreen.

“Nothing,” she said. “Nothing important.”

And then she turned to her full attention to what was.