



Maggie Lily

# The Call

Building the Circle  
Book 1

The Call  
*Building the Circle – Book 1*

Maggie Lily

Copyright © 2020 by Maggie Lily

All Rights Reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the of brief quotations in a book review.

*for my boys*

(there are not eight of them)

# Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Forward](#)

[Sixteen Months Earlier](#)

[Chapter 1 – March](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6 - April](#)

[Chapter 7 - May](#)

[Chapter 8 - June](#)

[Chapter 9 - July](#)

[Chapter 10 - August](#)

[Chapter 11 - September](#)

[Chapter 12 - October](#)

[Chapter 13 – November](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16 - December](#)

[Chapter 17 – March](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23 – April](#)

[Chapter 24 – June](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[The Trellis Siblings](#)

[Thanks for reading!](#)

# Forward

Jake wiggled and scooted until Matilda was on her side and he was cuddling behind her.

“Sigh,” Matty said.

“Did you just say the word ‘sigh’?”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“Cuddling is nice. I’m so cold without you. But, I miss sexy time,” she whispered.

“Matilda, I love you more than life itself, but there is no fucking way we’re having nookie in this hospital bed. The pool table was just about as adventurous as I get and I’m never fucking living that down.”

She was laughing. “The garden was way worse than the pool table. Also, ‘nookie’?”

Jake was chuckling. “I’ve mentally blocked the garden. What’s wrong with nookie?”

Matilda couldn’t stop laughing. “Every third word out of your mouth is ‘fuck’! But, hey, nookie. OK.”

Jake was laughing, too. “Fuck sounds too ugly in that context. ‘Making love’ is probably the most accurate but sounds way too dramatic. What would you prefer?”

“Umm. Sex, frolicking naked, making the beast with two backs, doing the humpty dance, balling, banging, adult naptime, aggressive cuddling, a bit of the bam-bam-”

Jake was laughing hard enough for the entire bed to be shaking with him. “Aggressive cuddling?! What the fuck?”

“I grew up in a bar, I can do this all day -

“Amorous congress, assault with a friendly weapon, beating guts, attacking the pink fortress-”

“Oh my God, I love you so much,” Jake gasped between laughs.

“Belly bumping, boning, batter dipping the corndog, dinky-tickling, the wild thang, fornicating, crashing the custard truck - are you ok?!”

Jake fell out of the bed, still laughing hysterically. “CRASHING THE CUSTARD TRUCK?! Did you just make that up?” He gasped out.



Sixteen Months Earlier

# Chapter 1 – March

Thunder boomed outside the 43rd-floor window as the wind made the skyscraper rock.

“I hate being up here when it storms like this,” Sam said as he stared out the window.

Jacob tapped the pocket and lined up the shot. The eight ball sunk as directed. “It’s fine. Suck it up, man. You chose the building. Another round?”

“Na, you’ve kicked my ass enough for today. That woman will be here soon, anyway.” Sam said as he hung up his cue.

“Tell me why we’re contracting this strategy work out again. Why can’t we just use the existing plan for the launch? The agencies have sucked.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “We’ve been over this.”

“Remind me.”

“I’m not opposed to the existing plan, I want you to consider other approaches. It’s a new industry for us. This woman knows the industry and she has a strong reputation for no bullshit. Let her play devil’s advocate and poke holes in our plan. We have nothing to lose.”

“Time. We have time to lose. I’m swamped.”

Sam delivered his patented shut-the-fuck-up look. “We just spent 20 minutes shooting pool. If you’re swamped, all the more reason to bring in help. Dad will be a few minutes late. I’m out of here.”

“You’re dumping this woman in my lap and not even staying for the meeting? Fuck you!” Jacob laughed at his younger brother.

“I’m the boss. I don’t have to stay for meetings. I delegate. Plus, this chick might be terrible.”

“And I say again. Fuck you!” Jacob called out to Sam’s back.

Before the door closed completely, Jen stuck her head in. “The Beer Team is here.”

“Thanks, Jen. They can come in and get settled. This woman should be here any minute.” It was five minutes to three in the afternoon.

Jacob began racking the balls on the pool table.

\*\*\*

Matilda Benton was flummoxed.

She had been impeccably dressed and styled at the start of her journey to this meeting. Hair gathered in a loose chignon at her nape. Just enough makeup to highlight, but not enough to distract. Pristine light gray pant-suit, a black tank with a swoopy neckline, chunky black ankle-high boots. Her lucky black leather carry-all, a gift from her dad.

No blingy jewelry, no super girly frills. The Trellis family was reportedly stocked full of men with short tempers and low tolerances for distraction.

Matilda had to get this right. It was a career opportunity that she wouldn’t see again. A chance to launch a new alcohol label on a global scale. If she got this right, her product consulting would be poised for growth and acclaim. She’d get this right. She could do this. She would do this, and do it well.

As she left her apartment building, the air felt charged. Weather reports predicted strong spring storms later in the evening. Maybe the rain would finish melting off and breaking down the last of the dirty snowbanks. It was fifty degrees out - definitely no coat needed after the long cold winter. She had her suit jacket.

She had almost an hour before her meeting and intended to walk from River North into the Chicago Loop.

She'd have time to stop for tea. Clients always have coffee. If they had tea, it was that nasty Lipton stuff.

It started misting rain. She had an umbrella. All was well.

Then, the rain got serious. It was sheeting down in waves.

A block later, the wind was blowing the rain horizontally. The umbrella was completely useless. She stepped out of the flow of foot traffic to order a ride.

Uber and Lyft had a double surcharge and no one available within the next ten minutes. She ordered the Lyft and tried to catch a cab in the meantime. If she got stuck with a cancellation fee, so be it.

There were no cabs. Ten minutes later, the Lyft was now fifteen minutes away. The clock was ticking.

She would finish the walk. There were shortcuts through other buildings. Everything would be fine. She had almost 20 minutes to spare. She might be a little damp when she got there, but it'd be fine.

She stepped back out into the flow of foot traffic and started moving quickly.

A rude, oblivious woman with a damn wheelie bag slammed into Matilda, knocking her ass over teakettle into a giant puddle. Matilda's carryall flew into the street and got run over a couple of times before she was able to rescue it. Her laptop and phone were destroyed.

Sitting on the muddy curb in the rain, Matilda started panicking. She was covered in sleetly street muck. The temperature was dropping and she was out of time. She couldn't even call the office; her phone was in pieces.

She could go home and try to reschedule for a future date. But it would probably cost Matilda the opportunity.

She could show up looking like a muddy, drowned poodle. The suit was ruined. The hair and makeup were gone.

Showing up like this was decidedly not ideal. But, it would demonstrate her commitment to the project. She could show up and do great work. Without her laptop. Or phone. Her notes might still be readable.

Onward. Muddy was forgivable. Explainable. She had a mishap on the way into the meeting.

Not showing up would cost her the contract. And no amount of tardiness would put her laptop together again in time to help her in the meeting.

She had mentally prepared for the pity and quasi-dismissal that came with meeting new work contacts for the first time. Most people saw the disability and wrote her off as incompetent until she proved otherwise.

It would be worse this time. Much worse. She was showing up less than perfect in appearance and lacking... everything.

People were staring at her as she walked down the street, toward the meeting. Correction: People were staring more than usual.

This did not bode well.

\*\*\*

The Trellis family had strong opinions about wasting people's time and energy. When Samuel Trellis launched his company, he incorporated that respect for other people's time into the culture.

Unexplained tardiness for meetings was not tolerated from anyone. Meetings started on time and people showed up prepared. To show up late or under-prepared was a waste of everyone's time and considered extremely rude.

Hank Trellis was going to be late because of a delayed flight. He informed the entire team as soon as the flight times changed. The team would carry on without him, knowing that Hank would join as soon as he could.

It was Jacob's project; Hank was along for the ride. And the beer. All Trellis men liked a good beer.

Otherwise, the marketing and product development team in charge of the beer launch showed up early. They were well organized and ready to start work promptly at three pm.

Jake checked the time on his phone. 3:02. He sighed.

"Hey Jen," he called out his door. "Have you heard from security? Are things backed up down there?"

"There's no wait time. I haven't heard from them," she replied.

He checked the time again. 3:03.

"Would you please try calling her?" The weather was terrible. Maybe there was an accident or something.

A few minutes later, Jen entered the doorway to let the team know that the call went to voicemail. Jacob grunted in frustration. The whole team shifted uncomfortably.

"So nice of you to dress up today, Jake," said Gary, one of the first Trellis employees and a long-time family friend.

Jake looked down at his jeans and t-shirt. "What's wrong with this?"

Gary laughed. "The lack of a dress code is nice, but you look like a slob."

Jake snorted. "Thanks, man. You say the nicest things to your boss."

"Whatever, you wouldn't know how to function without this team."

It was true. This marketing team, in particular, was vital to the company's growth and strategic vision. Jacob smiled as the team chuckled. They knew their value.

At 3:10, he dismissed the team. "Sorry all. Apparently, this woman doesn't want to work with us. If she shows up, I'll give her the brush off and we'll move forward with the original plans."

\*\*\*

The security desk clerk asked Matilda if he should call for help.

This contract was lost. There's no way anyone would hire her like this. She should have gone home and saved herself the embarrassment. She was an idiot to think she could still pull this off after the sleet puddle. Why was she even going past security? Just turn around. Save face and go home.

As she rode up the elevator, Matilda wondered who you called for wardrobe catastrophes. Surely there was a service that delivered last-minute clothing these days.

She followed the receptionist into an oversized office, fifteen minutes late. Foot traffic had slowed considerably after she got dumped in the puddle. The temperature dropped by at least 10 degrees since she left her apartment. Parts of her sodden red hair had gathered icicles.

"Ms. Benton, sir," the receptionist announced, sounding rather alarmed.

*Whatever, lady. There was a mishap,* Matilda thought.

A ridiculously good-looking man stood in front of a pool table, holding a pool cue. He was tall, over six feet, with dark brown hair stuck up in random directions like he had a habit of running his hands through it. He had light brown eyes set in a face that looked prone to smiles and laughter. He was also wearing a vintage Scooby-Doo t-shirt with a hole in it.

*What. The. Fuck.* Matilda gaped at Jacob Trellis for a minute. This family's wealth was measured in billions. Her best 'boss bitch' suit was just destroyed on the commute from hell. She spent hours getting ready for this meeting.

*Where did Shaggy leave Scooby and the gang?* Matilda wondered.

\*\*\*

As Jen entered the room, Jacob turned to greet the consultant before politely telling her to fuck off.

“Ms. Benton, sir,” Jen sounded distressed.

“Ms. Benton, welcome to Trellis Industries. I’m Ja... How can I help you?” There was a tiny, soaking wet woman covered in mud, dripping in his office doorway.

*What. The. Fuck.*

“There is a pool table in here.”

“Yes, there is. Are you OK? You’re clearly not OK. How can I help?”

“I’m fine,” she said automatically. She was always fine. “I had a mishap.”

“You have mud on your neck, Ms. Benton. Please, how can I help?”

“Matilda or Matty, please. I apologize. I have mud everywhere. Again, I had a mishap on my way here and didn’t have time to change clothes or clean up without being late. Or, at least later than I already am. There was a mishap. My bag and laptop with my presentation were damaged, but we can talk through our plans. I’ve done the research. I just don’t have the visuals because of the mishap.” She was talking fast to keep her teeth from chattering.

*Were those tire tracks on her bag? Did this woman get run over and still show up for a stupid meeting? Why does she keep saying mishap? Jacob was puzzled.*

“We can reschedule...” Jacob was halfway through the sentence when her face fell with frustration and disappointment. “There’s a private bathroom across the hall if you want to get cleaned up.”

\*\*\*

“I’m sensitive to wasting your time. We can just get started.” This was foolish. This was her worst nightmare come to life.



He was staring at her like she was nuts. She wasn't nuts, she was a moron. She wondered if her lips were blue. The contract was going to be a non-starter. No way they're going forward with her.

“Really, Ms. Benton. It's fine. My dad is delayed anyway. Please. You cannot possibly be comfortable.”

Matilda took a deep breath and let it out. This was unexpected. Pity, maybe? She looked down at herself. The suit was trashed. She was soaked and covered in mud. There was no getting comfortable. A trip to the bathroom wouldn't help.

Her laptop. Her bag.

Sigh.

She cleared her throat before speaking. “If rescheduling is better for you, I understand. I showed up because I want to make it clear that this project and product are important to me. I can do this work, even when I'm covered in mud after a mishap. I just won't sit on the furniture.”

\*\*\*

Jacob had no idea what to say. They'd reschedule, but fuck. If this woman was even remotely competent, they were going to contract her for the job.

*Who shows up to a meeting after a “mishap” like this? Did she just say something about the furniture? For fuck's sake, why won't she let me help? Or, get fucking cleaned up?*

Jacob could see the pieces of her destroyed laptop in her destroyed bag on the shoulder of her sodden, wet, destroyed suit coat. He could set the electronics to rights, at least.

\*\*\*

“Are you a PC or Mac kind of woman?” There was a flat, annoyed tone to his voice that she didn’t understand.

“I’m sorry?”

“Do you prefer PC or Mac? We make processor chips here - there are a couple thousand laptops laying around. I will go get one if you tell me what you prefer.” His words were clipped; he was annoyed.

She had made the wrong call. She was making a fool of herself.

“That’s very kind of you, but not -”

“Ms. Benton, you look -”

“Matilda or Mat or Matty, plea-”

“And, now I’m done with being nice,” Jacob snapped. “Lady, you look like someone tossed your tiny ass in a nasty street sludge puddle and then backed over you - and your bag - with a cab. If I saw you on the street and didn’t stop to help, my mother would disown me. I’m not sitting through a meeting with you like this. What kind of fucking computer do you want?”

She lost the contract. It was over.

A bit of a pause as she gathered herself. “A Mac, please. Thank you, sir.”

“My name is Jacob, Matilda. I’m fairly certain you know that.”

“I’m sorry to be a bother. I’m not typically... like this.” She should have borrowed a phone from somewhere to call and reschedule. This was horrible - worse than not getting the contract.

\*\*\*

*Well, now she looks defeated and sad, along with cold and miserable. I really hope she doesn’t start crying, Jake thought. I shouldn’t have yelled at her. Mom would be*

*appalled. What the fuck am I supposed to do here? Maybe a little humor?*

“You’re a pain in the ass so far, but a tiny one. You’re like... a miniature, perfect Barbie doll with crazy red hair that someone tossed in a shit puddle. Like, Barbie’s tiny ginger sister, from a damsel in distress toy series,” he grinned.

What the fuck? Was he making fun of her? At five foot even, she’d gotten a lot of crap for being short, and even more crap for her ginger hair. But, really?

“I had a mishap.” She said, chin raised. “You have a hole in your Scooby-Doo t-shirt.”

*Oh good! Jake thought. Feisty is so much better than defeated and sad. Thank you, God. She’s not crying. Tiny crying, miserable women don’t belong in my office.*

“You’re so tiny, someone didn’t see you and tossed your ass in a nasty sludge shit puddle without even realizing they did it. That was the ‘mishap’, right?”

Matilda’s bright green eyes turned to slits. “You better go back to being nice or I’ll tell your mother.”

“Oh, that’s low. You’ve only known me for ten minutes. You can’t threaten me with my mother yet.” Jake grinned again.

She flung her arms in front of her, gesturing to the pool table. “Why do you have a pool table in your office?” she asked. In all the little bits of gossip, no one mentioned the pool table.

“Because I like playing pool,” he said with a smirk. The ‘duh’ was implied.

“You need that much practice?”

“It’s relaxation, not practice. You’re shivering. Please go clean up. Please let me help. It’s uncomfortable to even look at you right now.” Jacob almost begged. Almost.

She snorted out of her little pixie nose. “Look at me. What do you think happens in the lady’s room that will improve my situation and make me look like less of a moron?”

Go find another damsel to save. And, yeah. ‘Relaxation.’ Because that’s not weirdly OCD at all.”

*She probably can’t even reach to line up a shot. But I love the snark. Fiery redheads for the win.*

Jake opened his mouth to say something pithy in reply.

\*\*\*

“Are you two about done doing whatever it is that you’re doing?” A tall, silver and brown-haired man said from the doorway. His posture was straight and formal, but he was smiling.

“Holy fuck, you’re late. You missed out on the shit puddle mishap.” Jacob said

“No, I didn’t. I’ve been standing here since the Barbie comment. By the way, she’s going to sue and never have to work again.”

“I don’t think she even noticed. She’s too busy trying to keep her teeth from rattling.”

The older gentleman looked at her with laughter in his eyes, and then almost glared at Jacob.

“This conversation would be much less awkward if you’d introduce me. I’m going to tell your mother that you yelled at a woman in distress and didn’t exercise proper manners.”

“Matilda Benton,” Jacob said automatically, “this is my father, Henry Trellis. He will not snitch about this because I tried to be polite.” He shot Matilda a look that dared her to disagree.

Matilda took a couple steps forward to shake the offered hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

“Likewise, Matilda. My friends call me Hank. Are you well? Did you get injured in your mishap?”

Oh. Sigh. She glanced between them; both men were staring at her legs. Time to retreat and regroup. “I’m not injured, thanks for your concern. I am going to make use of that bathroom now if that’s OK?”

Both men watched as Matilda exited the office, a noticeable limp slowing her pace.

Jake looked at his dad, a question on his face. “I have no idea,” Hank said.

\*\*\*

There wasn’t enough salvageable makeup in her bag to fix things up, so she washed it all away with the bathroom hand soap. Her green eyes looked huge in her face. It wasn’t going to help with the Barbie doll, damsel comments.

The suit coat was wetter than a dishrag, but her tank underneath was fine. Wet, but fine. It looked OK, not too bad. It showed a little more skin than Matilda was typically comfortable with, but she didn’t have a better option. At least her bra straps were covered.

There was no hand dryer in the bathroom, so she used an excessive amount of paper hand towels to blot some of the water from her hair and used a piece of a broken brush from her bag to somewhat untangle the curls.

\*\*\*

When Matilda returned to the room, her face was scrubbed clean and her crazy hair was reigned into a tight bun. Her suit coat was over her bare arm. She was definitely drier. And at least a bit cleaner.

A new MacBook Pro was waiting next to her wrecked bag. On top of the computer box, a new iPhone was updating. There was a light gray Trellis Industries fleece and a laptop bag on the chair.

“This is very kind. Thank you.” Matilda nodded to Jacob as she pulled the fleece on. It hung down almost to her knees and smelled like really good men’s cologne.

*Great, Matilda thought. I can put a belt on this and wear it as a dress. Not helping with the miniature Barbie shit. At least it’s warm and dry. Holy fuck it smells good.* She tried to inconspicuously take a few deep breaths.

\*\*\*

“What actually happened?” Jake asked.

“A stupid bitch with a wheelie bag whacked me into a giant sludge shit puddle as she came out of a revolving door. My bag went flying into traffic and got ran over by a bus.” Matilda flushed with embarrassment as Jacob burst out laughing. “She knew what she did, though. I’m not *that* small.”

“I rate my guess a 9 out of 10! Bag damage by a bus instead of a cab.”

Matilda winced at the mention of her bag. Maybe she could still salvage this. “Can we do actual work now? I can’t present but I have-”

As if it was planned, both men said “No!” at the same time.

“It’s ten minutes to four. We don’t start new work after 4 pm. It’s a company-wide rule. The last hour of the workday is for wrapping things up and getting ready for tomorrow. We discourage late working. Sticking to an eight-hour day actually increases productivity.” Hank explained.

Yep, the contract was gone. She lost her timeslot to present her ideas, and now it was done. Both men were looking at their phones. Unofficial dismissal, then. At least her electronics were replaced. That was nice.

“Um. OK. Well, if you’d consider working with me in the future, please don’t hesitate to reach out. I understand this

was not a great start.” Matilda said, trying not to look defeated.

“Huh?” Jacob said. Both men looked up, thoroughly confused.

“Or, I can reschedule with your assistant now. I’d be happy to come back any other time to talk about the brand launch.” Matilda hoped she didn’t sound too desperate. A little desperate, fine. Too desperate was just pathetic.

“No,” Jacob said, still rather confused.

“Oh. Um. OK. Thank you for your time and help. Best of luck with the product launch.” She would leave with dignity intact. Mostly.

“What? No. Stop,” Jacob said.

“I’m confused, I’m sorry.” Matilda said. “I’m not sure what to do here.”

“It’s 4 PM. Pool!” He said it with such conviction, as if it should make sense.

“What is it you want me to do?” Matilda asked.

“Pool! Or not, if you’re not up to it. I understand you’ve had a *mishap*.” The taunt was clear in his voice.

Hank rolled his eyes. “This is a thing, Matilda. I’m sorry. You don’t have to play with him.”

“Yes, she does,” Jacob declared. “Not today, if she doesn’t want to. She’s still wet and miserable looking. But, she’s going to play eventually. She was insinuating that my game sucks!”

Was he saying we’d reschedule the meeting? “What about the meeting?” Matilda asked.

“What meeting?” replied Jacob.

“The meeting I came here to have today. The meeting about the beer launch.” Matilda’s right eye twitched, just a little bit.

“Oh, that.” Jacob grinned, thoroughly enjoying the irritated look from Matilda. “We can do that another time. Whatever. I’m not sure why you’re all stuck on that meeting.”

“I’m stuck on it because I want the damn work.”

“Great. Sounds good. Pool!” Jacob said.

Matilda looked at Jacob, then Hank. Was this really happening? Was she going to shoot pool at the most important meeting of her career? Covered in street slime and wearing someone else’s fleece?

“Is it better if I win or lose?” Matilda asked Hank.

“Win!” both men exclaimed at the same time.

“It’s like you two are related, you know?” She smiled then, a real smile.

*She’s adorable,* Jacob thought.

\*\*\*

Matilda spent the next hour thoroughly trashing Jacob at 8-ball.

As she gathered her things to leave, she gave him a cheeky smile and said: “Keep practicing, Shaggy.”

He grinned at the Scooby reference. “Where’d you learn to shoot pool?”

“Same place I learned about beer. I grew up in a bar.”

\*\*\*

The next morning, a contract from Trellis Industries arrived in Matilda’s email.

*Matilda, thank you for your time yesterday. We look forward to working with you throughout the product launch. Please review the attached contract and let me know of any amendments. You’re expected to expense any losses from yesterday’s mishap. — Best, Hank*



She quickly tapped the Forward button. After selecting Ellie's email, she typed "Huzzah! I'll be at the office in an hour."

## Chapter 2

Fifty-three minutes after clicking the send button, Matilda was walking through the door of Hapner and Associates.

As the door closed behind her, Eleanor yelled from the back office “There’s no stipulated number of hours or hourly rate in that contract! What the hell happened to you yesterday? You didn’t call me back!”

Matty wandered through the front office and down the hall to her best friend’s office. Eleanor was Matilda’s closest friend and college roommate before getting a paralegal certification and meeting her lawyer-husband, Charlie.

“Where’s Charlie?” Matilda asked.

“He’s in a meeting upstairs until the top of the hour, but then free. He’ll review the contract when he’s out. Most of it is boiler-plate, but there were a couple of interesting things there. What happened yesterday?” Ellie asked as she twisted her long chestnut brown hair back into a bun.

“I had a bad day,” said Matilda.

“What does that mean? What was the ‘mishap’ comment in the email about?”

“It started storming as I was walking to the meeting and then I got tossed into a sludge puddle. I showed up to the meeting partially frozen, late, and covered in early spring street funk.”

“You had this ultra-important meeting with super-rich, powerful people and didn’t grab a Lyft?” Ellie was making the scrunched-up face that meant ‘you’re stupid, sometimes.’

“I also didn’t wear a coat.”

Ellie started laughing. “Oh, man. Did you wear the white tank or the black tank with the boss bitch suit? Because the white tank would explain the lack of hours cap.”

“I don’t think I’m ready to laugh about this yet. I made a fool of myself yesterday.”

“Pretty sure you did just fine yesterday, babe,” Ellie said. “You woke up this morning to a blank-check type of contract. That’s my girl, boss bitching it up, presenting even when she’s a mess.”

“I didn’t present anything at all. I showed up, missed my meeting, got into a bitchy conversation with Jacob Trellis, spent ten minutes in the bathroom freaking out, and then shot pool for an hour. I got a new laptop and phone out of it, though. And a boy fleece that smells yummy.”

Ellie squinted her dark blue eyes as she stared at Matilda.

“What?” Matilda asked.

“I’m trying to decide if I want the full story now or if we should wait for Charlie.”

“Wait for Charlie. I don’t want to tell it twice,” said Matilda.

“What happened to your laptop?” asked Ellie.

Matilda sighed and swallowed hard. “When I got knocked into the puddle, my bag went flying into the street and then run over by a bus and a couple of other cars.”

“Oh, honey. I’m sorry.” Ellie flung herself down next to Matty on the couch and hugged her tightly. “We can find a leather repair place. I bet it can be cleaned and fixed.”

“I’m choosing not to think about it right now. Yesterday was terrible. I didn’t expect the contract this morning. I’m sorry I didn’t call you back last night. I have this monster iPhone I don’t quite know how to work yet.”

“I’m so confused, but we’re waiting for Charlie, as requested,” Ellie said in her most impatient, I-hate-this voice.

“By the time I got home, I just wanted a hot shower, a bottle of wine, and a jar of Nutella. I was wallowing in failure. When I woke up to the contract, I thought it was a joke at first.”

“I’m back!” Charlie called as he walked through the office. “Hey, there’s our kick-ass Matty! That contract came from Hank Trellis directly. You must have killed it with that product team yesterday.”

“Get in here and sit,” Ellie directed. “Yesterday did not go according to plan and I’ve been waiting for you to get here because she won’t tell the story twice.”

Charlie frowned. “Matty, how can you possibly look sad right now? You got the contract!”

Matilda sighed, looking at Charlie. At five-nine, he was roughly the same height as Ellie. His dark blonde hair was neatly brushed and his tie was done just so. If he had a pocket protector, he’d be the stereotypical image of a nerd.

Charlie was the calm, logical counterpoint to Ellie’s chaotic humor. They fit together perfectly, in a way few couples do.

Matty recounted the day without interruption from Charlie or Eleanor.

When she was done, Charlie said, “I’m not sure if I should get champagne or whiskey right now, but some sort of alcohol seems necessary.”

Ellie started laughing.

“It’s not funny yet,” Matilda said.

“Oh, yes, it is,” Ellie said between laughs. “Eric’s going to lose his shit.”

\*\*\*

“You did NOT call him ‘Shaggy’.” Eric gasped between laughs.

“I did,” Matilda admitted. “It was such a surreal, twilight zone kind of encounter. I kinda forgot about the whole scary rich thing.”

“Did you give him back the fleece?” Eric asked.

“No. Of course, she did not.” Eleanor declared. “Girls never return boy clothes. You know that.”

“You should have brought it with you so we could experience what ‘obscenely wealthy’ smells like!” Eric laughed as he opened the door to the Coach store for his two best friends. His face was glowing with delight.

“I don’t think I can really expense this stuff,” Matilda said with a sigh.

“I saw the email! You were told to expense losses from your ‘mishap’. The bag isn’t work-ready, babe.” Eleanor picked up a gorgeous burnt orange bag.

“Why did you keep saying ‘mishap’?” Ellie asked. “I think that’s the best part of this entire thing.”

“I have no idea. In my head, I kept chanting that my career make or break moment was broken by a stupid mishap. It just kept coming out that way. I’m sure I sounded like an idiot.

“Charlie said there were no edits to his contract amendments. Congrats on that giant raise we thought they’d negotiate down. Did you sign it yet?” she asked.

“I did. I feel kinda guilty about that raise. Who doesn’t negotiate? That contractual gift stuff was strange too, but if Charlie said it’s OK, whatever.” Matilda said as she looked at a violet wallet. Her wallet wasn’t ruined. She put it down.

“You know who doesn’t negotiate? Rich people who give no fucks. What gift stuff?” Eric asked.

“She’s contractually obligated to accept any gifts from the corporation, so long as the corp assumes any tax and legal liability. It was a new one for Charlie, too.” Ellie said.

“I’m intrigued by the tall, dark, filthy rich, Prince Charming type pool addict that you trounced. Shared hobbies make for great sex... Maybe some chemistry there? You could play the part of Damsel Princess in distress,” Eric said, wagging his eyebrows.

Matilda snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“Woo, do you think he likes boy bits more than girl bits? Could there be rich boy match-making in my near future?” Eric asked eagerly.

“No, definitely straight. He was way too interested in my boobs to be gay. Pretty sure thoughts of him will be keeping me warm on cold, lonely nights. But, what would he do with someone like me?” Matilda said. “I can’t bring myself to buy anything here yet.”

Eleanor shot her a scornful look. “I hate it when you do that. Knock it off. You’re adorable.”

Matilda rolled her eyes as they left the store.

“I love Oakbrook Mall,” Eric said to change the subject. “We should come out here more often. It’s fun to pretend we’re spoiled rich people.”

“Please stop with the rich people shit. They were surprisingly nice. Kind. I was just too worked up to notice it, so I was a bitch instead. And, we’re not coming here more often. It took us an hour to get here. It’s just nicer for big shopping than Water Tower.” said Matilda.

“Think we can expense lunch? I bet rich dudes wouldn’t mind buying you a meal,” said Eric.

Matilda glared at him.

“OK, I’ll stop,” he said. “It’s fun though. You met billionaires. With a B. You’re going to hang out and drink beer with them. Thinking about it makes me giddy.”

“I can’t imagine that I’ll see much of them. I’ll be working with the product team,” she said.

“Back to lunch thoughts. I will spring for a fancy lunch in celebration of my new contract. What do we want for lunch? We had Italian last time we were here.” Matilda said.

“French place?” Eleanor asked.

Eric made fake gagging noises. “That place isn’t even that good. You just like to feel sophisticated.”

“Where are we shopping next?” Eleanor asked.

“I’m kind of done for today,” Matilda admitted.

“No, you’re not. You need a new boss bitch suit.” Eleanor reminded her.

“I’m not feeling it.”

“Try harder,” Eleanor glared again. “Look at the store directory. There are an absurd number of high-end stores here. Let’s get this done.”

They walked around the corner to Matilda’s favorite tea shop. “Grab a table, we’ll get drinks and strategize,” Eric said.

It was 12:30 on a Saturday afternoon. The mall was busy, but the outdoor walking made the mall feel less crowded. Saturday shopping was a best friend tradition since college. The venue changed weekly, but the friends stayed the same.

There was no trouble finding an outdoor table at the tea shop. It was sunny but chilly. *Tea would be lovely.* Matilda thought as she sat down.

\*\*\*

Hank and Darla Trellis had a couple weekly traditions. Saturday morning was for errands together, followed by lunch. Sunday evening was dinner with the whole family. And, they sat down to eat an actual breakfast together at least three times a week.

Over the course of forty years of marriage and nine children, Hank could count on one hand the number of times they violated these traditions. Two of the violations were due to the birth of children.

He held the door open for his wife as they left Tiffany’s in Oakbrook Mall. Their youngest child and only daughter would graduate with a Master’s degree in two months. They were shopping for a charm for her bracelet.

“Mission accomplished. What’s for lunch?” Hank asked.

“We probably didn’t need to have the charm custom made,” Darla said.

“Need? No. But, she’ll have it forever. I want her to always know how proud we are of her. You don’t like the design?” he asked.

“I love the design. I’m just surprised. You’re rarely sentimental.”

“Eh, we have a lot of boys. We can always swap one for another.” He dodged quickly as she swatted at him. “Only one girl, though.” He bent to give her a quick kiss as she tipped her face up at him. “What’s for lunch?”

“Hmm. Italian or Wildfire?” Darla asked.

“Italian,” Hank said.

They started walking together, naturally in step. Hank shortened his stride without thinking about it when walking with his wife. At five feet two inches, she was a foot shorter than him.

“Is Sam sleeping better?” she asked. Their middle child suffered from bouts of insomnia that went on for weeks.

“He looked pretty bad yesterday. I’m not sure if he’s managed more than a couple of hours.” After a look at Darla’s concerned face, Hank added, “He’ll level out, he always does.”

“That one worries me. They all worry me in different ways, but Sam on many levels.” She said.

As they were approaching a tea shop, Hank saw a girl with fiery Irish red-orange hair and started to laugh. “I forgot to tell you about Thursday.”

“About your lunch in St. Louis?” she asked.

“No, after that. Oh. Wait. That is her. We’re bringing in an outside consultant on the Beer Project. She’s sitting at the tea shop. Let’s go say hi. You’ll love her.”





“Your tea, my lady,” Eric said with a cheeky little bow.

“Thank you, sir,” Matty grinned back.

“So, where are we going next?” Ellie asked.

“Yeesh, I don’t know. But I hope it’s to buy a new suit.” Hank smiled as he walked up next to the table.

Matilda gave a little start when she recognized him.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Matilda. I saw you as we were passing and wanted to say hello.”

“Uh hi. Hi! Sorry Mr. Trellis, you surprised me.” Matilda said hurriedly as she jumped out of her chair.

“Matilda Benton, this is my wife, Darla. Darla, Matilda will be working with us on the Beer product.” Hank said, then smiled pleasantly at Ellie and Eric.

Darla Trellis couldn’t be more than two inches taller than Matilda. The family matriarch had walnut colored brown hair with smiling blue eyes and laugh lines around her mouth. The internet said Darla was in her late fifties, five years younger than Hank. But, as a couple, they looked distinguished and joyful. It was difficult to guess their ages.

“Hi! It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Trellis.” Matilda said as she shook Darla’s hand. “These are my two very best friends in the world, Eric Rodriques and Eleanor Hapner.” More handshaking ensued.

“Hapner? Are you related to Charles? I think I exchanged email with him yesterday,” Hank asked.

“Charlie is my husband, sir,” Ellie replied, clearly caught off guard.

“Ah. I was impressed with his thoroughness and speed. What kind of law-” Hank started to ask.

“Bah!” Darla interrupted. “You can call him on Monday and talk work stuff. You’re not hunting for new

lawyers on our morning out. What are we shopping for?" she asked Matilda with a smile.

"Ha." Matilda was turning red. *Why am I blushing?* "Your husband is correct, I'm looking for a new suit. But we shop together every Saturday. We've done this since college."

"Aw, Hank and I do the same thing. Saturday morning errands, even when the kids were little. We were that annoying family in a grocery store with a bazillion kids to wrangle." Darla laughed.

Hank chuckled. "We won't intrude, but I'll be looking for your invoice from today. Your poor bag took a beating, too."

Something flashed across Matilda's face but was gone before Hank could identify it.

Darla must have seen it, too. She quickly changed the subject. "Have you tried Talbots? They do right by petite girls like us. There's also a great designer on Michigan Avenue I can recommend if you don't find something here.

"I'm a little jealous of having shopping partners," Darla said, wistfully. "The boys won't shop with me and Beth is still away at school."

"All right, woman. Let's go. I require food and I can see where this is going. Let the young people shop, you don't need to join them." Hank laughed.

"You're no fun," Darla pouted. "I have better credit cards. We'd have a blast."

Eleanor and Eric were both laughing. "You can join us any time, Mrs. Trellis," Eric said.

"Oh, so sweet." Darla hugged each of them as they parted ways.

As they walked away, Darla and Hank heard Eric ask, "*When did we start hugging billionaires? I love today!*"

\*\*\*

When she was sure they were out of earshot, Darla stopped and turned to Hank. “Which one?”

Hank looked over his shoulder. “Jake.”

“Oh, good grief, is the end in sight for the gazelle? She’s into the beer project. Please tell me she’ll tolerate the pool obsession.” Darla smiled.

“She completely pummeled him. For a solid hour. After a horrible mishap on her way to the meeting.”

They started walking again as Hank explained.

\*\*\*

Jake was not excited about Sunday family dinner. He loved his family. He loved the food. And the laughter. And the beer. It was just a matter of mixing those things with his girlfriend.

Bella was a model. True to her name, she was six feet of leggy, beautiful blonde. She was also a pain in the ass.

She disliked food. And beer. And his family. And pool. And t-shirts and jeans. She loved reality TV and her photoshoots and her fans.

His mother called her the gazelle because there was nothing but long stick limbs to her. That wasn’t entirely accurate. Bella had a nice pair of fake boobs, too. It was like squeezing water balloons though. No flesh at all around the implants.

Jake shook his head to clear his thoughts as they walked into his parents’ house on Sunday evening.

The dog immediately charged them as they entered. The giant Rottweiler flopped on his back in front of Jake, waiting for the obligatory belly rub.

“Roscoe!” As Jake said the name, the dog howled along with the o sound.

Bella sneered at the dog. She didn't like pets, either. "Go wash your hands after petting him." Or germs.

Jake rolled his eyes. "I'll wash them before we sit down. Hello!" Jake called.

"We're in here," his mom called back from the big room.

He bent to kiss his mother's head as they entered the room and then shook his dad's hand.

He saw his dad six days out of seven. Sunday dinner was still a handshake event. It was man-speak.

If the handshake could talk, Jake's would say, "*Hello father, I have returned to your home. I love you and hope you are well.*"

And then Hank's handshake would say, "*Hello son, welcome home. I am glad you are here and proud of the man you have become.*"

At least, that's how Jake imagined it every week. It was a weekly affirmation of their respect and love for each other. No words needed.

Jake smacked his brothers and smiled at their assorted guests. "Wow, we're the last ones and we're not even late." There were sixteen people in the room.

"Let's eat!" Hank called.

"What's for dinner?" Jake asked. "Smells Italian."

"Lasagna," Sam said, as he walked around the far side of the table.

Bella smacked Jake's arm. "Go wash your nasty hands." *Sigh.*

"Woo, what were you doing that your hands are *nasty?*" asked Noah.

"I pet the beastly dog."

Noah put on an affronted face. "How could you?"

Jake smacked his younger brother upside the head. “There, now your head is nasty, too. Or maybe nastier. What the fuck is in your hair, man?”

“It’s a new pomade. I hate it.”

“Jacob, you will not curse at my table.” Darla scolded.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m sorry.” Jake apologized.

When he returned from washing his hands, Jake dropped into the empty seat on Bella’s left. He noticed that the two chairs to the right of her were also empty.

He looked across the table at Sam and Noah. Sam looked tired but was choking back laughter and trying not to make eye contact.

Noah was making squeezing motions with his hands while bugging his eyes out. When Jake made a confused face, Noah made a gesture like he was throwing a water balloon.

Jacob burst out laughing. “Asshole,” he said. Oh, man. He hoped Bella didn’t notice that.

“Jacob.” His father said. *Ah shit.*

“Sorry, sir.”

“Is there a salad? I can’t eat lasagna.” Bella whined. “I’d love to eat it, but I can’t and I thought you understood that by now.”

Darla sighed and made no attempt to hide it. “There is plain field green mix with lemon wedges on the side, as you prefer.” She looked around the table. “There’s also antipasto salad and fresh bread.”

There was a general cheer of appreciation.

Looking around the table, Jacob noticed his family and friends smiling and laughing together. Next to him, Bella sat perfectly straight in her chair, doing her best to ignore everyone, including him.

“What’s new with you, Bella?” his dad asked. “Any new projects going on?”

“Well, I’m auditioning for a reality show. Super excited about that, but I won’t know if I got it until the end of the month.”

“How does one audition for a reality TV show?” Hennessy asked. Hennessy was the best friend of Jake’s eldest brother. More than the other guys, he tried to be polite. Without much of a family of his own, he was grateful for his seat at the Trellis table.

“It’s not important,” Bella said.

*So much for that conversation, Jake thought.*

The awkward pause lasted longer than normal. Jake looked across the table. Noah made the cheers motion with his beer. *Yeah man, I’ll race you to the bottom.*

Jake had just tipped his head back for a big swig of beer when his mother said, “Your father and I ran into Matilda Benton yesterday. She seems lovely.” Jake choked on his beer and then spit it out all over Bella.

There were muffled snorts of laughter all around the table. Bella was crying. Noah handed Sam ten bucks.

*Fuck. They planned it. Assholes.*

Jacob gave his mother a look. *Really?*

Darla smiled and winked, then sat back in her chair and sipped her wine as Jake tried to calm Bella down.

“I’m so sorry, babe. It’s just a little beer. It’ll wash off your shirt. I’ll go get a new salad.” He said as he dabbed her with napkins.

“Don’t call me that. Ugh. It smells so gross. How could you do that to me? You did that on purpose!” she wailed.

“I didn’t do it on purpose. I’m sorry, honey.”

“My name is Bella! Not honey. Not babe. Bella.” She proclaimed. She didn’t like being called by nicknames.

“Your name is Stephanie,” Sam said.

“It is not! Again! I legally changed it two years ago. You know this. Why do you keep bringing this up?!” she screeched.

“Mostly because I’m done listening to you whine about a little beer. I thought we’d move on to something else.” Sam loathed Bella.

“You’re welcome to borrow a shirt, Bella,” Darla said from the end of the table.

“Ugh. I’m not wearing someone else’s clothes.” Bella said with disgust. “Take me home, Jacob.”

\*\*\*

“What was your mom saying before you puked on me?” Bella asked.

They were almost to her apartment. Soon he’d be able to walk her up to her door, apologize profusely again, and then leave. *Thank God.*

“Bella, I didn’t puke on you. Again, I’m so sorry.”

“What was your mom saying?”

“Huh? I don’t know.”

“She said someone’s name.”

“I don’t know. I hiccupped in the middle of swallowing. That’s why I spit the beer out,” he lied.

In the trailing silence, he thought of the fierce little woman that wanted to carry on with a dumb presentation after getting tossed in a city sludge shit puddle.

*What the fuck am I doing?* He wondered.

\*\*\*

“What the fuck am I doing? What is happening right now?!” Matilda laughed as she pretended to suck on a dildo in front of a room full of roaring, laughing friends.

“You’re making me happy because it’s my birthday,” Ellie said. “Now moan appropriately or you’ll lose the dare!”

“Is anyone else wondering why Matilda doesn’t have a gag reflex? Just me? OK.” Charlie was bright red in the face, horrified and incredibly entertained by his wife’s raunchy mind.

Matilda took the dildo out of her mouth to breathe deep and laugh for a minute. There were tears dripping down her face.

“Do it!” Ellie said.

“I can’t.” Matilda laughed. “I will never be able to sit through a meeting with him again without thinking about this.”

“Matty, please? It’s my birthday and it’ll make me happy. Please? It could be worse. I could be asking for the Silver Fox instead of Prince Charming. Please!”

*Fuck.*

She stuffed the dildo back in her mouth and pretended to moan, “Oh, Jake...”

The room cheered. From somewhere in the back, Eric gave a shout, “Got it, Ellie!”

Eleanor laughed harder and clapped.

“YOU DID NOT JUST FILM THAT!” Matilda was doubled over in laughter and embarrassment.

“Duh!” Eric yelled back.

Eleanor threw her arms around Matilda in a hug. “I love you!”

“I gift you this dildo. He’s new. There are some things that friends, even best friends, don’t share. Dicks are one of them.” The room cheered again. “May he treat you right and forever be known as Jacob!”

“Who’s next for Ellie’s Dirty Dares?!” Ellie called to the room at large. “You’ll earn a party prize!”



## Chapter 3

Tuesday morning dawned bright and clear. Matilda started her day the same as every other - with a workout. Thirty minutes on her elliptical to keep her limber and slender, some weight lifting to keep her strong, and thirty minutes of yoga to keep her as flexible as possible.

Matilda's muscle spasticity limited her range of motion, particularly for her left leg. But, she worked hard to keep what she had. She'd do a different set of yoga stretches before bed, as she'd done daily since she was about ten years old. Once done, she took a hot shower and mentally planned the rest of her day.

She had the Trellis presentation at eleven. And then another two-hour Trellis meeting scheduled immediately after. The calendar invitation just read "lunch". The attendee list included six of the Trellis family members.

*Well, that's not daunting at all.*

The family was rumored to be very close-knit and intolerant of others. They were supposed to be abrupt to the point of rudeness and standoff-ish when people disagreed with them.

Matilda had a hard time aligning those rumors with Jake's worry and Darla's hug. Maybe people just didn't like the close-knit clan? Regardless, she didn't feel anywhere near as intimidated today.

Lunch with six of them still felt overwhelming, though.

Black pants suit, pale green shirt, silver jewelry, neat hair twist. *Let's try this again.*

\*\*\*

Matilda got out of the Lyft at the Trellis building shortly before 10:30. She was ridiculously early. She'd kill

some time in the lobby before checking in at the security desk.

There was framed children's artwork hanging in the lobby. As Matilda read the plaque about the importance of funding non-academic art, music, and humanities, a man walked up beside her. She thought he was reading the plaque, too. But when she was done reading, he started talking to her.

"I like the way young children use color. It's unpredictable, they haven't yet learned the concept of matching or coordinating colors. Like little boys wearing nail polish and little girls in tool belts. Such bravery to disregard what's normal and ordinary without even knowing it," he said.

"They're happy paintings, a lovely exhibit," she said.

His lips turned up at the corners. Not quite a smile. "I hoped you'd be early today. Can I interest you in a cup of tea?"

She returned the smile. "I'd like that, Sam."

He took her work bag from her shoulder and walked with her toward the elevators, in step with her and matching her pace. It was odd that he took the bag from her. It wasn't heavy, but it was awkward. Matilda had borrowed it from Ellie. The straps were too long, so it pulled Matilda slightly off-kilter to carry it.

Still, most men wouldn't think to take the bag, and those that did would ask or hesitate.

*He's... different,* she thought.

When she started to move toward the first available elevator, he gently took her arm. "Too crowded."

"OK." She said. He kept hold of her arm as he studied her face. She'd normally pull her arm away, but the touch was so clearly a gesture of companionship, it didn't bother her. His dark hair was similar to Jacob's but cut shorter. His pale blue eyes stood out from his drawn, tired face.

He swayed a bit in place. "Are you OK?" she asked.

"How did you get the scar on the underside of your chin?" He asked as they got in the elevator.

“I slipped on the ice while walking home from school when I was seven. How’d you see that?”

“I looked at you.”

“You’re at least a foot taller than me! You can’t see the underside of my chin.”

“You had your head tilted higher when you were looking at the paintings.” He smiled a little smile again as they stepped off the elevator.

“You look so tired,” she said before she thought better of it.

“I am. I haven’t slept deeply for a long time. I think I might sleep today, though. You have a disability?” He asked.

She was startled by the directness of the question. People didn’t often ask outright, especially in a work setting. He waited patiently while she considered how to answer.

“Yes. I have cerebral palsy.”

He nodded. They turned a corner into a kitchen area. “Does it hurt to pull your hair back like that with the pins? It looks like it would hurt.”

“No, it doesn’t hurt,” she said.

“There are a couple of types of tea and there is good coffee.”

She selected a teabag. He handed her a paper cup with a lid. She made her tea.

“Let’s make a lap of the floor,” he said. “I think you made an impression on Jen the last time you were here.” He nodded to the receptionist when they walked by her desk. “After you went into Jake’s office, she ran into my office and told me to call someone for help.”

“Ha! The security guard asked if he should call for help, too. I had no idea who to call.”

Sam paused and looked at her. “That makes me sad. You are not so alone.”

“No, it just felt like it at the time. Everything had gone so very wrong.”

“Or right,” he said.

“I was a mess.”

“I’m sure you were, but you would not have made the waves you did, otherwise,” Sam said as they turned another corner.

“Oh?” she asked. *What waves?*

“My dad’s office is this corner, then Noah, Jake, and me. William is the next corner. Ethan is on the other side of Will...” He went on naming offices for people she didn’t know.

*Another surreal encounter...* she thought. Sam was very calm, though. Soft-spoken, gentle, and kind. He was downright soothing. She instinctively liked him.

As they walked down the hallway, Jacob came out of a door further down and saw them.

“Hello, Matilda. Congratulations on your safe arrival.” Jacob grinned at her and then looked at his brother.

A frown creased Jacob’s forehead. “Sam, are you with us?” There was a note of concern in his voice.

“Yes and no. I’ve been waiting, and now I’m done waiting so I can sleep soon.”

“What were you waiting for?” Matilda asked.

Sam looked at her again. “Who helped you when you hurt your chin?”

“My dad was there.”

“You wouldn’t have called him for help?” Sam asked.

“Oh. He died. I see. I’m sorry,” he said before she could respond. Sam startled Matilda with a hug. “Use your colors without fear, Matilda. You are welcome here. You can call me.”

“You’re doing that sleepwalking, talking, weird thing again, man.” Jake ran his hand through his hair.

Sam handed Jake the bag with Matilda’s computer. “Jen!” He called, “I’m sleeping now.” There was no response.

“Sleep good, Sam. No dreams.” Jake said.

“Only bitches, shrews, and vegans pass on Mom’s lasagna, Jacob.”

\*\*\*

Jacob winced.

“So, I shouldn’t pass on lasagna in the future?” Matty asked.

“Would you typically pass on lasagna?”

“Fuck, no.” She smiled.

“He’s usually not like that.” There was an apology in there somewhere. The serious tone of voice didn’t suit Jacob at all.

“I wasn’t offended. We had a talk.” Matilda said.

Jacob paused to look at her. “Thank you.”

She nodded. The conversation felt too heavy. “Your mom and I are going to be shopping buddies. We both appreciate petite sizes.”

He snorted again. “You don’t need Darla’s influence.”

“You best not be talking smack about your sweet little mama. She gave my friends and I hugs.”

Jacob looked at her with raised eyebrows. “She’s a hugger. She mothers everyone. But, you best remember that she has eight big, smart sons that she bullies and manipulates on a regular basis. She’s wonderfully, sneakily deceptive.”

“Don’t you also have a sister?”

“Yes, but no one manipulates her. Not even Mom,” Jake said as he opened his office door for her.

“Hey, nice balls. Why are there tennis balls all over your office?”

“Why are you so interested in my balls? You can’t play with them right now. We have work to do.”

*Don’t think about the dildo. Don’t think about the dildo. Don’t... ah fuck. Too late.*

“I figured you’d want me to slap ‘em around and show them who’s boss. Again.”

He grinned. “That’s later. You’re so red right now, I can’t even see your freckles.” His eyes danced with suppressed mirth.

“I know. My best friends are bitches, I’mma murder them later.” She laughed.

“Good to know.”

“What’s with the tennis balls?” Matilda asked. “They weren’t here last week.”

At her question, he picked one up and thwacked it on the wall shared with the office next door. “Yes, they were. They were just cleaned up behind my desk. You were too busy shivering to notice them.”

“WHAT?! I’m not late yet!” A voice yelled from the office.

Jake picked up another ball and threw it at the wall again.

“You’re such a dick!”

Matilda could hear the voice moving into the hallway. A few seconds later, another Trellis brother appeared in the doorway. “What? Oh. Hello, gorgeous.”

Tall, with lighter brown hair and darker brown eyes, this brother had a similar build to Jake, more muscular than Sam. Matilda could see Hank and Darla in all the brothers. They were all of a type, thus far.

While *Hello gorgeous* was not a typical professional greeting, Matilda took it in stride. There was no leer or heat to

it. “Hiya handsome. Which brother are you?”

“The BEST one,” he declared.

“Nope,” Jake said. “Sorry, man. Adrian’s the best of us. Then Ethan. Then probably Matthew or Luke. You don’t make the top three.” Looking at Matilda, he said, “How come he gets ‘Hiya handsome’ while I get ‘what’s with your balls?’”

“The ones younger than me don’t count. I’m in the top 3,” the unnamed brother corrected.

“He started out with a compliment. I responded in kind.” Matilda said.

“I started out with immediate, sincere offers of assistance when you were in distress! I got ‘I’m fine.’”

“Stop whining and introduce me to your brother,” Matilda sassed. It was hard to be serious and professional when the guys were so casual.

Jake rolled his eyes. “Matilda Benton, this is my man-whore brother, Noah.” When Matilda reached out to shake hands, Noah turned it as he bowed over it and kissed her inner wrist.

Jake smacked him on the back of the head. “Don’t get us sued.”

“Oh, OK. Now he’s worried about being proper,” Noah rolled his eyes. “So, Matilda, how do you feel about nicknames?”

Jacob glared at Noah.

Matilda looked back and forth between them, clearly missing something “Uh, sure. Mat. Matty. Whatever.”

“Tillie?”

“I’m not opposed, it just feels like the name of a crazy old aunt.”

“Ever change your name?”

“Nooo. What am I missing here?”

Jen stuck her head in the office. “The Beer Team is here.”

\*\*\*

Matilda finally got to present the information she had spent weeks compiling.

The group of eight people around the table were completely focused on her for the entire length of the presentation. It was eerie. This was not normal. She could not read their reactions. They sat there, completely zoned in on the content.

No laptops. No phones. No interruptions. No questions. No feedback. No reaction at all.

“And, that’s what I have so far.” Matilda looked around the table. “Can I answer any questions?” Did she completely misread the project?

“That was great, thank you.” The marketing lead, Gary, said in a monotone voice. “Would you please go back to the beginning?”

“Um. Sure. OK. Do we need to run through it again?” She asked as she moved backward in the presentation.

“Is this available for us to make notes on somewhere?” a woman asked. Ellen. Her name was Ellen.

“Ah, no. I don’t think I have access to anywhere you can get to it electronically.”

“Wait,” Jake said as he tapped a few keys. Then he came over to her computer. “May I?”

“Sure.”

He hit some hotkeys and mapped a network drive. “You can save things in this location while you’re in the building. We’ll need to set up access for you to get into it from your office.” He sat down in the chair next to her.



“OK. I’ll move the presentation file now.” Matilda wasn’t sure what to expect next.

“I’m in,” said Ellen. “Go Gary.”

“Slide 3 - microbrewery trends suggest...” Matilda watched in wonder as Gary and his team pulled her deck apart, slide by slide, and wove it seamlessly with their internal work and research.

“Slide 38 - your numbers are much higher than our estimates and don’t align with the trend data we saw earlier in the deck. Where did those estimates come from?” Gary asked.

“The trend data is under-estimated,” Matilda said with confidence. “It is based wholly on bars, taverns, and restaurants that aggregated purchases up through three specific point-of-sale systems that are popular with franchise and chain establishments. It completely ignores the mom-n-pop local places.

“30% of the sales volume from these manufacturers goes to mom-n-pop. The trend data ignores it, which is fine for a trend. But, we’re not going to ignore it in projections.”

There was silence around the table. “Unless you disagree,” Matilda hedged.

Gary shook his head. “Not at all.”

The room was silent again. She looked at Jacob. He raised his eyebrows.

“Trying to figure out what the non-verbal conversation is about?” He asked.

“Very much so,” Matilda replied.

“When I floated the idea of starting a beer label a few months ago, the group was in favor of exploring it. We did some research and came up with an action plan.

“Then we brought it back to the larger leadership team. In general, everyone was on board. Then Sam started rambling about this local vodka brand. The product was good, the labeling was great, the brand alignment with its ad channels was even better.”

“Ah, that’s how I got a Request for Information,” she nodded.

“Well, not quickly,” Jake admitted with a small smile. “Sam told us to go find someone that knows liquor, and then we’d move forward.”

“So,” Gary picked up the tale, “I went and found some ad agencies that had experience with big liquor brands. We put out the request for information to a group of them. They came in and presented. ‘Those people know how to sell beer,’ Sam said. ‘They don’t know liquor.’ So, we kept looking. There were eight consultancies that presented before you.”

“Then I got annoyed,” Jacob said. “We were wasting time. The thing is, Sam is *never* wrong. Everything he’s ever blessed has been amazingly successful. He has the Midas touch.

“Sam told me to move forward if I wanted, he wasn’t opposed to our plans. But, he thought we were missing perspective. He asked if I had seen the vodka.

“I’m not a vodka drinker. I forgot all about it. So, I went and found the vodka, which led to you.

“When you didn’t show up on time on Thursday, we intended to just move on,” Jake said. “I was done with RFI screening. I hate that shit. Advertising people talk a lot and say very little.”

“After you left on Thursday, your contract went to legal for review, but we were still uncertain about what you’d bring to the project,” said Jake.

“Why extend the contract without the pitch? Why not just reschedule? I was shocked when it popped up in my email on Friday.” Matilda asked.

Jake shrugged. “We couldn’t fault your dedication. If you weren’t useful with beer, Dad would move you to a different project.”

Gary’s head snapped up from his laptop screen. He shot Jake a confused look. Jake shook his head slightly.

“The lesson learned here is that Midas is always right. Two-thirds of what you presented today was new information for us.” Ellen said. “We need to rethink the phases and timing. And, we need more information on those distribution metrics you shared...”

From there, the team divvied up the to-do items and scheduled recurring meetings for follow-up.

The meeting ended three minutes early.

\*\*\*

After the team cleared out, Matilda was sitting in a conference chair next to Jake, lost in thought.

He touched her arm. She started a bit.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you,” he said.

“S’ok. Just thinking through the metrics. Sorry, I zoned out on you.” Matilda said as she looked up at him.

*Fuck, even sitting down I have to look up at him. Why is this family so tall?*

“In case this wasn’t clear, you did an amazing job today,” he said.

She grinned. “Thanks! I appreciate the compliment.”

“You know what needs to happen now?” he asked.

“Lunch,” she said.

“No! Try again.”

“My calendar says ‘lunch’,” she said.

“Well, it’s not wrong. We’ll order food.” He bent to grab a tennis ball and then thwacked it at Noah’s office again. “But, mostly, pool.”

“Seriously?” she asked.

Jake looked at Noah. “Did you?”

“Yep, they’re coming,” Noah said.

A voice from the hallway called “You know, we own a technology company. There are better ways to communicate than throwing tennis balls at the walls.”

Jake and Noah simultaneously yelled, “Booo!”

A trail of people wandered into the office. Matilda thought she could spot the brothers that she hadn’t met yet, but it was more than just the Trellis family.

“Aww. She’s so little. Hank said you were petite, but you are tiny. Hi Matilda, I’m Jane,” said a smiling middle-aged woman in jeans.

“Jacob got thrashed at pool by a little girl!” she taunted at Jake. Most of the people in the room chuckled.

*Fucking great. Is “little girl” better than “Barbie doll”?* Ugh.

“I’m going to do a round of introductions. Feel free to forget all the names that don’t end in ‘Trellis.’” Jacob said.

Halfway around the room, Matilda met Ethan Trellis. “Don’t worry, Matty,” he whispered, “I won’t let them call you a Barbie doll or a little girl.” He smiled a sweet smile that made her think of Eric.

William Trellis was next. All the Trellis men were tall with wide shoulders. Will was the tallest and most built of the brothers she had met. She was fairly certain he could throw her over his shoulder and run full out for several miles without breaking a sweat.

*Holy fuck. He and The Rock must share workout routines.*

William smiled politely and shook her hand, but lacked the warmth she had felt from the rest of the family. She wasn’t sure what to make of him. He was a little unsettling.

Jacob squeezed her hand. *When did he grab my hand?*

A shorter by comparison, blockier looking man stood next to Will. “This is Hennessy.”

Matilda smiled. “Like the liquor?”

He chuckled “Exactly like my preferred after-dinner drink. My name is Jessup Garland, Matty. Everyone calls me Hennessy.”

“When Will left the military, Hennessy followed him home and hasn’t left since. Something about duty and a saved life. They won’t talk about it. Anyway, he’s as good as another brother. We’ve adopted him.” Jake said.

“Thinking I might change my name. Name changes are goin’ round.” Hennessy said with a bit of side-eye at Jacob.

“What’s with the name change comments? You’re the second person to mention changing names today.” Matilda asked.

Will snorted. Hennessy grinned. Ethan outright laughed, then took her arm.

“Girlfriend, let’s finish these introductions and get food ordered. I’m starving,” he said. Then, “What are you doing Sunday night?”

\*\*\*

After introductions were done and lunch was ordered, someone handed her a pool cue.

“Really? Are we having a meet and greet lunch so you can all watch a couple of rounds of pool?”

Ethan did a little jump with a handclap. “YES!”

“Just so you know, Jake, this is really fucking weird,” she laughed.

“To be clear, we have lunch and play pool like this a couple of times a week. The only difference is that there’s someone here that *might* beat me.” Jake teased.

“Place your wagers!” called Noah.

“Better to win or lose?” Matilda whispered to Ethan.

“Win. Definitely win. Only the ass-kissers are betting on Jake to win.” He grinned.

Jacob won two rounds. Matilda won eleven.

\*\*\*

At 1:45, most people started leaving. Five minutes later, Noah, Jake, and Matilda were alone, cleaning up the lunch leftovers. It was a peaceful sort of silence.

Matilda was planning her exit and sorry to be leaving. Her consultancy was a dream come true. She worked hard for it and was proud of her accomplishments. But, working alone was... lonely.

Something bounced off the back of her head. She turned to Noah. “The fuck?”

“I love that you’re foul-mouthed. It’s just perfect. A little, red-headed angel dropping f-bombs at leisure,” he grinned.

“You people are going to need to pick a condescending nickname and stick with it. Barbie doll, little girl, and angel are on the table presently.”

“Aww, are you sensitive about your diminutive stature?” he asked.

“Not particularly, but being around you guys is like hanging out in the land of giants.

“Mess is all cleaned up. Thanks for lunch, guys.” Matilda picked up the laptop bag she borrowed from Ellie. “I’ll get to work on those projections and send them over before the end of the week.”

“Boo!” Noah said. “Why leave now? You’re welcome to stay here and work.”

“Boo!” Jake said. “You’re welcome to stay here and play with my balls.”

*FUCKING ELEANOR!* Matilda was turning red again.

“And now I’m leaving. Bye, guys.” Matilda closed the door behind herself.

\*\*\*

After Matilda closed the door, Noah pulled his phone out of his pocket.

“What are you doing?” Jake asked.

“Summoning Ethan.”

“Why?”

“What?” Ethan said as he opened the door. “I’m actually busy. What do you want?”

“Just need a witness,” said Noah. In an official tone of voice, he said, “I call dibs on our little Tillie.”

“Dibs?” Jake asked.

“Yes, Jacob. Dibs,” Noah said. “She’s way too adorable to not, ahem, date.”

“Noah, don’t be a dick,” Ethan said.

“I’m not being a dick,” said Noah with an affronted look on his face. “I’m unattached. I can call dibs on a beautiful woman. It’s not like I’m dating a shrew and calling dibs on an amazing little pixie. I love her foul-mouth mixed with womanly bumps and curves. Damn sexy.”

“Get out,” Jacob said.

## Chapter 4

Jacob slammed his way into his parents' house on Sunday evening.

"What up, dog?" He said while scratching Roscoe's ears.

"We're back here," Darla called from the big room.

Jake made his way into the room to find Hank, Darla, Will, Hennessy, Ethan, Noah, and Luke.

"Where's everyone else?" He asked.

"You're early. They're not here yet. Where's Bella?" Darla asked cautiously. Sometimes Bella went to the bathroom before saying hello. Darla didn't want to get her hopes up too soon.

"Madrid. On a shoot. Decidedly not here. You can speak freely," Jake said.

"Great. Why hasn't that ended yet?" Darla got right to the point.

"Huh?" Jake said. Everyone else in the room laughed.

"Where's the adorable little redhead I haven't met yet?" Luke asked. Not part of the business empire, Luke had only heard of Matilda, not yet met her.

"Oh. OH! That little redhead," Jake said with a glare at Noah. "Turns out, Lucas, you're looking to the wrong brother for information on that one."

Noah cackled. Ethan was trying not to laugh. Hank sighed and glared at Jacob.

"What's this?" Darla asked.

"You can ask Number Six over there. I don't deserve that glare, Dad," Jake said defensively.

"You absolutely deserve this glare, Jacob. And you know it," Hank said with uncharacteristic sternness.



Darla's eyes were slits. "What did you do?" She asked Noah.

"I called dibs," Noah said nonchalantly.

"You did not," she declared.

"I did."

"You did NOT, Noah Michael Trellis. Dibs were a high school thing. You're adults. No more dibs," Darla said.

"I'm going out drinking with her on Tuesday," Noah said.

"We're all going out drinking with her on Tuesday, jackass," Jake said.

"I'm aware. But, she's gonna hang with me. Because I called dibs."

"NOAH," Darla exploded. "STOP THIS NOW."

"Mom, she's extremely cute and fun. She swears like a sailor and is ridiculously smart. This could be *IT* for me," Noah said.

"IT IS NOT! QUIT BEING AN ASS!" Darla continued to roar as Sam came into the room.

"Woo. What are we arguing about?" Sam asked the room at large.

"Dibs," Ethan said.

"Honey, calm down," Hank said.

"Oh, shut it, Hank! You know he's full of shit just as much as I do," Darla said.

"I do," Hank agreed. "I also know that he's just trolling his brother. It'll be fine."

"Dad, that's really unfair," Noah said with innocent eyes. "I'm unattached. She's adorable. She can't be more than five feet tall, with all that fiery red hair. Why shouldn't I go for it? I mean, is there a reason I shouldn't go for it?"

"It's going to be really fucking awkward if you sleep with your future sister-in-law, Noah. Even to make a point,"

William said.

Everyone in the room looked at Jacob. His face was completely blank as he stared at the wall over his mother's head.

“JACOB!” Darla yelled.

Jake jumped. “What? What the fuck, Ma! I’ve had exactly two conversations with the woman. Mentally marrying me off to her seems a little premature.”

“Oh, you shut up, too. I mentally married you off to her approximately three minutes after I met her. It’s time to dump the gazelle and get on with your life.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake! I’ve been trying to dump her for a fucking year and you know it!” Jake said.

“Stop swearing! Your language is terrible,” Darla complained.

“We’re not at the table yet. I can swear in the big room,” Jake said defensively.

“Put on your big-boy pants and kick the whore to the curb,” Sam said to Jake. “It’s time, and you know it.”

“Samuel!” Darla said, more from shock than offense.

“Yes, Mom? I don’t think I said anything inaccurate. Did I, Jake?” Sam asked.

“What’s for dinner?” Jake asked.

“Everyone else is having polish sausage and sauerkraut with dumplings. You’re having mixed greens with lemon wedges,” Darla said as the room exploded in laughter. “Otherwise the salad and lemons will go to waste.”

\*\*\*

“What should I wear on my date on Tuesday?” Noah asked Ethan over dinner.

“I have no idea, but your shoes better match your handbag or the old biddies will talk,” Ethan replied.

“Suit up?” Noah asked.

“She doesn’t seem opposed to jeans and t-shirts. I’m not sure she’s the type of person that cares about suits or Polo shirts,” Ethan replied.

Jake glared daggers at both brothers. “Really? All fucking week you’ve been doing this, you have to do this now, too?”

“Jacob,” Hank said.

Jake glared at Hank.

Hank smiled. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Jake. You have a girlfriend.”

“I’m aware. I didn’t ask you to say anything. I just wish they’d shut the fuck up. This was done being funny two days ago.”

“Stop swearing at my table, Jacob. Even if your brother is being a jackass,” Darla said.

“How is this my fault?” Noah asked. “I met a charming, attractive woman I’d like to know better. I’m unattached. Free to do as I please. Sam, I was thinking maybe we’d take a ride out to the lake house next weekend. You don’t mind, right?”

Sam gave Noah a flat look. “I’m not involved in this.”

“You’re assuming she’ll be interested in you. It’s a big assumption,” Ethan commented.

“I can be very charming, especially once the panties come off,” Noah said.

Darla pegged him in the head with a dinner roll. “Noah! Enough! This isn’t funny and it’s in very poor taste.”

“You’re only upset because you think she might chase off the gazelle!” Noah complained.

“That’s not the only reason,” Darla corrected.

“Oh yeah?”

“She’s also very petite. She and I could bond in the land of giants that is this family.”

Jake sighed. “Alright, I’m going.” He got up and left the table, putting his plate in the kitchen and heading out without another word.

After the door closed behind him, Darla said, “Noah, stop it.”

“I’m just needling him, Mom. Matilda’s not even remotely interested in me,” he admitted.

“You think she is interested in Jake?” Darla asked.

Ethan chuckled. “I don’t think it’s occurred to her yet, but I’ve never seen two people better suited. When she was teasing him about the balls, I just about died laughing. They’re ridiculous.”

William laughed. “She kicked his ass up and down that pool table. Excuse me, Mom. Sorry.”

Hank smiled. “I wish you’d seen her last week. A frozen, sad tiny mess with steel in her spine, still trying to have the beer meeting. When she finally got cleaned up and wrapped in his fleece, she had to roll the sleeves five times to free her hands and she *still* crushed him. Made fun of the hole in his t-shirt and called him Shaggy. I don’t think she was trying to tease or flirt, she just seemed to forget why she was there. She was charming and funny and bright on Tuesday. But she was magnificent last Thursday.

“If he could have found the right words that day, I’m pretty sure he would have taken her home with him - Bella in the picture or not,” Hank said with a shrug. “He’ll figure it out.”

“Agree,” Sam said.

“Well, I’m going for drinks on Tuesday. I can’t wait to meet her,” Adrian said.

“Same,” said Luke.

“That’s crap! I have class Tuesday night,” Matthew said. “I’m going to try to get out of it.”

\*\*\*

Matilda met six Trellis men, Gary, and Ellen in the lobby Tuesday evening. While she knew the outing was casual, she couldn’t bring herself to wear jeans and a t-shirt when meeting with extremely rich people. She opted for casual tan pants, a lightweight navy blue and white striped sweater, and her favorite pair of slip-ons. Casual, not sloppy.

Ellie had been angling for skinny jeans and a fitted t-shirt that had “Juicy” written in cursive across the chest.

*Ellie is ridiculous. I need to stop thinking about her. And I need to bribe Eric to delete that video.* She gave her head a shake to get back on point.

“OK. We have a great understanding of the market and our audience. We still need a product. We’ll make the rounds through some local microbreweries for sampling. The goal here is to figure out what we like and don’t like in the product. We’ll narrow it down to three breweries, and then go from there,” she summarized.

“It’s beer, Matilda. Not a scientific experiment,” Gary laughed. “Call it what it is. We’re going out drinking.”

Matilda laughed. “Yeah, but it’s drinking with a purpose!”

“It’s beer that someone else is buying! Free beer - the best kind of beer,” Ellen chuckled.

Everyone looked at Sam.

“Don’t look at me, I forgot my wallet,” he said with his small smile.

“I brought my corporate card,” Ellen laughed.

“Woo hoo! Ellen’s buying the beer,” Noah said. As they turned to walk out of the building, he threw an arm around Matilda’s shoulders. “Where are we going, small fry?”

Matilda glared at him.

“Excuse me,” Noah said formally. “Ms. Benton, where are we headed on this field trip?”

She listed off three local breweries as he pulled his phone out of his pocket and continued walking with her.

“What was the second one again?” He asked.

“You don’t need to look up directions, I know where we’re going. We can walk to the first one, but we’ll need to get rides to the second one,” she clarified.

“I’m not getting directions, beautiful. I’m texting the *other* brothers,” he said.

She glanced at him with raised eyebrows. “The other brothers?”

“There are eight of us, after all. Only five are here. Plus Hank. Darla’s probably going to join us, too. They’ll head out when we find a place we like. It’s beer. We’re connoisseurs.”

“Thirteen of us drinking beer. That’s just great,” Matilda said.

*I should have suited up*, she thought.

\*\*\*

The first brewery was a bust. They didn’t even finish the first round of beers. The place reeked of chemicals and the waitstaff was rude.

Sam touched Matilda’s hand as she was talking about brewing techniques. Matilda paused.

“Even if this was the best beer in the world and the brewery wanted to sell it to me, I wouldn’t buy it. This is not what I want. Let’s go,” he said quietly.

\*\*\*

They had to get three Lyfts to fit everyone in cars to the second brewery. They tried two drafts at the second brewery. It was a nice place, the beer was good, but Sam looked confused.

Matilda was surprised. This was Jake's project, but Sam was definitely driving the decisions. "What's wrong, Sam?"

He frowned. "This is good, but this is not the type of place I was expecting."

"We're looking to buy a beer, right? Not a bar?" she asked.

Sam hesitated. "I don't know. I thought I was buying a beer, not a bar. But this isn't the kind of place I want to be associated with. It's too... hipster modern."

Everyone laughed. The bar was very hipster. Matilda didn't mesh with the crowd. People were staring at her outfit like she was from Mars.

"The beer is OK, but it doesn't feel right," Sam said.

Matilda looked at Jake. He shrugged. "Midas is *never* wrong."

"OK. Can we change plans?" Matilda asked the group at large. "There's a place I love. I'm not entirely sure the owner would sell the beer or the bar, but we'll have fun."

"Let's do it, Pip!" Noah called.

"Pip?" She asked.

"Yeah, pipsqueak," he laughed.

"Nope," Will said decidedly. "Not Pip. It can't be Pip."

"No Pip? I kinda like it," Noah complained.

"No Pip. Hard pass. Oldest brother veto rights. No Pip."

Everyone started at William. It was the most Matilda had heard him say at once.

“Why no Pip?” Noah pushed.

“Because I said no,” Will said.

“But, why?”

William glared at Noah. “Because. I. Said. So. Stop being a jackass. ‘Pip’ is already taken. Respect it, or I’ll hurt you.”

“Well, OK then. No Pip,” Noah backed down immediately.

\*\*\*

The third place was an old-fashioned Irish pub, run by an old Irishman that loved Matilda. The customers were a mix of young and old, the food was great, and the pool tables were level.

The group filed in, one at a time, with Matilda coming in second to last with just Noah behind her, holding the door.

“Well, that’s a crowd right there. You can just seat yourselves, we don’t do that formal crap here,” the old man behind the bar yelled.

Sam turned to Matilda with a grin. “I love this place.”

“Me too,” she said. “It’s my favorite watering hole. He has all the beer staples, as well as two house brews. I’m somewhat doubtful he’ll sell, but we’ll see if it gets that far.”

Ethan and Jake pushed three tables together, making enough room for thirteen people to sit. Apparently, they were staying here for a bit.

When the old man caught sight of tiny Matilda in the forest of giants, he yelled out, “Hey! It’s my wee one! Matty my love, what’reya doin with these big boys? Where’s your Eleanor?”

Matilda made her way to the bar and hopped on a stool to reach the old man for a hug. “Hi, Connor. Want to meet my friends?”



“Well now, you know I do,” he said as he threw open the hatch to the bar.

Matty made a round of introductions. When she got to Noah, Conner raised his eyebrows at her. “That one’s up to mischief.”

Matty laughed. “He’s a terrible flirt, but harmless.”

Once introductions were done, Connor said. “Ya got too many chairs. We’ll get them out of the way.”

“No, there are more people coming,” Matilda smiled.

“Oh, your Ellie girl?” He asked. Connor liked Ellie and Charlie, too.

“No, more of these boys and their mother,” she laughed.

“Eh, good boys, drinking beer with their mama. There’ll be no fighting in my bar over beautiful women, boys. I got five brothers of my own, I know how this goes,” he said with a smile and a wink as the group laughed.

“I’ll pour some beers, but you come get ‘em yourselves around here during the week. The girls only wait tables Thursday through Saturday and you won’t be gettin no three tables on those days,” he said with a wave as he made his way back to the bar.

“He didn’t take the beer orders,” Ethan said.

Sam laughed. “I think this is a ‘you’ll like what you get’ kind of place.”

Noah, Jake, and Ethan ferried the beers from the bar to the table.

Jake opened a tab and grabbed a menu. “Of course. It’s all pub food. How is it that we didn’t know about this place?”

“Because you’re no fun,” Matilda said with a smirk.

Jake quirked an eyebrow. “Is that a pair of pool tables in the back?”

The table groaned.

\*\*\*

By the time Darla and Adrian arrived, the group had moved back by the pool tables, and Matilda and Jake were full-on trash-talking each other.

“You don’t have that shot. There’s no way. Just move my marker now. The game’s mine,” Jake said.

Matilda dropped the ball in the pocket.

Jake bent to make a shot. “Hey, nice ass,” she said from directly behind him. He missed the cue ball.

“She’s way better at this than you,” Adrian chuckled.

Matilda turned and smiled at the new arrivals. “Hi Darla, it’s nice to see you again.” Matilda held out a hand to shake. Darla ignored it and hugged her.

“Hello, sweetheart. This is my second oldest, Adrian. He’s a doctor,” Darla said.

Adrian laughed. “That’s true, I am a pediatrician by training, but I run the charitable foundation for the family. It’s nice to meet you, Matilda.” He shook her hand with a grin.

“He’s single,” Darla said.

Adrian turned to glare at Darla.

“Well, you are,” she said. “They pretty much all are. Nine kids and NO grandchildren. Clearly, they need help with dating.”

Matilda laughed.

“Mother, you’ve been here three minutes,” William said.

“Don’t you ‘mother’ me, William. Let’s take them in order, Matilda.” Darla gestured to William. “This one went off and joined the military and hasn’t dated a single woman since he got out. We’re not sure what happened there, and he

won't talk about it. Just glares at us. He used to date all the time. Even when he was in the service, he had lady friends for a while."

William rolled his eyes. "I'm ruined for all other women, Mother."

Matilda snorted. "Was that... sarcasm? Does he have a sense of humor?"

Will patted her on top of the head. "Knock it off, Wee One, or I'll dangle you by your feet from the rafters."

She grinned. "This is *my* bar. You better be nice. Connor will spit in your beer if I ask him to."

"This one," Darla gestured to Adrian. "Can't talk to women."

"Aww," Matilda laughed with the group.

"Jacob is involved with a shrew that won't eat lasagna," Darla continued.

Matilda was going to say something snarky until she saw Jake's face. His smile flickered towards a grimace.

*Oh. That must be hard. They don't like his girlfriend. That's gotta hurt,* she thought.

"Ethan's gay and hasn't brought a nice boy home for Sunday dinner in over a year. Samuel is Samuel," Darla said as the group laughter turned to catcalls.

"Noah is a mess - you'll want to stay away from that one," Darla said over the group's laughter.

"You haven't met Matthew and Luke, yet, but they'll probably surface sometime this evening. Neither of them has *ever* brought someone to family dinner. This hurts my heart, Matilda," Dara complained.

"You have a daughter, too, right?" Matilda asked.

"Yes, Bethany. She's in her last semester of college for her master's degree in psychology. She keeps diagnosing us as different varieties of dysfunctional, and she's also not

married or involved with anyone. NO grandkids. Not even potential grandkids in sight!”

“You know what will help with that heartache, Mom?”  
Ethan asked.

“Hmm?”

“Beer! Want one?”

The group was laughing again.

*This must be a familiar routine for them.*

\*\*\*

Jake saw Matilda’s smile waver a bit.

“It’s your shot,” he called.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts. “Sorry, my mind was elsewhere.”

“You OK?” He asked. She was still smiling but it seemed brittle.

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“You said the same thing after you were tossed in a shit puddle,” he reminded her. She missed her shot.

*About fucking time she missed one. Holy fuck.*

Even playing single-shot, where they each got one shot per turn, regardless of if they pocketed a ball, she was still kicking his ass.

Her smile fell a bit more. “Your family seems great.”

Jake grinned. “They really are.”

He made his shot.

She missed hers.

*Two misses in a row.*

“Matty, what’s wrong?”

Her lips tipped up a little bit. “Given up on the condescending nickname?”

Jake chuckled. “I’m pretty sure Wee One is gonna win it.”

“Bah! That’s Connor’s name for me. You can’t have it.”

“Too late,” he said with another grin.

\*\*\*

Matilda had a strong desire to leave. She didn’t want any more beer. She didn’t want to play pool. She didn’t want to look at Jake’s grin. She didn’t want to watch his great big family be silly together.

*Stupid grin. Stupid lucky shrew girlfriend. I hate her and I’ve never even met her. She’s probably fucking gorgeous.* Matilda shook her head again to clear her thoughts. Jake’s girlfriend was none of her business.

“I’m done after this round, OK?” Matty said.

Jake’s gaze snapped to her face. “It’s not even seven.”

“I know, but we clearly accomplished our mission. Midas is happy,” she chuckled. Sam was sitting in the corner, watching her.

She pocketed the eight-ball out of order, just to be done.

“Booo!” William called. “She threw that one away.”

Jake made chicken sounds at her.

“Really?” she asked. “That’s mature.”

“When you met me, I was wearing a Scooby-Doo t-shirt. Why the fuck would you think I’m mature?”

She grinned. A real grin. “That’s true. What’s with the Polo shirt tonight?”

Jake opened and closed his mouth. Will and Sam laughed.

“The shrew must be back from Madrid,” Will explained. “She hates the t-shirt and jeans routine.”

“You guys really shouldn’t call her a shrew. That’s his girlfriend. Come on. Be nice,” Matilda said. It clearly bothered Jake. Every time someone mentioned her, he frowned or turned away.

She looked at Sam for support. He seemed to be gentler than everyone but Ethan.

“Don’t look at me,” he said. “When I call her by a name, it’s ‘whore’.”

*Wow.*

She turned back to Jake. “Sorry, I tried.”

“S’ok. Bella has a bitchy streak.”

“Understatement” Will fake coughed.

“Bella?” Matty asked.

“Stephanie,” Sam said.

Jake rolled his eyes. “She changed her name a few years ago. She felt like ‘Bella Morgan’ sounded better.”

“Oh. She’s a model, right? Gorgeous, if I recall correctly,” Matilda tried to smile.

“Who’s gorgeous, besides you, Wee One?” Noah asked.

Matilda opened her mouth to answer, but words weren’t coming out.

“We were talking about Stephanie,” Sam said.

“Eww,” Noah shuddered.

“That is totally not fair! The woman’s not here to defend herself,” Matilda said.

“You haven’t met her, Matty. She’s a horrible person and doesn’t deserve your defense,” Sam said with complete

sincerity.

“I’m sorry they don’t like your honey, Jake,” Matilda tried to sympathize.

Jake was chugging his beer.

*They have to be exaggerating. He wouldn’t be with a terrible person.*

Sam grunted a little laugh. “Don’t feel too bad for him.”

“We’re done beer sampling, right?” Jake asked. “Stay for one more game? Luke and Matthew will be sorry to miss you.”

At her nod, he went to the bar and ordered a double whiskey.

\*\*\*

Two hours later, Matilda was still at the bar, sitting with Darla and Luke, talking about music. Luke was a musician and played several instruments.

Matthew showed up for a beer after teaching his English as a Second Language evening class but left after one round. He had to be up early to teach second grade the following day.

Matilda had the distinct impression that the Trellis family had several conversations about her when she wasn’t around. Matthew skipped the handshake all together, scooping her up in a spinning hug. When he put her down, he declared that he had second graders that were bigger than her. It seemed like a rather personal interaction for a family work acquaintance. But, Matthew also scooped Ellen up in a hug. Maybe he was just a warm person.

Something poked her in the shoulder.

When she turned around, Jake was standing closely behind her with a pool cue.

“I’ve trashed William enough. Come play with me,” he whined.

“I’m comfortable, right here. Go play a different brother. There are a lot of you people,” she said with a smile. He smelled like good cologne and whiskey. “Having a bit of a whiskey party?”

Jacob put an arm around her waist, hugged her back to his body, and picked her up off the bar stool. “Come on, Matty!”

“Holy fuck! Put me down! Gah!” She yelled through laughter while kicking her feet.

“Pool!” He yelled back, still holding her off the ground with one arm. “Say it! Say ‘I will kick Jake’s ass in pool, as per usual,’ and then I’ll put you down.”

“OK! OK. Fine. Put me down. I’ll play one more with you,” she said.

“Best of three!” Jake demanded.

“You’re drunk, that’s not going to take long!” Everyone remaining laughed, including Connor.

Gary and Ellen had left an hour ago. Ethan and Adrian left shortly after them, followed by Will. Noah made a friend and left with her about twenty minutes earlier. Hank, Darla, and Luke were putting on their coats.

“Bye, kids. Be good.” Darla kissed Matty, Jake, and Sam on the cheeks.

“Samuel, please put the drunkard to bed after pool is done,” Hank called over his shoulder.

Jake racked the balls.

“What’s the obsession with pool about? Where’d it come from?” Matilda asked. “I grew up in a bar, I have an excuse.”

He grinned. “I like watching tiny women bend over the table. It gives me an excuse to oggle at my leisure.”



“Ugh. I knew this would happen if I played with your balls too much,” she chuckled.

“I like the geometry of it. Thinking through the angles and the way the game fits together. It’s like an ever-changing puzzle,” he admitted.

“That was a surprisingly lucid answer,” Matilda laughed.

“I’m not really that drunk, Matty.” His gaze was more direct than usual. She felt slightly uncomfortable.

“Pfft. You just hauled my ass off a barstool. You’re plenty drunk.”

“I know. You kicked and wiggled. It was nice for me. You should come home with me and do a different kind of wiggling.”

“I’m pretty sure you have a six-foot-tall supermodel waiting at home for you,” Matty teased. He was drunk. She knew better than to take this seriously.

“No, I don’t. She doesn’t go into my space without me. She’d steal something.”

Sam started laughing. “He’s not wrong.”

“Jake, if you don’t trust her and everyone hates her, why are you dating her?” Matilda asked.

“Mmm. Because she cries when I try to dump her. And because she serves a purpose as arm candy,” he said.

*Arm candy. She’s gorgeous. Of course, he’d stay with her. If I needed a reminder to keep this professional, there it is,* Matilda thought.

\*\*\*

Jake really didn’t want to start talking about Bella again. His body firmly believed that a wiggling Matty pressed to him meant it was fun time. While the talk of Bella would

end that bodily misconception, it would also cause Matty to defend his girlfriend again.

Sam was right. Bella didn't deserve the defense.

"Why were you sad earlier?" Jake asked.

"I wasn't sad," Matilda replied. "Just pensive. There's a difference."

"Why were you pensive earlier?" He grinned.

"I'm envious of your lovely, chaotic, giant family. I'm an only child and my dad is gone," she said.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Me too," she said.

"If you think this was chaos, you should come to Sunday dinner," Sam said.

"Oh?"

Jake rolled his eyes. "Every Sunday, we have dinner as a family. There's a lot of laughing and talking. Darla bosses everyone around. I get yelled at constantly for swearing at the table. There's good food. And beer. And a dog." Jake shrugged. "Family time. Because, you know, we don't see each other every fucking day."

Matilda's smile was a little sad again.

## Chapter 5

Sam texted Matilda on Wednesday afternoon.

SAM: So, how do we get Connor to sell?

MATILDA: What are we buying?

SAM: What can we get him to sell?

“So, I’m going to go talk to Connor about it,” Matilda said to Ellie later that day.

“Why isn’t Sam going?” Ellie asked.

“Because I don’t want Connor to be surprised. He might get thrown off. Beers?” Matilda asked.

“We’re in a meeting until 5. After that?” Ellie suggested.

“Sounds good.” They made kissy sounds to each other and hung up.

Matty left for the bar shortly before 5. It wasn’t a long walk, and Ellie and Charlie would be late anyway. They were usually late when meeting after work.

Spring had definitely sprung in Chicago. Late March was warmer. The trees were starting to bud with leaves. Matilda went out in jeans and a t-shirt without getting a chill, but she brought a hoodie with her for later.

There was no one in the pub when she arrived. Conner was stocking the coolers from the storeroom in the back.

“Hey, it’s my wee one! Two days in a row. You left them big boys elsewhere today, eh?”

She smiled. She’d known Connor for most of her life. Her dad distributed Connor’s beer through the bar when she was growing up.

“It’s my favorite old Irishman. Fancy meeting you here!”

“Darling girl, I’m always here. Whatdoya want ta drink?” He said, just a touch of accent drifting into his speech. “Those boys paid their tab with a very nice tip last night.”

“They’re good boys,” Matilda agreed. Tipping was a sign of respect and appreciation.

“Their mama’s real nice, too. Little, like you, but feisty like you, too.”

Matilda laughed. “I’m pretty sure Darla’s feistier than me. She’s got nine kids - only one girl - and they’re all giants. I’d quell under that many boys.”

“The one with the pool cue has eyes for you, my Matilda,” Connor said.

“I don’t think so, Connor. He has a very beautiful girlfriend.”

“Eh, I heard them talking about her last night,” Connor rolled his eyes.

“That’s not what I want to talk to you about, though,” Matty said.

“Oh? There’s a purpose to this visit?” He asked.

\*\*\*

By the time Charlie and Ellie arrived, Connor was deep in thought. Ellie made it all the way to the bar and touched his hand before he greeted her. “Oh! Eleanor. Hi, lass. Charlie, my friend.” They shook hands.

Charlie and Ellie each got a beer and made themselves comfortable at the bar.

“I don’t know, Matty. I just don’t know.” Connor said again.

“That’s why I came to talk to you first. Thought you’d like to consider things,” she said.

“I’m getting up there in years. There’s not much money in this pub. It’s hard work for an old body. But it’s the

only thing I've ever done. What would I do with myself? What would I do for money?"

Ellie snorted. "Connor, I don't think money would be an issue."

"That's what Matilda says, too. But, I don't own this building. Just the business. And the business doesn't turn much profit. Just enough for an old man to get by."

"Do you want to talk to him about it?" Matilda asked.

"Which one was he, again?"

"The last one to leave, not the guy that played pool," Matilda said.

"Ah, not the one that's sweet on you," Connor smiled. He knew that would trigger Ellie.

"Oh ho, what is this? Prince Charming is making eyes already? Did you wear the Juicy t-shirt?" Ellie asked.

"No, Eleanor, I did not," Matilda said over Charlie's laughter. "I wore the boating outfit that you hate."

"I hate that outfit," Ellie said.

"I just said that."

"Why did you wear it if you know I hate it?" Ellie asked.

"Because it was nice without being too nice," Matty said. "I can't be juicy with clients."

"Oh, fuck you. Eight big billionaire boy clients, mostly eligible, would have loved that fucking shirt."

Matilda rolled her eyes.

"So, the quiet one, eh?" Connor asked. "He paid the bill at the end, shook my hand and thanked me for a nice evening."

"Sounds about right," Matilda said.

"I'll talk to him, Matty. I'm not opposed to selling the beer or the bar, to be honest. I just don't think it's worth much," Connor admitted.

\*\*\*

MATILDA: I'm sitting in the pub with Ellie and Charlie. Connor's not opposed to discussing a sale.

SAM: What is he going to sell me?

MATILDA: What are you going to buy?

\*\*\*

A half-hour later, Sam and Jake came in the door. Matty, Ellie, and Charlie had moved to a booth in the back.

"Here we go," Matilda said under her breath. She was nervous for Connor.

"That's them?" Ellie said. She and Charlie had turned around in the booth to get a look. "The internet doesn't do either of them justice. Sam and Jake, right?"

"Oh shit, I forgot you haven't met them. It's weird to think that I've only been working with them for a couple of weeks," Matilda admitted.

"Nope, not the boys. Just the Silver Fox and Darla," Ellie said as she turned around.

"Oh, God. Please shush about that. I have to work with these people."

"So, I shouldn't try to sell you to Prince Charming?" Ellie said.

"Ellie. Please Ellie, please be good," Matilda begged.

"I shouldn't mention Little Jake?" Ellie asked.

"Fuck! Shush. They're going to hear you!" Matilda said.

"Poor Little Jake. He's like a dirty little secret. Caught live on camera, getting swallowed," Ellie muttered.

“Charlie, you stop laughing! This isn’t funny. This is my career!” Matilda scolded.

“Sorry Matty, but this is hilarious,” Charlie said, in a clearly audible voice.

“Shush, he’s coming over,” Matilda said

\*\*\*

“Sorry Matty, but this is hilarious,” the guy said before Matilda shushed him.

Jake paused.

*Are they laughing at me after last night?* Jake wondered.

He spent the entire day decidedly not thinking about striking out last night. It was a dumb move. He’d made a fool of himself.

He walked to Matilda’s side of the booth. “Scoot your rump roast, woman, and introduce me to Ellie and Charlie.”

As Matilda scooted, he said “You’re blushing. Have you been talking about my balls again?”

*I’m just going to pretend like last night didn’t happen. She thought I was drunk. I just won’t tell her otherwise,* Jake decided.

Ellie snorted and then giggled.

“Your ball handling is really not all that impressive. I don’t discuss it with my friends. Jacob Trellis, this is Charlie and Eleanor Hapner. Ellie was my college roommate and has been my very best friend since the first day of freshman year,” Matilda made the introduction.

Jake grinned. “Was she young and impressionable then? I’m sorry I missed that phase.”

“I taught her how to properly bounce her boobs for attention. You’re welcome,” Ellie said.

Charlie choked on his beer.

\*\*\*

Two hours later, Connor was opening champagne to toast the sale of his business and the growth of his beer label. As part of the agreement, the name of the beer would be “Aisling na Meala” - or dream of honey in Gaelic. He was retiring in style, worth well over three million dollars.

When Matilda gave Sam a bit side-eye at the price tag, he said, “Don’t look at me like that. I’m not making Trellis Beer. That’s narcissistic. I regret naming the company ‘Trellis Industries’ every damn day. It wasn’t supposed to get this big. The name is pretty. Only the Irish will know it’s a dumb name for beer.”

“That’s not why I’m giving you side-eye,” she said.

“Oh. The price? It was a bargain. We’re going to sell a lot of beer. And old Irishmen that are nice to wee women should get to do whatever they want in retirement.”

Matilda hugged Sam. *He’s good people.*

“Come to Sunday dinner with me this week. We’ll celebrate,” he said. “And you might understand some things a little better.” It wasn’t really a question.

\*\*\*

SAM: I’m bringing someone to dinner tonight, Mom.

DARLA: Holy hell!

NOAH: No shit?

JAKE: Wow. Who?

\*\*\*



Matilda got into Sam's Mercedes right on time on Sunday.

"My parents live in Oak Park. We've got a little bit of a drive, which is good," he said.

"Good why?" She asked.

"We need to talk about the shit show that is Stephanie-Bella."

"Jake's girlfriend?"

"Yes, Matilda. Jake's horrible girlfriend," Sam said.

"Sam, it's not fair that you all talk smack about her behind her back. I would hate that."

"Yes, I know. But, that's because you're not a bitch," Sam said. "I'm trying to warn you so you don't get offended, Matilda. I'm not being mean. I don't say anything behind her back that I don't say to her face."

"You've called her a shrew to her face?"

"Yes. Many times. She has a black soul, Matilda."

"Well, that's not dramatic at all, Sam."

He sighed. "You'll see."

\*\*\*

"Are you afraid of dogs?" Sam asked.

"No, why?"

"Roscoe has no manners, but he's harmless," Sam explained.

When he opened the door, a giant Rottweiler charged them. When Sam said "Roscoooooe", the dog flopped on his back and slid the remaining distance of the entryway to them while howling along.

"That's hysterical," Matilda laughed while scratching the dog's chest.

Darla came into the entryway to greet Sam's guest and paused when she saw Matilda. "Sweetheart! I'm so glad you're here."

While Darla was hugging Matty, she glared daggers at Sam. "Dinner will be ready in 20 minutes. Just Jake and Adrian are missing. Adrian said he might be late."

"You have a beautiful home, Darla," Matilda said. And she meant it.

"Thank you, Matty. There was a different house here while the kids were little. Then when Sam started making big money, he built this house so we'd have more room for things that were important to us.

"We're headed into the big room, which will comfortably seat at least 25 people. The kitchen is restaurant-grade, and the dining room will seat up to 30, but we don't have all the sections in the table right now.

"There are three bedrooms and five bathrooms. We rarely have house guests, but we often have dinner guests, so extra bathrooms are nice. Come on in."

They had walked into a giant room that would have passed for a ballroom in earlier eras. The Trellis clan was sitting at one end of the room, staring at her. And Sam. Both of them. Together.

*Oh. Shit. I didn't think about that. I really hope this isn't a date.*

Sam leaned over and muttered. "Relax, they're not wondering if this is a date. They're wondering if I've properly prepared you for Bella."

*Well, that was weird. Thanks for answering my unspoken question, Sam.*

Sam gave her a small smile.

"Matty!" Hank said as he jumped up from a chair. "I'm so glad you can join us! What a great surprise."

Will stood up next. "Sam did you-"

“I tried. She still thinks I’m exaggerating,” Sam shrugged.

Will stepped over and grabbed Matilda’s shoulders to turn her toward him. “Matilda, she’s terrible. She’s going to be outright cruel to you. She’s going to say horrible shit. Don’t respond. Just don’t acknowledge it. We’ll smack it down.”

*Wow. I didn’t think Will liked me. This is unexpected.*

“Are you listening? Matilda, listen. Do you understand?” He asked. “They’re going to be here soon.”

“Why would you do this to her?” Ethan demanded of Sam as he hugged Matilda. “Why wouldn’t you warn us? Beth isn’t even here.”

“You have no respect for dibs,” Noah said.

*Huh?*

The front door opened and closed. The entire family held their breath. Adrian walked in. “Holy hell! Uh, hi Matilda! Jake’s not coming this week, right?”

“Wow, you guys are really freaking out,” Matilda said. “It’ll be fine. Even if she’s horrible, she’s not the first bully I’ve encountered.”

Hank pressed his lips together like he was trying to hold words inside.

Matty waved to Matthew and Luke, who were still in the seating area. “Hi, guys.”

Luke’s eyes looked huge. “Matty, I’m so sorry in advance. I’m so sorry.”

Matthew opened his mouth to say something just as the front door was opening again.

\*\*\*

“Ugh, that dog is so nasty,” Bella bitched.

Jake pet the dog so he'd calm down.

“Why do you touch that nasty animal? Go wash your damn hands right now. You're not touching anything of mine with those hands.”

“We're back here,” Darla called.

*Wow, it's quiet.* The suspense over who Sam was bringing to a family dinner was killing Jake. Sam didn't date. Ever.

“GO WASH YOUR HANDS NOW,” Bella screeched.

“Oh, for fuck's sake, please shut up,” Jake said in his rush to get to the big room.

When he walked in, his family was standing in the middle of the room, completely silent and staring at him.

*What the fuck?*

“Hi everyone, what's going on?” Jake asked.

He found Sam in the crowd.

*He's holding someone's hand! Holy Fuck!*

Then he followed Sam's arm to the hand, and that hand to a body. A very short body. He couldn't see her because Will was blocking the view, but, all of a sudden, Jake knew this was not going to be a good dinner.

As he walked toward the group, most of his family shifted to make room. Sam let go of her hand. Will didn't move.

William gave Jake a look that clearly said, “Don't fuck this up, man.” And then stepped to the side.

“Hi, Matty. I didn't know you were coming to dinner. I have to go wash my hands,” and then Jake turned around and left the room without a backward glance.

\*\*\*

“Who the fuck are you?” Asked a sneering voice from beside Hank.

Matilda shifted her gaze from the door Jake just exited through to the six-foot-tall ultra-leggy, ultra-blonde supermodel left in his wake.

*No wonder Darla calls her the gazelle. Holy fuck. I've never felt so incredibly inadequate in my entire life.*

“Ah, Bella, this is Matilda Benton. She has been consulting on the Beer project with us,” Hank said.

“Oh,” she smirked. “You work for Jake?”

“No,” Hank corrected. “She works for me.”

“We’re celebrating the purchase of a beer recipe and bar tonight. The contract was signed on Friday,” Sam said.

“Ugh, beer,” Bella said.

*OK... She's kinda bitchy but-*

“Are you a midget? Like, a little person? Why are you so fucking small?” Bella asked.

*Wow.*

“Um. No. Just petite.”

“God, your hair is fucking awful. Why would *anyone* want carrot orange fucking frizzy hair? You can dye that shit, you know. And you didn’t even cover up your damn freckles. It’s like you fucking fell from nature’s ugly tree and are too stupid to know it. Your ass is huge,” she went on.

Matilda started laughing. She couldn’t help it. It was just so over the top.

“I don’t know who you’re parodying, but it’s fucking amazing. Do you practice sneering?”

Bella put a shocked look on her face and sucked in air like she was going to start screeching.

“Holy fuck,” Matilda said. “You’re a model. Have you seen how many lines that expression causes on your skin?”

Will was the first one to start laughing, followed by Hennessy. Then they were all yucking it up.

“Carrots,” Will said. “Wee little carrots. Never mind.” And then he patted her head as the group turned to go into the dining room.

\*\*\*

Jake could hear Matilda laughing from the hallway. He didn't want to step back in that room. Why would Sam do this? Why bring her here when he knew Bella would be here?

“-Do you practice sneering? Holy fuck, you're a model. Have you seen how many lines that expression causes on your skin?” Matilda asked.

*Holy fuck, I love the sass. Fiery, feisty little redhead, I adore you.*

Jake was expecting a Bella explosion. Maybe tears. Maybe it'd be so bad they could leave. Leaving would be good.

*I can't sit at a table next to Bella with Matilda there. I just can't.*

Fully willing to admit he was attracted to the tiny ginger woman, Jake wasn't yet willing to admit why the thought of sitting at a table with her *and* the shrew was upsetting.

The only sound from the big room was laughter. Bella was blissfully silent. He could hear the rumble of William's voice as he said something to Matilda before walking into the hallway and giving Jake a look.

*Yes, I know I'm dumb.*

\*\*\*

“Wow,” Matilda said as she got into Sam's car.

“I tried to warn you,” he said.

“I can’t even-”

“I know.”

“Why is he with her? It doesn’t seem like he loves her. How long have they been together?”

“Over a year.”

“Why in the world is he with her, Sam?” Matilda asked.

“Because he’s dumb,” Sam said with a laugh.

“So, what was I supposed to understand better after dinner?”

“What do you understand better after dinner?” He asked back.

“You guys weren’t exaggerating,” she laughed.

“We don’t exaggerate. We weren’t being cruel. She is horrible. And William is going to beat the shit out of me tomorrow,” Sam said with a chuckle.

“Yeah, that surprised me! I didn’t think he cared for me,” she admitted.

“Oh. That’s not you. That’s Will. He’s like that now. Not a lot of emotion going in or coming out.”

“Gawd, how does Jake sleep next to her at night without worrying about getting disemboweled?”

“He doesn’t sleep next to her. She has her place. He has his place,” Sam said.

“It must be incredible hate sex,” Matty laughed.

Sam shook his head.

“On to brewing beer!” She cheered.

Sam laughed. “Lots of work to get done there. It’s the last week in March. Do you think we can have early samples for the Holiday Conference in mid-November?”

“They won’t have final labels. It won’t be marketed yet. But you should be able to announce it and have samples by then.”

“Then, that’s our goal.”



## Chapter 6 - April

The ball magically fell into the pocket with no other contact from anything on the table.

“You just shook the table!” Matty accused.

“I did no such thing,” Jake said sanctimoniously.

“Yes, you did! There was no other contact.”

“Gravity happens, sometimes it just-” Jake couldn’t even finish the sentence without laughing.

“Blah blah blah! You cheated. I saw it,” Matilda teased.

“I didn’t cheat,” Jake laughed. “The ball moved! I can’t help it. That’s the way gravity works!”

“Cheater!” Matilda giggled.

Jake intentionally bumped another ball into a pocket.

“Hey!” She kept giggling.

“If I keep bumping them in, will you keep giggling? Because that makes me happy,” he admitted.

She pulled a face at him. “Girls giggle. Women chuckle or laugh.”

“Nope, I’m pretty sure that was a giggle,” Jake said. “Maybe because you’re the size of a little girl?”

“Now listen here, Herman Munster-”

“Herman Munster! I don’t have a t-shirt for that. Go back to calling me Shaggy, Polly Pocket,” Jake laughed.

“Polly Pocket?! Fuck you, too! I’m not that small!” Matilda said indignantly.

“Matilda, you’re so tiny I can pick you up with one arm. William could run with you on his shoulder for like ten miles.”

“Well, Will is like Heman! That’s not my fault!” Matilda exclaimed.

“Why does Will get to be Heman and I’m stuck with Herman Munster? That’s not fair,” Jake faux whined.

“Because you’re more long-limbed and lumbering and he’s more Masters of the Universe. Go gain like fifty pounds of muscle, then toss me over a shoulder and run around for a while. Then we’ll talk!”

“What are you - No! Jake! Put me down!” Matilda yelled as Jake threw her over a shoulder and then spun in circles. “Put me down! I’m going to puke on your ass and then we’ll both be sorry!”

## Chapter 7 - May

Jake returned to his office after a meeting to find Matilda standing on two large books, on top of the pool table, barefoot. She was reaching into the drop ceiling.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Jake laughed.

“Shut up, I’m short! This is how short people compensate,” Matilda laughed. She could barely reach the connection. Barely.

“But, what are you doing up there? And where are your shoes?”

“My shoes are on the floor. I can’t wear shoes on the pool table, it’ll ruin the felt,” Matilda said in her best ‘duh’ voice.

“OK, but what are you doing up there? This doesn’t look safe,” Jake said.

“Wait for it!” Matilda called.

“What am I waiting for? Does your t-shirt say ‘Juicy’?” Jake was fascinated.

“Just wait for it! OK, turn out the lights,” she said.

“It’s daylight, babe. I can’t turn out the sun.” Jake said.

“Just turn out the lights! Don’t ruin it for me.”

Jake flipped off the office lights. “The ‘Juicy’ t-shirt glows in the dark. OK. I’m going to need some time alone now,” he laughed.

Matilda laughed. “It was a gift from Ellie. She loves this t-shirt. It is not work appropriate, so stop looking at my boobs.”

“Ellie is officially my second favorite person on the planet, and it’s my favorite t-shirt. Better than Shaggy,” Jake teased.

“Shush, you’re making me feel awkward. You’re dating a bitchy supermodel, go look at her boobs.”

“Meh,” Jake said.

“Well, go talk to your favorite person while I finish this. You’re very distracting. Tell Sam I said hi and to come over when the ball thwacks. He’ll like this, too,” Matilda said, blushing.

“I am talking to my favorite person,” Jake said, laughing at her.

Matilda pulled a face at him. “I have a feeling your favorite person at any given time is the woman with the tightest t-shirt around you,” she laughed. “I’m almost done.”

She reached up again and swung an Aisling na Meala bar light down over the pool table.

“Yay!” Matilda clapped as Jake laughed.

“Fun!” Jake said. “Now go back to reaching into the ceiling. The t-shirt shows off your belly when you stretch. It’s nice for me.”

Matilda turned beet red. “Shush. I was out running errands when I got the message the light was done. I picked it up and brought it here so I wouldn’t have to take it home and back again. Now shit’s all weird. Go back to oggling your supermodel and leave us lesser mortals to our fun!” She grinned.

Jake’s smile seemed... sad.

When she stepped over to the chair to climb down, he stepped over and put her on her feet.

Jake looked at her suspiciously. “Did you just sniff me?”

“Yes, yes I did,” she admitted.

“Why?”

“Because your fleece no longer smells like you. And you smell really good.”

“Does that mean you’re going to bring my fleece back?”

“Absolutely not,” Matilda said.

“Booo!” Jake laughed.

“Has the supermodel taught you nothing? Girls don’t return boy clothes.”

His smile was sad again.

\*\*\*

“So, how was the date with John?” Eric asked.

“He was really nice,” Matilda said.

“Charlie said he’s a great guy. You going to see him again?” Ellie asked.

“Meh,” Matilda made a so-so gesture.

“Eric, I know what our problem is,” Ellie declared.

“Pfft. Eleanor, I’m no fool. I also know what our problem is,” Eric replied.

“There’s no problem,” Matilda said, blushing.

“The problem is that this guy’s not Prince Charming,” Ellie said.

“Bah!” Matilda said.

“Tell me I’m wrong!” Ellie said. “Look me in the eye and tell me I’m wrong.”

“There’s no problem! I’m just really into this project and there wasn’t a lot of chemistry, for him either I don’t think,” Matilda said.

“Oh, bullshit! He called Charlie this morning talking about how gorgeous you are,” Ellie said.

Eric rolled his eyes. “Would you please just make a pass at Prince Charming? Please? Like, invite him over for wine and sex and see where it goes?”

“Again, he’s dating a supermodel!” Matilda said.

\*\*\*

“Welcome home, Bella. How was the trip?” Jake asked.

“Smelly. Europeans smell. And I had to fly coach on the way home because the airline screwed up. They should know I fly first class, always. I don’t care what the agency books. I tweeted at them to make my displeasure known. My fans are organizing a boycott.”

“Well, that seems reasonable. Listen, Bella, I’ve been thinking-”

“My period is late,” she blurted out.

“I haven’t seen you in almost two months, and it’s been longer-”

“It’s really really late,” she said.

## Chapter 8 - June

“How did the doctor go?” Jake asked.

“He said that I’m not pregnant, that I might have had a miscarriage,” Bella said, pulling a frown.

“Well, we kind of knew that when all the tests were negative,” Jake said.

“It’s still sad, though. We could be on our way to having a baby by now. Wouldn’t that be amazing? You and me as parents? I love you so much, Jake,” she said.

“Bella-” Jake started.

“We should try to start a family, don’t you think?” She asked.

“Bella, I wouldn’t want to start a family without being married and-” Jake started.

“I mean, we’ve never really talked about it before, but I’d like to get married at some point. I’d have to keep my name for work, but ‘Bella Trellis’ does have a nice ring to it,” Bella rambled.

“Bella, I don’t want to marry you. We’re not getting married. That’s not the conversation I’m trying to have,” Jake said firmly. “I think we should-”

“Jake, can we talk about this later? I’m still kinda upset about the doctor’s visit and all. I’m going to go back to my place and take a nap, OK?” Bella asked.

Jake sighed and nodded. “Of course.”

\*\*\*

“Matilda Benton, this is my little sister, Bethany,” Sam made the introduction as Bethany gave Matilda a giant hug.

“I don’t know you at all, but I love you so much. I love that you told the Screeching Face she was going to get lines,” Beth clapped.

“We’re going to have so much fun trolling Jake. The Stephanie-Bella reference is gonna stick. Everyone has started to use it. Her face - every time I say it - Best. Thing. Ever.”

“It’s great to finally meet you,” Matilda said.

“Likewise! You’re coming to dinner on Sunday, right? Last week, that bitch kicked the dog. I thought Will was going to bodily throw her out of the house,” Beth said.

\*\*\*

“Ugh! Can’t you people put this beast away when I come over? You know I hate him!” Bella screamed from the entryway on Sunday.

As Will went to retrieve the dog, Noah called out, “The dog lives here, Bella. You don’t have to come over to his house if you don’t want to deal with him.”

When Jake entered the big room behind Bella, his heart did a little lurch. Matty was sitting by Beth, giggling about something.

*Fuck. I don’t want to sit with Bella and Matty together again.*

“Ugh, it’s the little gimpy ginger bitch again. Don’t you have anywhere else to be?” Bella said.

“Bella, you look... poofy. Are those new implants or is the rest of your body just shriveling around the artificial parts?” Matilda asked.

Beth choked on her drink.

“Does your t-shirt say ‘Juicy’, bitch? That’s so fucking tacky,” Bella sneered.

“I know, right? It glows in the dark, too,” Matilda said as she bounced her boobs around.



There were snorts of laughter from everyone in the room, including Darla.

*Fuck my life.* Jake thought as he watched Matty's boobs.

\*\*\*

"Have a safe flight, Bella. Here, I'll put the luggage up there for you," Jake said.

"Ugh, I hate flying commercial. You should fly with me so we can take the Trellis plane," Bella whined.

"I would take a commercial flight to Australia, Bella, not the private plane," Jake said.

"Well, you should still come with me. We didn't have any private time at all while I was home. It's like you were avoiding me," she pouted.

"Safe travels, I hope the shoot goes well. You'll be back in like eight weeks, right? Australia, then Peru, then Portugal?"

"Six weeks. I'll be home in six weeks," she said.

"OK, have fun."

## Chapter 9 - July

“But it’s my birthday!” Jake whined.

“Oh, poor Jake. Want some cheese to go with that whine?” Matilda mocked.

“You’re not supposed to shellack me like this on my birthday!”

“Oh, shut it. You love it!” She said.

Jake grinned. “I really do. Where’s my birthday present, woman?!”

“You mean other than this ass-kicking?” Matty laughed.

“Yes!”

“I mean, you could have worn the Juicy t-shirt at least,” Noah said.

“Shut up about the Juicy t-shirt!” Matilda laughed.

“No juicy t-shirt talk right now! It’s only fun to talk about when she’s wearing it. Where’s my present!” Jake yelled as Sam, Will, Hank, and Ethan laughed.

“What if I didn’t get you anything?” She asked.

“I will cry lonely sad tears of neglect,” Jake said with a grin. “Did you get me something?”

“Of course, I did. I brought you two things,” she grinned back.

“What’d I get?” Jake asked.

She handed him the first box.

“My collection is complete!” Jake laughed as he pulled off his Alf t-shirt and pulled on a new Herman Munster t-shirt.

“Could you take off your shirt again so I can take a picture for Eric?” Matilda asked.

“Only if you promise to frame it and put it on your desk,” Jake teased.

“Show’s what you know,” Matilda laughed. “I don’t have a desk. I work from my couch!”

“I feel like you missed an opportunity to ask her to take her shirt off,” Noah said, disappointed.

“What else did I get?” Jake asked.

“Oh, so this one is really a gift to me. You’re supposed to wear it for a while and then give it back on my birthday next month.”

Jake’s eyes turned to slits. “Is it my Trellis fleece?”

“It absolutely is,” Matilda grinned.

“I love that fleece, you know,” Jake teased.

“It has bumps in it now where my boobs go. Sorry, not sorry,” Matilda laughed. “It’s nice to wear with stretchy pants.”

“So, I’m going to need some alone time with this fleece now. That’s what you’re telling me?”

“Eh, make the shrew wear it for an hour. That’ll suck all the joy right out of it,” Will said with a straight face while everyone but Jake laughed.

“What did Bella get you for your birthday?” Matilda asked. She still felt bad that they all took potshots at Bella. It had to bother Jake.

“She left for six weeks.”

*OK. Or, maybe it doesn’t bother him at all, she thought.*

## Chapter 10 - August

“But it’s your birthday!” Jake whined.

“Oh, poor Jake. Want some cheese to go with that whine?” Matilda mocked.

“You’re not supposed to shellack me like this on your birthday!”

“Oh, shut it. You love it!” She said.

Jake grinned. “I really do.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t go to the brewery with everyone else. This was your project,” Matilda said.

“Meh,” Jake said.

“Meh?” Matty asked.

“It’s your birthday. Someone had to stay behind and give you gifts,” Jake smiled.

“We could have celebrated my birthday on a different day,” she said.

There was a pause in the conversation.

*I am hopelessly in love with you and wouldn’t miss your birthday for anything. Say it. Say it. Say it. Spit the words out.* Jake thought. But the words didn’t come out.

“Jake, you OK? I’m sorry you’re missing the trip,” she said. Her smile fell a bit.

“I’m not. Time for presents?” He asked.

“Did you get me a Polly Pocket doll?” she asked.

“No, I couldn’t find one with red hair. And they don’t make a Skipper Barbie with red hair, either,” he laughed.

She glared at him.

“I was told to give these to you in a specific order. This one’s from Noah,” Jake said.

“Oh my God, it’s a glow in the dark Lush t-shirt. Ellie will be so happy,” Matilda laughed.

“So will Noah,” Jake laughed, too.

Ethan gave her a pale purple coach wallet. “I looked at this, right after I fell into the mud puddle and didn’t buy it because it wasn’t a need.”

“Ethan has good taste in gifts. It’s always either something you wanted and didn’t buy or something you didn’t know you needed,” Jake said.

“This one is from Sam,” Jake said.

It was a leather carryall, clearly meant to fit her small frame and not pull her off-kilter.

“This one is from Hank and Darla,” Jake said.

It was in a Tiffany’s jewelry box.

Matty blinked back tears.

“Matty?”

“I’m ok,” she choked out.

She opened the box and found a charm bracelet with a beer bottle charm. The tears dripped down.

Beth got her a friendship charm. Luke gave her a violin charm. Matthew gave her a tsavorite and white gold charm with the date engraved. Will gave her a carrot charm.

Jake gave her two charms. The first was a pool cue charm that had her name engraved in super tiny letters. Matilda smiled, “I should have seen that coming.”

The second charm was a platinum and diamond doll charm.

By the time she was done opening little charm boxes, she was snot crying in big heaving sobs, face buried in her hands.

And then Jake was hugging her, rubbing her back. “Matilda, what’s wrong? Can I help? Can you tell me?”

She shook her head. “It’s silly. I’m so sorry. It’s beautiful. Thank you so much,” she gasped out.

“Why the tears, Matty?”

“You and your family have always been so kind to me.” Matilda shook her head a bit. “I’m not sure what I did to deserve it, but I’m so grateful for all of you.”

“Why the tears?” He asked again.

“Uh, it’s silly. Sentimental and silly,” she said.

“OK,” he said.

“No one’s ever given me jewelry before. My grandma wasn’t one to wear jewelry and was buried with her wedding ring. My dad wasn’t one to shop for jewelry and we had bigger fish to fry growing up. Not a whole lot of money in bartending.”

“Oh, come on. No diamonds from old boyfriends or best friend rings from Ellie and Eric? Nothing?” Jake asked, somewhat appalled.

“No diamonds from old boyfriends,” she said with a laugh. “Ellie is a firm believer that jewelry is shared between lovers, and she didn’t enter my life until college. We were past the friendship bracelet stage.”

“The bracelet is very beautiful and thoughtful,” Matilda bit her lip. “I don’t really have any family left. I hope you and yours understand how much this means to me.”

She mopped up her face with a tissue and looked up at him. He touched the side of her face gently and for a second, she thought he was going to kiss her.

“Where’s my fleece?” She said with a laugh.

He gave her another brief hug as he laughed.

\*\*\*

“Matilda, this story had better end with ‘AND THEN I GOT DOWN ON MY KNEES AND GAVE HIM THE

BLOW JOB OF A FUCKING LIFETIME’. This is not a gift one gives to a work consultant for brewing some fucking beer!” Ellie yelled later that night, sitting in Matilda’s living room.

“No,” Matilda muttered.

“I’d give the mother of all blow jobs for this bracelet. Blow jobs for all the boys for that. It’s so fucking sweet I can’t even process it right now,” Eric said as he teared up.

“I know, right?” Matilda said, tearing up again.

“Quit being a couple of sissy bitches, you two! That doll charm is mostly diamond,” Ellie pointed out. “What the fuck happened? How did you leave it?”

“I’m pretty sure I owe him a new t-shirt because I snot cried and sobbed all over his Thundercats shirt. Makeup running down my face - full-on ugly cry,” Matilda said.

“And then you mopped up your face, shoved your tongue down his throat, and gave him the mother of all fucking blow jobs, right?” Ellie asked.

“No, Ellie. After I calmed down, he drove me home because I was a mess,” Matilda muttered.

“MATILDA!” Ellie and Eric yelled in unison.

“He’s dating a supermodel! They’re still together! I can’t compete with that, please stop with this. It makes my chest hurt to think about him with her,” Matilda begged.

\*\*\*

Jake ran his hands through his hair.

“What’s the story? Together? Not together? Not interested?” Beth asked Jake.

“Uh,” Jake said.

“So, there was no kissy-face and no discussion. We all beat feet out of town on her day for nothing,” Noah said.

“Things got awkward,” Jake said.

The table groaned.

“You know what makes things awkward?” Ethan asked.

Jake pretended to bang his head on the table.

“Do tell, Ethan,” Matthew played along.

“GIVING A TRULY WONDERFUL PERSON A BEAUTIFUL PRESENT AND THEN NOT TELLING THEM HOW YOU FEEL WHILE ALSO DATING A SHREW!” Ethan yelled.

“Why isn’t that over?” Asked Luke. “That needs to be over, man. That is a major blocker at this point. Matilda will not be the ‘other woman’. She just won’t. She has the wrong colors for that.”

“Colors?” Asked Sam, trying to look at Luke at the other end of the table.

“Yeah,” Luke said. “You know, like it doesn’t fit her personality.”

“How-” Sam started.

“I keep trying and then Bella pulls something like the pregnancy scare shit. Sorry, Mom - Didn’t mean to swear.

“When I last talked to her, I was just going to do it over the phone and be done with it, but then she started babbling on about how much she loves me and how she couldn’t imagine life without me and that she’d just want to die if we broke up,” Jake said.

“Serious question: Do you think that’s even remotely true?” Sam asked.

“No. I know it’s not, but it makes me feel horrible. And I’m pretty sure she’s actively avoiding coming back to Chicago now,” Jake admitted.

“Jacob, get on a plane, go wherever she is, and end this. She’s manipulating you into staying together. It’s not even that she wants to be with you,” Hank said.



“We’ve been together for like a year and a half. You want me to fly out, dump her, leave her overseas, and call it done? That’s just horrible,” Jake said.

The table groaned again.

# Chapter 11 - September

“Yay beer! Cheers!” Matilda called.

“Cheers!” The beer team called back as they all drank.

“It’s just like Connor’s! We did it! The first batch is a success!” she cheered. “Now we just need to mass-produce it. The factory is almost ready...”

Sam and Jake clinked bottles as they watched Matilda strategize the successful launch of their product.

“You are so stupid,” Sam said.

“I’m aware,” Jake agreed.

## Chapter 12 - October

“OK, the product will be shipped in cases to the conference next month. It’s all prepped, just conditioning now. I can’t believe the labels came together that well,” Matilda said as they wrapped up the end of a status meeting.

“This is your first conference, right Matilda?” Ellen asked. “I forget you’ve been here for months and not years.”

“First conference,” Matilda confirmed.

“Just be warned. It’s a big conference. People everywhere. Bring your invite with you, you’ll need it to check-in,” Ellen advised.

\*\*\*

“You don’t have to fly back for the conference, Bella. It’s going to be a bunch of work talk and standing around,” Jake said.

“No, I’m going. I’ll meet you there and we’ll go back to Chicago together. It’ll be fun, plus there will be other rich people like us at the conference!” She squealed excitedly.

*You’re not rich.*

“Mostly not,” Jake disagreed. “A couple of good friends of the family that you already know. It’s a conference. Mostly worker bees.”

“I’m going. If I don’t go, you’ll drink beer and play pool all night,” Bella said.

*Can’t have that - sounds too much like fun,* Jake thought.

“I just want to be clear - this is a work thing. Full of people I work with. Where I will talk to work people about work stuff. I don’t want you to feel left out, but I can’t spend the entire conference sitting with you.”

“That’s fine. You’ll have to step away occasionally. I’ll mingle with you. Plus, we can have some alone time together. My poor Jake has to be feeling neglected with me traveling so much.”

*FUCK MY LIFE.*

## Chapter 13 – November

Matilda stood in the hotel entryway with a look of abject terror on her face. There were thousands of people and all their luggage packed into the lobby.

*What the everliving fuck?! I'm going to get trampled and die. There's no way this meets fire code.*

There was a large sign hanging from the ceiling. "Check-in at the desk that matches your invitation number."

*Invitation number?*

She started digging through her carryall for the invitation, but the man behind her was trying to push her forward.

"Jesus, lady. Don't you know where you're going? If you're new, you're a one. That's your line."

"There is literally nowhere to go. It's a wall of people. Why are you shoving me?" Matilda demanded.

"For fuck's sake. It's a crowd. Move!"

Matilda stepped toward the line labeled with a giant number one. As she looked around, she realized there were nine numbered lines, and the queue of people in each line was shorter as the numbers got higher.

*Maybe I could go get in line 9 and tell them I lost my invite?*

She dug through her bag to find her invite.

"You're in the wrong line," the lady behind her said.

"Where is the number? I don't see it," Matilda was thoroughly confused.

"I'm not sure about yours. It's a platinum invite. You can go in any line, I think."

Matilda gave the woman a look that clearly said, *huh?*

“See? The paper is different and you don’t have an assigned check-in time.” The woman held out her invitation for comparison.

“It’s 11:30,” Matilda said.

“Oh, I’m well aware that says a five pm check-in time. Do you know why I’m standing here? For the same reason I’m a one. My boss is a dumb ass. He wanted us to be here early to ‘mingle’.” She rolled her eyes. “Who mingles in this shit show?”

“Last year my asshat boss decided he wasn’t waiting in line 3 and caused a scene at the 9 desk. Busted down this year. Probably going to be on the second floor next to the elevator or something.”

“Wow! How would the hotel even keep track of something like that?” Matilda asked.

“The family does room assignments. Ultimately, the hotel will be completely full. Someone has to get the shitty rooms, so they assign the rooms as they see fit based on the working relationship, strategic importance, blah blah blah. First-year?”

“Yeah. I had no idea it was going to be like this.”

“Platinum in year one. It must be nice! Who are you sleeping with?” she asked with a laugh. “No, really. I’m pretty sure you can go to line 9. I’ve never known anyone with a platinum invite, but there is a lot of talk about them.”

“Thanks for the help,” Matilda said with a blush.

“Sure, you’re one less person to wait after. I’m probably going to be in this line until five tonight anyway.”

Matilda made her way to line 9. There were only two people in front of her.

A few minutes later, she was greeted by an efficient looking young man.

“Hi. I’m hoping you can help me. My invitation doesn’t have a number.” He looked doubtful until he saw the invitation paper.

He took the invite from her. “A platinum invitation can check in with any hotel staff or the concierge, Ms. Benton. I’m happy to get you situated. I just need your ID.”

He spoke rapidly. “You’re on the forty-second floor, in a corner suite. Your stay is fully comp’d, help yourself to any snacks or beverages in the room. Room service is available from 5 AM to 11 PM. The hotel restaurants and bars can comp all meals and drinks for you and your guests. Are you interested in scheduling a massage or spa treatment?”

Matilda stood before him with her mouth agape. “I think there may be an error.”

The hotel clerk laughed. “It doesn’t look like an error. The reservation, your invitation, and your identification all match. Just one room key?”

Matilda nodded.

“Massage? I suggest booking now before there is no more availability.”

\*\*\*

Five minutes later, Matilda was walking into the fanciest hotel room she had ever seen.

The living room portion of the suite was at least twice the size of her apartment. Dark hardwood floors were complemented by cream, tan, and gold-colored furnishings. The rug was a low pile and well-cushioned. The couches were deep and looked soft. Two walls of the room were completely made of glass and looked out over the scenic hill country view.

The bedroom had a king-sized bed and the bathroom had a jetted tub.

“Wow.” She said aloud.

There was a mini bar in one corner of the room. She grabbed a bottle of water and plopped down on the closest couch.

“This is so wasted on me.” She said aloud. It felt strange to be in such a big room alone.

The end table had a vase of fresh flowers and an envelope with her name on it.

*Matty - I hope your travels were uneventful and the room is to your liking. Thank you for all you've done in the last several months. What are we going to make once the beer is brewed?*

*Each year, Trellis Industries gifts contractors attending the conference something to celebrate shared success. This year, we're opting to take something from you, rather than give you something more. Your school loans have been paid in full.*

*Best wishes for continued success and happiness throughout the holidays and into the new year. You are always welcome at our table. - Hank*

There was another note under Hank's tight handwriting. It looked more like printing than cursive.

*Remember about the colors. You can call me. - Sam*

\*\*\*

Matilda read the note six times before she could fully process the words. Her school loans were well over a hundred thousand dollars. This had to be a misunderstanding.

She pulled out her phone and loaded the loan management website. Her loans reflected a negative balance. They had been overpaid by the November payment amount.

*HOLY FUCK! THIS HAS TO BE A DREAM! I have been trampled in the lobby and am hallucinating.*



Tears dripped down her face.

*HOLY FUCK! HOLY FUCK! How did they even get my loan information?! HOLY FUCK! HOLY FUCK! HOLY FUCK! HOLY FUCK! HOLY FUCK! HOLY FUCK! HOLY FUCK! HOLY FUCK! HOLY FUCK!*

*It's time for whiskey.*

\*\*\*

There were more tears and more whiskey. There was a call to Ellie (“Holy Fuck!”). And then there was a nap, mostly because of the flying and the whiskey.

*How does one even say thank you for something like this?*

After a visit to the jetted tub, she didn’t have an answer, but she was relaxed. She’d look for Hank and hopefully something that represented her gratitude would come out of her mouth when she found him.

The opening dinner for the conference started at 6 PM. According to the schedule, there would be an hour of appetizers and drinks, then dinner. Appropriate attire was listed as “casual.”

Matilda had packed a dress for tonight but wasn’t feeling it. The conference had caught her by surprise so far. A dress felt wrong. Too exposed.

She opted for black slim-cut pants and a silver tank that had just a little sparkle to it. It was sleeveless, but it would be fine.

With her hair pinned up loosely in a messy bun and charm bracelet in place, she was as ready as she was going to be.

Hank’s gift had shaken her nerves. While incredibly grateful, she couldn’t believe a “corporate gift” was going to relieve her of that much debt. It was mind-boggling.

\*\*\*

The lobby was much calmer as she made her way to the conference banquet hall.

*Are they going to put a couple of thousand people in the same dining room? I wonder how this is going to work.*

As she turned the corner, she saw Noah surrounded by a crowd of people. He was in a suit.

*Noah wears suits?*

Swarmed by people, he looked so serious and... not-jovial. So very unlike himself, it was jarring. There was no easy way to say hello, so she moved on.

“Hey Platinum! Did everything work out with your invite?”

Matilda turned to see the woman from the lobby coming down the hall.

“Yes, thank you again for your help! I see you finally got checked-in. I’m Matilda, by the way.”

“I did. I got into my room a little before 3 PM. I’m Jan; it’s nice to meet you. I got zero mingling done, other than talking to you, so you know, time well spent,” Jan said with a sarcastic laugh.

“Where did your room end up?” Matilda asked.

“Fourth floor, next to the ice machine. Fuck my stupid boss. How about you? What kind of room are you in? And what do you do for Trellis?” Jan asked.

“Umm....”

“Oh, just say it. I know it’s going to be good,” she laughed.

“Forty-second-floor suite. And I’m making beer with them,” Matilda said with an awkward little smile.

“Damn. I ask again - who are you fucking?! 42nd floor in your first year!” It was said with so much gregarious laughter and bluntness, Matilda couldn’t take offense.

Matilda laughed with her. “I swear I’m not sleeping with anyone. I’d fess up if I was. Those boys just don’t come in an ugly version!”

Jan’s eyebrows raised. “The Trellis boys? No. Even the elder Trellis is a fox. It’s a charisma thing, I think.”

“So how does dinner work? Assigned seats?” Matilda asked.

“Na. Everything from here on out is free for all. Wanna grab a table?” Jan asked.

Matilda smiled. “That’d be great! I don’t know many people here.”

“Eh, we can laugh at my dumbass boss together. There he is, waving like a fool.”

“Matilda, this is Jeff, my dumbass boss,” said Jan without preamble.

Jeff held out his hand to shake as the ladies sat down. “Hi, Matilda. I had several cocktails on the plane last year. I have not heard the end of it since. What do you do?”

“I’m a marketing consultant that specializes in liquor,” she laughed.

“That’s just... great,” Jeff said as his cheeks went red.

“See? Told ya. He’s a dumbass,” said Jan.

“I didn’t catch what you all do for Trellis Industries,” Matilda said to change the subject.

“Accounting software,” Jan said. “We’re one of several accounting software vendors.”

Someone pulled out the chair next to Matilda. Jan looked startled by the new person.

“Hel- Hello, sir,” she said quickly as Jeff pushed his chair out to stand up and shake hands.

Matilda turned to see Sam settling into the chair next to her. “Oh, hello,” he said to her with a teasing smile. “I got called sir. How come you never call me sir?”

Matilda grinned. “Do you want me to call you sir?”

“Absolutely not! They seem very impressed by me, or my wealth. Maybe both,” Sam said, gesturing to Jan and Jeff.

“Aren’t we all? This is CRAZY!” Matilda said, looking around the giant room stuffed with people.

“I know. I hate it. Every year is a little worse. Hank insists it’s good, though. Why are we sitting over here? Introduce me to your friends?” Sam asked.

Matilda made introductions and couldn’t help but notice Jan’s suspicious eyes.

As Sam shook her hand, he laughingly said, “No, we’re not sleeping together. She’s a little sister.

“This is a wonderful spot. We’re in the corner where no one can see me. Excellent table choice, Matty.”

“It was Jeff’s choice,” Matilda said, relaxing a bit. Being around Sam was calming.

The chair next to Sam was pulled out. “You are not hiding over here all through dinner, Samuel,” Hank stated. “You will mingle and be social.”

“I am being social.”

“Hanging out with Matilda is not being social, Samuel. And you know it.”

“Have you met Jeff and Jan? I’m being social with them as well,” Sam said innocently.

Hank smiled around the table. “Good evening, everyone.”

“Hank! Um. I. Oh my goodness. I don’t have words,” Matilda stammered out.

Hank made a concerned face. “What is it, sweetheart? Is something not right with you?”

*Since when does Hank call me sweetheart?*

He seemed to notice it after it was out of his mouth.

“Are you well, Matilda? What happened?”

“See,” Sam gave a rare grin. “She’s a little sister.”

Hank smacked Sam’s shoulder. “Shut it or I’ll tell your mother. What’s wrong, Matty?”

Aware that Jeff and Jan hadn’t said a word and were staring at her, she said, “I found your note.”

“Oh.” The smile was back in Hank’s eyes, worry erased. “Happy holidays from Trellis Industries.”

She returned the smile. “I don’t know what to say.”

Sam pulled her close and kissed her forehead. “Then say ‘thank you’, and think of it no more. It’s a relatively little thing.”

Hank smacked Sam again. “Go be social. I’m going, too. Matilda, you can, of course, sit where you like. But, there is also a seat reserved for you at our tables. I suggest *not* sitting near Jacob.” Hank stood to leave.

“Why not near Jake?” she asked, a bit disappointed.

“Stephanie-Bella is here with him.” Sam rolled his eyes.

“Oh. Yikes.” *They’re still together, then.* Matilda sighed.

Sam nodded as he got up to mingle.

Sam and Hank left the table, walking in opposite directions.

Jan cleared her throat. “So, um. When you said you were making beer with *them*...?”

“I meant with the Trellis family. The beer label is Jacob’s pet project.”

“And you’re a contractor?”

“Yes.”

“Huh. Well ok. It’s weird that your gift came through the elder Trellis,” Jan said.

“Weird? Why?”

“Typically, the holiday cards are signed by the head of the area associated with your work. We’re part of accounting, which is part of internal services, so Ethan signs our cards. If you’re making beer with Jacob Trellis and your contract rolls up through his areas, he’d usually sign your holiday card.”

“Oh. My work is through Hank. He signs off on my stuff, so the gift thing isn’t weird,” Matilda said.

Jan blinked. “Are you related to them?”

“No, I just work with them.”

“Last call for drinks. Dinner starts in fifteen minutes!” Noah said through a microphone from a little stage on the other side of the room.

“I’m going to get a drink,” Matilda said. “Anyone want anything?”

\*\*\*

Nine tables away, Jake was sitting next to Bella, staring at the spot where he knew Matilda was sitting. He hadn’t seen her in almost a month. Hadn’t really talked to her privately since her birthday in August. He fucked her birthday up. He should have gone for it and dealt with Bella in the aftermath.

Sam walked over to Matilda with casual ease, chatted for a few minutes, then pulled her close and kissed her face.

*Fuck you, Sam. I hate you right now.*

He couldn’t see her anymore. Too many people blocked his view. Maybe he’d see her later. Maybe they could play pool. Maybe she’d bend and stretch for a shot in that way she does. Maybe they cou-

Bella smacked his arm. “Are you even listening? What are you staring at?”

“I wasn’t listening. I apologize.”

“Jacob! You’re sitting right here next to me and not even listening. That’s rude.”

“What were you saying?” He asked.

“I was saying that this is boring. There’s no one here I know. Why do I have to be here?”

”*You* don’t have to be here. I have to be here. I told you this was a work thing with work people. My family is here. You know them.”

“Whatever. We can see them all the time, and they’re so tacky.” Bella rolled her eyes. “Are you going to get us drinks before dinner is served?”

The wait staff would bring them drinks during dinner, but it seemed like a good way to get away from her for a minute. She had been following him around like a lost puppy all day.

He walked to the bar on the far side of the room, hoping to get a look at Matilda. No such luck.

As Jake got in line at the bar, he spotted her, three people in front of him, chatting with a frumpy middle-aged woman.

“Matty,” Jake called. She turned at the sound of her name.

*Oh my God.*

Matty dumped in a sludge puddle was endearing.

Matty barefaced, hair severely pulled up with her body wrapped in his fleece was adorable.

Business Matty with minimal makeup and hair tied back is lovely.

Any version of Matty with a pool cue is sexy as fuck.

But this Matilda - hair loosely up, darker makeup, shimmering fitted tank, and pants that clung to her hips and ass - this Matilda would be in his dreams tonight. Her

hourglass figure was so very apparent and so very worth staring at. Front, back, or profile - all the views were delicious.

She saw him. When the smile lit her face and made her bright eyes dance, he forgot to breathe. Then she was moving toward him. As she tried to say hello, he pulled her close for a hug.

*Oh, fuck. Her arms are around me. She feels amazing against me. Fuck. I've never wanted anyone like this.*

His dick stirred; he let go of her immediately.

“How was your flight? How is your room?” He asked.

*Where is your room? We should go to it and be naked together.*

“Just like the rest of the conference, the room is over the top! I knew the conference was big, but this is obscene,” she said, big green eyes still smiling up at him.

*Fuck my life... I am so crazy about this woman and she doesn't get it.*

“How are you? How's Bella?” Matilda asked.

“I'm good right now. Glad you're here. Bella is... a bitch, same as always.”

*Why is this line moving so fast? Fuck you, bartenders. Move slower.*

Matilda shook her head.

Jake smirked. “Don't look at me like that. She is currently unhappy that there are no other rich people here.”

“It's a work conference...”

“I know that. You know that. She was told that. Still, here we are.” Jake said.

*Why are we talking about bitchy Bella?*

“You look amazingly beautiful. More than your usual level of beautiful,” he blurted.

\*\*\*



Matilda could feel the heat rise to her cheeks. “Thank you.”

*Breathe. He dates supermodels. He’s strictly fantasy fodder. Don’t make a jackass of yourself,* Matilda told herself.

There was a banging sound behind her as the bartender knocked on the bar to get her attention. “Oh, sorry!” She said, “A Bud Light and a Modelo, please.”

“Bud Light?” Jacob asked.

“It’s for someone at my table. I’m trying not to judge.”

Jake ordered a beer for himself and wine for Bella.

“Did you choose the alcohol for tonight? Thanks for getting Modelo,” she said.

He nodded.

*He smells so good.*

They turned to walk back to the tables.

“I can’t get over you guys in suits.” She touched his tie knot as they paused at her table.

*Stop touching him. This is just pathetic, Matilda. Get your shit together.*

“It won’t last. Darla likes us to look presentable, but we’ll be back in jeans and t-shirts by Tuesday.”

She handed Jeff his bottle of Bud.

“Maybe a round of pool later?” He asked.

“Sure,” she said.

She sighed as he walked away. *Another date with Little Jake tonight... Damn Ellie.*

Matilda pretended she didn’t notice Jan watching her.

\*\*\*

Dick on full alert, he slowly made his way back to the girlfriend he couldn't stand and couldn't seem to dump.

*I can fuck her later and pretend she's a tiny redhead rather than a blonde bean pole, right?* He asked himself.

*That's repulsive,* he answered himself.

\*\*\*

The room had too many people in it. Now that dinner was over and drinks were flowing again, people were moving around. Crowds made Matilda nervous. People didn't see her or they shoved her. The cerebral palsy made her more prone to falling. It was embarrassing.

She eventually found her way to a side door that led out onto a patio and then down a garden walking path. A walk sounded good. The grounds were lit by old fashioned looking gas lamps, and she could see other people walking around. There were even some benches sprinkled in the garden.

Matilda walked out the door and down the path, enjoying the slightly chilly air on her bare arms.

*It was stuffy in the banquet room. It's beautiful out here.*

\*\*\*

After dinner, Bella wanted to go for a walk, "for some private time". Anxious to get out of the overcrowded room and move around, Jacob agreed.

*Maybe some walking will ease my blue balls.*

"Were you talking to that gimpy midget woman earlier? At the bar?" Bella asked.

Jacob glared at her. *Fuck you, Bella.* "Matilda is just short. Don't be rude about her - again. And yes, I was. I work with her."

They turned a corner in the path. It was a beautiful night, but there was no one else out walking on this side of the garden.

“I don’t want you talking to her. Stay away from her.”

“No.” The response was immediate, no social filter or softening applied.

“Excuse me?” Bella was annoyed.

“I said no. I work with her.”

Jake plopped down on a concrete bench. If they were going to argue, he wasn’t walking any further with her.

*Maybe I can actually dump her this time... We’re twelve hundred miles from home. Can I dump her while we’re out of town?*

“I don’t like the way she looks at you!” Bella was trying to sound victimized, but couldn’t pull it off.

“Too bad.”

\*\*\*

Matilda had wandered too far. She was approaching the golf course associated with the hotel. She turned back on the path. The evening chill had gone from refreshing to cold, and she didn’t see anyone else now.

As she got closer to the main paths, she could hear a deep voice.

“Excuse me?” She heard a shrill voice respond.

She didn’t hear a reply. The path bent here, so she couldn’t easily see who was ahead. Not wanting to blunder in on anyone’s argument, she took a few steps off the path to see around the bend.

She saw Jake sit down.

“Too bad.” His voice was terse.

“Jake, don’t be like that. I just get jealous because I love you so much,” Bella whined.

Matilda’s heart sank to her stomach. Hearing that hateful woman talk about loving Jacob made her chest ache.

“I don’t think so, babe. You love the money. It is what it is.”

“How can you say that?”

“It’s true.”

*I should leave. This is not a conversation I need to witness. Maybe I can go back the other way and find another path...*

“You were rock hard through most of dinner. You want me so bad.”

*How can he talk about her being a bitch and then also be that turned on by her?*

“Not quite.” There was a sarcastic, angry sound to the chuckle that didn’t belong in Jake’s voice.

“Oh, is someone grumpy and frustrated? Do you need a little extra attention? I’ve been away too long...” Bella said in a baby-talk voice.

*Is she petting his crotch? Out here? In public? Oh, good God, she’s on her knees. She’s going to suck him off right there?! Holy shit! Turn around and get out of here.*

Matilda couldn’t bring herself to move. She didn’t want to watch him be intimate with anyone else but was somewhat interested, too.

*Little Jake and I have spent enough time together. I’m curious about reality. Oh fuck, she’s really going to do it! She’s got a hand around him. Move your hand, bitch, I can’t see...*

\*\*\*

*If the bitch wants to give me a blow job, I'm not going to disagree. No baby scares from some head.*

Bella gagged as she tried to take too much.

*Oh, fuck. I wish this was Matilda. She'd suck and I'd lick and... oh fuck.*

“See how much you want me, Jake? See?” Bella simpered as she pumped him with her hand.

“Shut up. Don't say another fucking word,” Jake growled.

*Matty... fuck. That gorgeous fiery hair loose, wrapped in my hands, tits bouncing...*

\*\*\*

“Shut... fucking word,” Matilda heard as Jake pushed his dick back into Bella's mouth.

*I can't believe I'm watching this. Turn around. Go back the other way. Give them privacy.*

*Why am I watching this? This is not my business. He's a work friend... that I occasionally enjoy thinking about doing naughty things with.*

*What the fuck is she doing? Can't the bitch even give a proper blow job? There's no rhythm to it. Faster. I would...*

Jake dropped his head back to look up at the sky. Then suddenly, he turned and met her gaze.

They both gasped.

*Did he know I was here the whole time? FUCK!*

“Matty...” he clearly mouthed. “Matilda” his lips moved without sound.

He moved with speed and rhythm, then climaxed while watching Matilda watch him.

By the time he was done, Matilda was on the other side of the path, past them, most of the way back to the building.

\*\*\*

*Holy fuck! Was Matty just standing there? Did I imagine her being there? Holy fuck!*

Bella was gagging and spitting into the grass.

“You’re not supposed to finish in my mouth! You know I can’t have those calories and it’s nasty. You know better!” She shook her finger at him as she spoke.

*I’m dumping you the moment the plane touches down in Chicago. I’m done.*

“I’m not a puppy to be scolded, Bella.”

## Chapter 14

Matilda woke up Monday morning with a sense of dread. How was she going to explain being there? Watching that? How was she even going to look at him?

In the end, she avoided the risk of seeing him at breakfast. She ordered room service. She'd see him later at the beer booth, but there would be other people around. He'd be mad, but at least he wouldn't mention *what* specifically she saw.

Room service was a new experience - it felt luxurious and overwhelming at the same time. The waiter delivered her eggs, still hot, on a literal silver platter. The fruit was ripe and sweet. There was a selection of loose tea choices and fresh-squeezed orange juice.

*Good grief. I can't imagine being rich enough to afford this.*

\*\*\*

“Can you imagine all those poor schlubs downstairs at the breakfast buffet right now?” Bella sneered.

Jacob sat at the table, counting the seconds until he would be free of her. She actually sent her egg white omelet back because it wasn't hot enough. He was often embarrassed by her antics, but now he was ashamed. Ashamed of her bad manners. Ashamed of her pampered, spoiled, bullshit. And, most of all, ashamed of himself.

He didn't love Bella. He never loved her. She wasn't always like this; he didn't always dread her company. But, they have always been more like associates than friends. He should have ended it a year ago.

Jake knew she slept with other people. About three months after they started dating, Sam had come to him with pictures and a private investigator report detailing the men

she'd been with over the last month. It was more than a few. Jake didn't care. Whatever. She was convenient, so she stayed.

Sam hated Bella from the moment he met her. It used to bother Jake. His favorite brother hated his girlfriend. He tried talking to Sam about it.

*"You don't like her. Why should I?"* Sam had asked. Jake didn't have an answer. They didn't discuss it again.

He thought about the casual ease Sam had with Matilda. Of the kiss on the forehead last night.

*Fuck. Does Sam have feelings for her? Midas doesn't date. Surely not...*

And then he thought of Matty, big eyes smiling up at him. Big eyes staring at him last night.

*I had to have imagined that. How else would she have been there? How fucking sad to want someone so much, you imagine them like that.*

How was he going to talk to her today without thinking about that?

Maybe he and Matty could talk. Really talk. He could just tell her how he felt. Convince her.

Then he thought of that night in the bar, when he'd made the pass about wiggling around together. How she blew him off, pretended like he hadn't invited her back to his place.

*She is not interested. It's just sad and pathetic that I am this stuck on her. Maybe after Bella... Bella bothers Matilda - the hatefulness upsets her. Maybe once it was done.*

"-not going today," Bella pouted.

"Huh?" Jake asked.

"Don't say 'huh?' It makes you sound like a moron. Aren't you listening?" Bella asked

"No, sorry. What were you saying?"



“I said I’m not going today. I’m not wandering around that stupid conference with dumb people.”

“OK.”

“I’m going shopping,” she said.

“Sounds good.”

“What are you doing today?”

He was surprised she asked, surprised she cared. “I’m going to the conference.”

“And we’ve agreed you’re not going to talk to that gimpy midget woman,” she said.

*Oh. Now her interest makes more sense.*

“No, we’ve not agreed on that,” Jake said. “That’s not feasible.”

“But, Jake!”

“Save the whining. There isn’t anything you can say or do. I will not ignore her. Let it go.”

“I don’t understand why you’re so stuck on this woman!”

“Well, I don’t understand why you care. Let. It. Go.”

And then he was moving toward the door as he tied the knot in his tie. “Have fun shopping.”

\*\*\*

Matilda finished eating and got dressed. She opted for her typical black slacks and blouse look. Hoopy earrings. Daytime makeup.

*I’ll leave my hair down so I can hide my face if I need to,* she thought as her face turned bright red, an ominous start to the day.

As she walked toward the elevator, she promised herself she’d never spy on anyone again.

*If I had just behaved like a reasonable, logical adult, instead of listening to my damn hormones, I wouldn't be in this mess.*

She hit the button for the elevator.

*People have sex. Couples have sex. It wasn't even sex. It was head. I'm an adult. I can be an adult about this. I'll just... not think about it.*

The elevator whirred by on its way up as she thought about it.

*No one but the family knows me here. No one would be looking for me. I can just not show up. Say I'm sick or something.*

He'd know. If she didn't show up today, he'd know she was too embarrassed and guilty about spying on him. Somehow, that made it worse. She'd see him eventually anyway.

The elevator on the right dinged. When the doors opened, Jacob was standing inside.

*FUCK!*

“Good morning. How was your night?” Jake asked with a surprised smile.

*FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK! WHY? WHY IS THIS HAPPENING? How can he look so normal and calm about this? He doesn't even seem mad.*

Matilda cleared her throat. “You didn't go down to breakfast with your family? I thought you all would be downstairs already.”

“Bella and I ate in the room,” he said, perfectly calm. “The kickoff starts in about 20 minutes, so I figured I should get a move on.”

“Ah.”

The elevator dinged again. More people got on. A sweaty man that smelled of processed meats started a conversation with Jake.

*OK. Maybe we were pretending like it didn't happen. I can do that.*

\*\*\*

As the elevator got more crowded, Matilda looked more and more uncomfortable. It seemed to be stopping at every floor.

*Maybe she's claustrophobic?*

Jake touched her hand. "You OK?"

She swallowed hard and took a deep breath. "I just don't like crowds. People don't always see me."

That made him smile. He nodded, knowingly. "Sometimes they knock you into sludge puddles."

She gave him side-eye.

"Oh, come on. It's been long enough for that to be funny."

Matilda tried not to smile. "Still not funny."

"It was hilarious. I should have taken a picture of you that day."

\*\*\*

*Why is he so fucking kind? He shouldn't be trying to distract me right now. He should hate me for being a creepy voyeuristic spying person. Why? Why is he like this? It just makes keeping distance from him harder.*

"I'll be ok," Matilda said, just to say something.

Jake was still touching her hand. He nodded.

When the elevator finally got to the first floor, they stepped off together, staying close as they walked, in step without thinking about it.

“What’s on the agenda for this morning?” Matilda asked.

“Umm, Hank will do a little talking, Sam will do a little talking, then we’ll do a panel conversation. Anything you want to ask us?” He grinned at her.

*Say something lighthearted and impersonal. Don’t fuck this up.*

“Hmmm. Does Will share his workout routine with the Rock?”

Jake chuckled a bit.

“Do you love Bella?” Matilda asked quickly.

*WHERE DID THAT COME FROM? I can’t believe I asked that. Oh, good grief. Why did I go there? We were doing so well, pretending as if nothing happened.*

\*\*\*

“I’m sorry,” Matilda stammered out. “It’s none of my business. I don’t know where that came from.”

Jake touched her hand again so she’d stop walking.

*This is it. This is my chance. It’s the perfect opening...*

He talked fast. “No, not even a little bit. I have never loved her and never claimed to. I’m cra-”

“HEY HEY! There’s my favorite Trellis kid! I want to talk to you about a line of fishing products.” A middle-aged man in glasses, a bad combover, and polka-dot bow tie barged into their conversation.

*What? No. Who the fuck is this? No. What is this guy’s name? Gary? George? Greg!*

“Hey Greg, I was in the middle of a conversation. We can talk-”

“No, it’s OK. Again, sorry Jake. That was very rude of me. I’ll see you later, OK?” Matilda looked upset as she

walked quickly away.

“Shit, man. Did you see the boobs on that hot little piece? She’s got an ass to match. Must have a bad hip or something, but I’d bang her. Those little petite ones are always wild, and she’s a redhead to boot. Yum. Sorry to interrupt, but you’re a tough guy to find during the conference.”

*I’m going to rip his head off and spike it like a football.*

“What Greg? What the fuck do you want? That was an important conversation you just busted in on. So, what the fuck is so important?” Jake demanded.

“Eew wee. My apologies, brother. I thought I saw you sitting with that hot blonde last night. I want to talk about fishing tackle. Baits, lures, lines. It’s an underserved market that Trellis could...”

*Fuck my life.*

\*\*\*

Ethan and Noah were greeting people as they came in each of the doors. When Ethan saw her, he swept her off her feet into a giant hug.

“It’s my favorite Matilda!” He laughed.

“Hi honey,” she tried to smile back.

“What’s wrong, Matty?” He asked with concern.

“Nothing, I’m fine. Just don’t like crowds.” She swallowed the lump in her throat, as she got out of the way of the crowd trying to enter the auditorium.

“Head to the front, Matty. Darla is looking for you. She saved you a seat,” Ethan called.

Doing as she was told, she spotted Will first and headed toward him. Darla was probably close to him.

*Why did I ask him that? It’s so much worse now knowing that he doesn’t love her. There’s no chance we’ll be*

*together. What a stupid thing to ask. He dates supermodels, for fuck's sake. He's in a different league.*

Jake was kind in the elevator. She had been expecting him to be angry or cruel or standoff-ish. But he was regular Jake. Always trying to make her comfortable. Always trying to make her smile. He was so easy to banter with, to be with.

It was hard not to crush on him, to wish for more. But there would be no more. They were friends and she needed to stop this.

Darla saw Matilda before Matilda spotted Darla. Darla was walking toward her with her arms up, waving enthusiastically. Matilda half-smiled again.

*Why are these people so nice to me? All of them. I thought they were just open and approachable. Clearly, based on how these crowds react to them, they don't usually mix with contractors. They must feel sorry for me. Poor disabled Matilda, no family, all alone.*

She thought back to the original rumors she heard about the Trellis family before she knew them. Were those rumors closer to the truth and she was treated differently? But, the thought of the Trellis family pitying her made her want to cry. Matilda had thought of all of them, except Bella, as friends. It hurt to think of them coddling her, and she wasn't entirely sure why.

Darla's face furrowed into a look of concern as she got closer. "What's wrong?"

"Hi Darla. Nothing at all, I'm good. I just don't do well with crowds." It wasn't a lie.

"Matilda, you look like you're going to cry."

"No, I'm fine. I'm sorry. The conference is just huge. I'm a little out of sorts. How are you?"

Darla didn't seem convinced, but she let it go. "I hate this conference. Beth and I are going to find good tex-mex and margaritas after the speeches are over. Care to join us?"

“I think I have to go to the expo, to the beer booth,” Matilda said with feigned regret. She couldn’t have a drunken lunch with Darla and the youngest Trellis right now. There were too many emotions floating through her. Too much to sort out in her brain. Plus, Bella might go to lunch, and then she’d have to deal with that nonsense.

“Where’s Bella?” Matilda asked.

“I don’t know. Not here, thank God,” Darla muttered. “I haven’t seen Jake, yet.”

“I was in the elevator with him. He’s talking to someone about fishing supplies,” said Matilda.

“Fishing supplies? Ugh. That’s ridiculous. I think they’re going to start soon. Let’s sit.”

\*\*\*

Hank, Sam, Will, Ethan, Jake, and Noah quickly gathered on stage. There were six chairs and a table lined up on the stage with them, and a presentation screen hung from the ceiling. A PowerPoint slide with the Trellis logo and the words “Trellis Industries Expo” with the current year, was on display.

The lights in the room flickered, like the start of a play or musical. People who weren’t already sitting found seats. Adrian, Luke, Bethany, Hennessy, and Matthew sat in a row with three additional seats reserved.

After a couple seated hugs and some enthusiastic hand waves, Matty was sitting between Hennessy and Matthew.

“Where’s Stephanie-Bella?” Asked Beth.

Darla shrugged. “Not here.”

There were general grunts of agreement. Beth leaned over Hennessy to talk to Matilda. “Margaritas and lunch, yes?” she asked with a smile.

*They saved a seat for me and a seat for Bella. No one else. They’ve never been anything but kind to me. Why am I*

*questioning it? They're friends.*

“I think I have to go to the beer booth,” Matilda said again.

”I think you have to go for tacos and margaritas. You don't look so hot. You OK?”

“Do one of you want to change seats with me?” Hennessy asked.

Beth hopped up. “Scoot it, hot stuff.”

Matilda raised her eyebrows at Beth. Hennessy looked decidedly uncomfortable.

Beth shrugged. “It's fun to make him squirm. It's like making Will belly laugh. You feel like you've won a rare victory against their combined premature stodgy old man syndrome.”

And that really did make Matilda laugh. Will rarely smiled, let alone laughed. Hennessy was always steady, always calm.

The lights dimmed again and stayed low this time.

\*\*\*

After the welcome presentation and panel were done, a rush of people tried to push out of the room. Matilda waited for the crowd to clear.

“Tacos and booze!” Beth cheered. “I'm starving.”

“Didn't you eat this morning? It's only 11 AM.” Matilda half-smiled.

“What's up with you, Mat? You look like someone kicked your puppy. I kinda want to find that person and punch them,” Beth said.

“I'm not feeling well. If they don't need me at the beer booth, I might go lay down.”

“What's wrong?” Jake asked from behind her.



Matilda started and turned so she was able to see both Jake and Beth.

“I didn’t realize you were there,” Matilda said. “I just have a headache. Not feeling well. I’ll go check in at the booth and then maybe go lay down.”

“You don’t need to go to the booth,” Jake said. “Gary and Ellen are there. You’re not supposed to be at the booth during the conference, other than to say hi. You’re supposed to wander the floor and see all the cool shit we’re doing, and then come up with more cool shit for us to do. That’s the point of the conference - to share ideas across the silos in our work processes.

“You should go lie down if you’re not feeling well, but can I walk with you? I’d like to finish our earlier conversation,” Jake asked.

“What? Who’s not feeling well? Oh, Matty. You have dark circles under your eyes, honey. Go take a nap,” Darla said.

“I’m fine, just tired I think. A nap and some quiet time sound good.”

“OK if I walk with you?” Jake asked again.

“Of course, but really, Jake. It’s fine. It wasn’t my business and I shouldn’t have asked,” Matilda apologized again.

“No! No. I’m glad you did. I’d like to explain,” Jake noticed his mom and sister looking on, interestedly. “Let’s walk, OK?”

As Jake and Matilda made their way through the crowd, Beth and Darla shared a look.

“PLEASE tell me that is FINALLY happening. I came close to stabbing Stephanie-Bella in the eye over dinner last night,” Beth said.

“Maybe he’ll crawl into bed with her and the shrew will be gone before nightfall,” Darla said.

\*\*\*

Jake was quiet as they made their way out of the crowd. By the time they were free of it, he wasn't sure where to start.

“What did you want to talk about?” She asked.

*She's pale. Her freckles look dark against her skin.*

“I don't think I've ever seen your hair down before,” Jake said. He wanted to slap his forehead. He was fucking this up again.

But her hair was different - a wavy, curly, vibrant orange-red mass, it fell to the middle of her back. He wanted to run his fingers through it. It couldn't be as soft as it looked.

“I don't normally wear it down. It gets in the way.”

“It's beautiful, like the rest of you,” he said.

*Did she just flinch?*

“Thank you. I've met your gorgeous girlfriend, though,” Matilda muttered.

“About that,” he stopped walking again.

When she stopped to look up at him, her eyes were glassy with unshed tears.

“Should I get Adrian?” Jake asked.

“No, I don't need a doctor. Thanks, though. Just some rest,” Matilda said.

*I shouldn't do this now. She's not feeling well and already upset. The conference goes through Thursday. We have time. Maybe I should wait until things are ended with Bella. I'm tired of procrastinating, though.*

“Matilda,” Jake started.

“Jake, can we talk later?” She asked over him.

“Yes, of course,” he replied.

“I’m sorry, I just can’t do this right now. Listening to you talk about being with Bella makes my chest hurt. I try to keep things straight in my head, but I keep getting my wires crossed with you,” she continued.

“She’s just not - a good person. But, you’ve been with her for a while. You say she’s a bitch, but you’re still with her. And then, in the garden last night...” Matilda paused for a breath.

*In the garden. In The Garden. IN THE GARDEN!  
She was there. She was actually there. Fuck my life!*

The color rose in Jake’s cheeks as Matilda got paler.

“I’m so sorry. I really didn’t mean to spy. I heard people arguing, or at least snapping at each other, as I was walking back to the hotel. I didn’t want to interrupt anyone so I was trying to see if I should walk around the long way or if I could pass through. And then it happened so fast and I couldn’t look away it was like a train wreck she’s really a terrible person and I just-”

Jake was shaking his head faster as she talked faster. “Matilda, stop. Please stop. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry you saw that. I didn’t actually think you... Anyway, I’m sorry.”

Now she was shaking her head. She opened her mouth to speak.

“No, wait. Let me just explain,” Jake said quickly.

A tear dripped down her face.

He sighed. “I’m so sorry. I hate that I upset you. I don’t mean to upset you. I know she’s a terrible person. I’m a terrible person for staying with her. It... I don’t love her. It’s a convenience thing. For both of us.”

“I’m not judging you and she’s absolutely beautiful and I get it - it’s a completely different league. But it’s hard to keep straight when you and your family are so easy to be around. I just really need a nap. So, I’m going to go take a nap. We can talk later, OK?” And then she was walking away.

*A different league? What the fuck does that mean?*

*I am so confused.*

*She was in the fucking garden.*

*I need a drink.*

\*\*\*

Five hours later, Sam found Jake sitting in a hotel bar. There were three hotel bars. Jake was in the country-western bar.

Hank had seen Jake walk out of the auditorium with Matilda. When he didn't resurface shortly thereafter, they assumed things were finally progressing. Darla and Beth came back from lunch a few hours ago, both rather tipsy, claiming Jake had been walking Matilda back to her room.

Then Matilda surfaced later in the afternoon without Jake. She hadn't seen him in hours. He wasn't answering his phone. He was not in the bar that had pool tables. The search began.

All the while, here Jacob was, working his way through a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue.

"Hey big brother, how are you?" Sam asked.

Jake was drunk. No doubt about it. He turned on his stool to look at Sam and wobbled a bit. "Hey, little brother."

*Sigh*, Sam thought. *They're making this so hard on themselves. They fit together like puzzle pieces.*

"You're going to be hurting later," Sam said.

"Samuel, you're my favorite brother. I know I'm not supposed to pick a favorite. But, you're my favorite. Except for when you're pissed. Then Noah's my favorite brother," Jake rambled.

"What happened? You were fine this morning," Sam asked.

"No, I wasn't. You know why? Because this morning I was in a hotel room with a bitch. She sent back the fucking

eggs, man. Five thousand people in the damn hotel and she bitched about her egg whites not being hot enough. The egg whites!” Jake snorted. “What an idiot. And I’m an idiot. Eighteen months with an idiot. She was in the garden, man. She saw *that*.”

“What did she see in the garden?”

“Huh?”

“What did she see in the garden?”

“I can’t tell you, man. You’re my little brother. It’s not something you tell your little brother.”

Sam paused, then smiled.

\*\*\*

“What did Bella see in the garden, Jake?” William asked.

“Huh?” Jake mumbled. His eyes were at half-mast.

“What did Bella see in the garden?”

“Ha! My dick!” Jake fell off his bar stool, passed out.

“This is why you called me, isn’t it? You didn’t want to cart his ass back upstairs on your own.” William stated. It wasn’t really a question.

Sam grinned. Will smacked him on the back of the head.

## Chapter 15

The only thing Jake remembered from Tuesday was puking. A lot of puking. Adrian was pissed off at him and told him he was lucky to be alive. Bella was pissed off at him and kept bitching. He'd ruined Will's favorite shoes, but Will thought it was funny.

*Damn, I just keep getting dumber.*

He ended up telling William and Samuel what he could remember. Sunday was clear. Monday, less so. He remembered Bella sending her egg whites back. He remembered Matty asking if he loved Bella. And then something about a different league.

"You're a fucking moron. You know that, right?" Will asked.

"Of course."

"Who dates someone for a YEAR AND A HALF because it's convenient? Especially when the sex isn't great. I assumed she was a crazy good lay for you to put up with her bullshit," Will continued.

"Meh. Water balloons." Jake made a cupping motion with his hands.

William smacked Jacob upside the head.

"I'm going to talk to Matilda. I'm going to tell her," Sam said. It wasn't a question. He wasn't asking permission.

"Sam, I'll talk to her," Jake said. "It's my life. I need to do this."

"No."

"No?" William asked.

"No," Sam said again.

William and Jake looked at each other. "Why not?" Jacob asked.

“Because you use the wrong words for everything and keep fucking things up,” Sam said.

“Who the fuck are you to talk? Actually, why am I talking to either one of you about this? You two don’t date. At all. I can’t remember Sam ever having a girlfriend. Where the fuck is Noah?” Jake demanded.

*Noah knows women. He’ll help get this shit straight.*

“Is the goal to get in Matty’s pants, or is the goal to be with Matty? Noah can be helpful with the former, he’s useless with the latter. And you know it, you fucking moron.” William was still laughing at Jake’s predicament.

“I’m going to tell her,” Sam said.

“No, let me try again. The timing was terrible. Better timing, and being rid of Bella will help.”

Sam shrugged. The gesture said *we’ll see*.

\*\*\*

While the conference went through Thursday afternoon, most people were on flights by noon. Wednesday night was typically the closing party.

Jake was playing pool and drinking water. Adrian was still on his ass about hydration.

Will knocked in a shot.

*I didn’t think he had that shot. Huh.*

Jake pretty much ran the table from there.

“Next!” He called. There was a queue of people to play against him.

Most of them had no idea how to shoot pool; they wanted a few minutes of attention from one of the family. Playing pool with Jake was easier than trying to have a conversation with Sam or getting a moment with Hank. Will, Ethan, and Noah were at the pool table with him, so they divided the queue among them.

The fishing tackle guy was next. *Gary? Greg? Greg.*

“Let me ask you this - do you ever lose, man?” Greg was ‘scratching’ his nose.

*Fucking nasty bastard. I still fucking hate you.*

“Yup. I get my ass handed to me on a regular basis,” Jake said with pride.

“By who? I ain’t seen that dude here tonight!”

“She might be five-foot-tall with shoes on and has wild red hair.”

“Bullshit! That hot little ass can’t even reach to line up a shot.”

He felt, rather than saw, his brothers bristle at Matilda being called a ‘hot little ass’.

Noah snorted. “I bet you a thousand dollars she can schlep him on demand.”

“This I gotta see!” Greg exclaimed. “You’re on, Noah. One grand.”

“Anyone seen her?” Noah asked. Head shakes all around.

A phone call later, Matilda was on her way down from her room, though Noah had failed to mention what the urgent need for her presence was related to.

That was fine with Jacob. He had been searching for her all day and kept missing her.

\*\*\*

This was either a beer-related question or an urgent need for Matilda to play pool. She was still going downstairs.

*I’m an idiot.*

Once it was resolved, she could go back to her room and try to sleep before catching an early flight tomorrow.



Matilda made her way through the hotel in a t-shirt and jeans, with basic flats and no make-up.

*Fuck it. I just want to get out of here.*

She'd spent most of today avoiding Jacob. Sam had told her yesterday that he drank himself stupid over some problem with Bella that was not yet understood.

*People don't drink themselves stupid over someone they don't love.*

Matilda had no expectation that Jake would ever stoop to getting involved with her, but she couldn't understand why he was so fixated on making sure she understood his relationship with Bella. It was none of her business.

*It's time to mind my own damn business. Time to stop this nonsense. I can't keep panting after him as I have been. He's a nice guy. I can accept that and move on.*

As she walked into the bar, she saw Will standing by the pool table.

*Figures.*

She made her way over and found Noah. "What?"

"Woo, are you grumpy?" Noah asked.

"No, I have a 6 AM flight tomorrow," she clarified.

She managed a half-smile for Will and Ethan. She didn't acknowledge Jacob at all, but she could feel him staring at her.

"This gentleman right here," he said as he smacked the fishing guy on the shoulder, "has wagered a thousand dollars you cannot beat Jacob on demand."

Matilda nodded and looked at the table. The balls were already racked. "How many rounds?"

"Best of three," Jake said.

"Break?" she asked a spot over Jake's left shoulder.

"Ladies first," Jake said with a bow.

"House rules or championship rules?"

“That’s a new one,” Jake said. “House.”

“What’s the difference?” Noah asked.

“Championship rules have more technicalities. We typically play house rules, but she’s never asked this question before. So, I think maybe we’re about to see a new trick,” Jake laughed.

“By the way, Greg. You’re going to lose a thousand dollars on this. You better not be shooting blanks,” Jake announced amid laughter from the crowd.

“Hey now, no throwing the game!” Greg yelled. “You can get distracted by her ass after the game’s over.”

Matilda turned and gave Greg a ‘fuck-off’ look.

Matilda lined up the cue ball. “Eight to left side.” Her break shot scattered the balls. The eight ball, and only the eight ball, dropped as called, in the left side pocket.

The crowd cheered.

“Where the fuck did *that* come from?!” Jake said laughingly.

“One-Zip. Rack ‘em,” she said.

\*\*\*

*She doesn't seem pissed... Withdrawn is a better word. Like she'd rather be anywhere else but here. Did Sam talk to her after all?*

Jake re-racked the balls.

“I feel like you’ve been toying with me this whole time, humoring me,” Jake said, still laughing.

“Likewise.”

*What? What the fuck?*

“Jacob! There you are, babe,” Bella pushed through the crowd.

*Fuck my life.*

“I thought you went upstairs,” Jake said, tone flat. She was rubbing her body against his side, glaring at Matilda.

“I was going to, but then I just couldn’t go to bed without you,” she all but purred as she pulled his face over to kiss him. He pulled out of the kiss and away from her, almost dumping her on her ass in the process.

“Interesting. It didn’t bother you last night. I slept on the couch. Or the night before, when I stayed in Adrian’s room, or for the last several months that you’ve been traveling,” he replied tersely.

“8 Ball Rotation, one-shot, one pocket?” He asked Matilda.

Matilda still didn’t meet his eyes, but she snorted. “Now you’re just making shit up.”

“I need to give myself a fighting chance. Each player gets one shot, regardless of whether or not you drop a ball. We play like that all the time.

“One pocket - we each pick a pocket. After the break, all our balls have to go in the chosen pocket. We’ve played that before, too.

“8-Ball Rotation would be hitting your balls in the pocket in numerical order, 8-ball last,” Jake finished explaining.

“Left far corner pocket. Break,” she said, still all business.

“I’ll take right-far-corner,” Jake said.

Matilda nodded.

*She’s tenser now. Damn Bella.*

Jake broke, dropping two solids and two stripes. “Stripes,” he called.

Matilda studied the table. Two and Five were already sunk. The one-ball was out of position. And her pocket was blocked by a bunch of out of sequence balls.

Fifteen turns later, neither had dropped a ball out of sequence, or dropped an opponent's ball. Matilda had the seven and eight balls left. Jake had eight, fourteen, and fifteen. The table favored Jake, though.

The crowd around the table had grown. People were cheering and booing at each shot.

Rather than try for the seven-ball, Matilda scattered Jake's remaining balls.

"Gee, thanks Matty," Jake said with playful sarcasm. She didn't react.

Jake took his shot, missed dropping 14, but managed to line up the 8-ball in front of the 7-ball, out of sequence in front of Matilda's pocket.

Jake grinned. "This ain't over yet."

Bella called, "Yay honey, you show that gimpy bitch who's in charge."

Jake's face went completely blank.

Matilda took a deep breath and lined up her shot.

*Is Matty just going to throw it now? She's lining up to hit straight at the pocket or bank off the rail. It'll drop the balls out of order. Fuck you, Bella. This is the best game pool I've played in years. Leave it to you to fucking ruin it.*

Matilda hit the cue ball low, sending it with force off a rail toward her pocket. It hit the seven-ball off the pocket corner, which knocked the eight ball away from the pocket. Seven and eight bounce off each other in a way that 7 knocked into the pocket. Then the cue ball finished caroming around the table to drop the eight-ball after it.

"Wrong again. We're done here. Good game," Matilda said. She handed her cue to Noah on her way out of the bar.

\*\*\*

*Gimpy bitch. Of course. Air. I need air.*

There was an exit to the back-garden patio at the end of the hallway. It was raining, but the patio was mostly covered. She slammed out the door.

She stood in the rain, arms wrapped across her chest. It felt good, refreshing. It made her feel less like she was crying and more like she was just getting wet. Someone came out the side door a few minutes after her. She didn't look. She didn't care.

“Matty -”

She shook her head without looking at him

Sam came up behind her and dropped his chin on her head. He was a full head taller than her. Matilda thought there might be a hug coming. Instead, he pulled her arms away from her body, holding them out wide with his.

“I once caught a fish this biiiigggg,” Sam said.

It was, without question, the silliest thing she'd ever seen Sam do. Absolutely ridiculous. She burst out laughing.

They laughed together, then she turned and gave him a hug. When she started to pull away, he held her close.

“I need to talk to you about something that's none of my business,” he said. “I can't watch things continue as they are. Act on it. Don't act on it. Share in it. Don't share in it. Whatever you want. I just need you to understand it, OK?”

She nodded, her head tucked into his shoulder.

*This is nice. It's nice to be hugged. There should be more hugging in my life.*

Sam's arms tightened as if he expected her to pull away. “Jacob has loved you since the day he met you.”

And then she did try to pull away. She pushed against him. “Sam, let me go.”

“Please wait,” he murmured. “I think you could use a hug. Just two more minutes. Please? For me?” His arms

loosened so she could pull away if she still wanted to. She stayed.

“I’m going to tell you what I know. Let me finish, and then you can ask me anything you want. Anything at all. OK?” Sam asked.

Matilda nodded.

Sam paused to collect his thoughts.

“I didn’t intend to become this rich. It was an accident. Processor chips, then social media, then online shopping, and now everything else. It snowballed. My family and I have more money than can be spent in ten lifetimes. None of us ever have to work another day in our lives, and we don’t have to put up with shit from anyone. We can paint with colors that don’t match, and people would call it an artistic expression.”

Matilda nodded again. Sam didn’t talk about the money. She knew he spent a lot of time and energy trying to give it away. He had reached a level of wealth where it just continued to grow of its own accord.

“Sudden wealth came with its own host of problems. Long-time friends became ass-kissers. People we didn’t know claimed close friendships. And, people crawled out of the woodwork, trying to attach themselves to us romantically. We are nouveau-riche, wealthy in the extreme, and tight-knit. People are determined to gain access to our inner family circle.

“Noah did what Noah does. He chases skirts and looks for romance that lasts a weekend - no longer.

“Ethan fell into it and got trampled by assholes a couple of times. One of them even tried to blackmail him about being gay. We’ve known Ethan was gay since he was about 11. The blackmail failed. He stays out of the social scene now, as much as he can.

“William was still in the service and removed from it. He struggles with it now, but he’s more like me. He doesn’t give a flying fuck what anyone thinks.

“Adrian was in medical school. He’s never really been into the social aspects of the money. Beautiful women make him nervous. But, he always seems to have a down-to-earth date when he needs one.

“Beth, Luke, and Matthew were fairly sheltered from it. They were still in high school and college when the money started rolling in. Now. Well. You show me the guy that’s going to pull one over on Beth and I’ll hand you my fortune. They’re pretty immune to the whole thing.

“I have never shown any interest in anyone. When pushed, I effectively shut down communication and walk away. I don’t care what other people think. I’m not inclined to coddle anyone.”

He paused for a minute, looking for the right words.

“Jake had trouble. He was too outgoing and nice to shut people down. He wasn’t interested in rotating bed partners. And he hated being chased. His solution - and I’m not saying it was a good solution - but, his solution was a long string of girlfriends that were so bitchy and repulsive, they kept the socialites and matchmakers away.

“Bella was the longest-lasting and final girlfriend in that pattern. She is the most manipulative, so she has managed to stay when he would have otherwise made her go. She’s claimed everything from a miscarriage to self-harm to keep him under her thumb.”

*She really is a horrible person. Poor Jake.*

“The evening after he met you, Jacob bounced into my apartment after work, downright giddy. He babbled on about getting thrashed at 8-ball by a tiny little redhead that fell into a ‘shit-puddle’ on her way to a meeting. He’s always so eloquent, right?

“He was radiating joy, something that I had not seen from him in years. He kept saying, ‘She was fucking magnificent, bro. You shoulda seen her.’ I asked if he asked you out. He was startled. He hadn’t thought about it. It’d

been so long since he actually dated someone he liked, he forgot that dating was a thing people did.

“The next morning, Dad walked into my office with your contract in hand and said that he’d hold the contract if I’d counter-sign. I agreed and signed off without question. I don’t know if you ever really understood the significance of Hank holding your contract. Hank doesn’t hold any contractors or have any direct reports other than you.

“There are very strict ethics guidelines in our employee handbook. Bosses don’t date people that report to them. If they do and they’re caught, the higher-ranking job is forfeit. There are very strict repercussions for discrimination, favoritism, and punitive actions.

“For Dad and me, it was never really a question of ‘if’ things would happen with you and Jake. It was a question of ‘when’. From a corporate hierarchy perspective, Hank is my peer. There is no chain of command under him. No one reports to him. He doesn’t report to anyone. He’s my dad. I can’t be his boss. My brothers report to me. Technically, at least. Hank holds your contract because no one can cry ethics foul. There’s no favoritism; no one else reports to him. You could date anyone in the corporation but Dad without issue.

“The same day I met you, just to fuck with Jake, Noah called dibs on you. I know the ‘dibs’ concept is ugly. But, there are eight of us guys, each almost exactly eighteen months apart. There were issues over girls in high school. We worked out dibs rules.

“That was six months ago? Seven? Jake’s been trying to ask you out but not push you since then. Bella keeps getting in the way. He can’t seem to shake her.

“The night we were at Connor’s, he was tipsy but not as drunk as you thought he was. The invitation to go back to his place was intentional. He pushed the drunken act a little more than he should have because he didn’t want things to be awkward after you ignored him.

“As for Sunday, well. He’s a guy and she’s a giant pain in the ass. If she was offering head, he wasn’t declining.



He didn't know you were there. He thought he imagined you there. His body was with Bella, but his mind was with you. Yes, I agree that's repugnant.

"When he realized you were *actually* there, he was mortified. I found him in the country-western bar, two-thirds of the way through a bottle of whiskey. He spent all day yesterday puking and all day today looking for you. You surfaced just long enough to shellack him - again - and for Stephanie-Bella to be the raging bitch we all love to hate.

"That's it. Longer than two minutes. Maybe more like five. I under-estimated. Your turn."

There was a long pause as Matilda gathered her snarled thoughts.

"You've been kind to me. More kind than you typically are to people. Because you think Jake likes me?" She asked.

"No. I have been kind to you for the same reasons Jake loves you. You fit naturally in our circle, our peas to your carrots." He tugged a strand of her hair.

*Carrots. Sigh. Love the ginger jokes.*

"Why don't you date?" Matilda asked.

"Oh. That's a whole thing. Before we go there, no more questions about Jake?"

She shook her head.

"What are you thinking? What are you going to do?"

"I don't know that there's anything for me *to* do. Next time I'm invited to his bed, I'll take him more seriously, I guess. Maybe scratch the itch and move on."

"Scratch the itch? Really? Before this minute, I would have sworn you had real feelings for him, too.

"I'm not sure what to say to that. Up until now, I have fought off serious crushing on him because he dates a fucking supermodel. No one goes from that to a tiny ginger 'gimpy bitch.' I've struggled with keeping things straight in my head.

Same as I told him the other day. It's a completely different league, and I'm trying to remember my place." Matilda swallowed hard.

"There were a lot of things extremely wrong in that statement. Most of all, though, I can't decide if you're just lying to me or also lying to yourself. Either way, I suggest thinking over the last several months with this new perspective. No other questions?"

"Do you guys call me a gimpy bitch?"

That made him laugh. A true laugh that rattled his chest. "No. Don't be neurotic about Stephanie-Bella being a bitch. She's an ugly person in disguise."

"Are you going to tell me why you don't date?"

"I will. Do you need to sit?" He asked.

She shook her head against his chest. This was easily the longest hug she'd ever had.

"This is not known outside my immediate family, so you'll keep it to yourself? Not even Ellie and Charlie?"

"I promise," Matilda said solemnly.

It was Sam's turn to pause and take a deep breath. "I have dreams when I sleep.

"Sometimes nightmares where the world is burning around me because I've done something wrong. People are suffering and dying because I haven't done something. The land is destroyed and the oceans are boiling.

"Sometimes nightmares where all the air is gone. People are gasping and dying around me, begging for help, and I can't help.

"Sometimes, dreams where everything is in balance and right. I've done everything right. The world thrives around me.

"I dream about walking through houses with different views out each window and fireplaces burning without fuel.

“I’ve had these dreams since I was young. Very young. Darla says I would talk about fire in my dreams as soon as I could talk.”

“That is absolutely horrible. No wonder you don’t sleep,” Matilda said.

He nodded. “They’ve done sleep studies and scans and all that crap. There’s nothing abnormal.”

“When I was about twelve, I started dreaming about a little girl with true black hair and pale lavender eyes. Now, you’re going to tell me that lavender eyes are impossible and I know that. Nonetheless, lavender eyes.

“She was maybe four or five at the time. We would play hide and seek in a tavern. There was a double gauge shotgun under the bar that she’d point at and shake her head, as if to say ‘we don’t play with that.’ There was a picture of Wile E. Coyote over a fireplace that burned without fuel. She never talked. Even then.

“When I travel, I visit every tavern I can find. I have been in every last tavern or bar in Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa. I haven’t found the bar yet, but I keep looking.

“As I’ve aged, so has she. When I see her now, we’re in a forest. She holds her head like it might fly apart if she lets go. She cries bloody tears, screaming without sound, then explodes into flames.

He paused for a few heartbeats.

“Anyway, I can’t find her. I know this sounds nuts. That’s why I don’t tell people this. But, when I sleep, I’m either with her, on fire, out of air, in a house with changing views, or in a peaceful world. Those are my options. So, I look for the girl, I buy every piece of land I can find, and I invest heavily in ideas that might improve climate change.

“I have tried dating and being intimate with women I find interesting. It just feels wrong. Wholly wrong. Foreign. Akin to hurting a child. So, I don’t do it. And I sleep as little as possible.

“When I go too long without sleep, it’s like the day we met. I’m there but not there; it’s a feeling of ‘otherness’. I see some things very clearly and miss others. Everything is hazy, but I feel more of what people truly are. What they feel. Sometimes I feel it whether I’m rested or not. I felt Stephanie-Bella’s ugliness immediately.

“The day we met, I felt your sorrow when I asked about your dad. I felt your sense of being alone, your surprise when I asked about your CP, and the little spike of joy that came with seeing Jake.

“I hold to what I said then. Use your colors without fear. You are welcome among us. And you can call me.”

Matilda smiled. “What were you waiting for that day? You said you were waiting for something before you went to sleep.”

“Did I? Hmm. Maybe you. I’m not sure. That day, though, I got eighteen hours of the world at balance. I woke up wondering about the girl.”

“What if she’s not real?”

“Then she’s not real. I’ll be everyone’s favorite uncle, just like I’m everyone’s favorite brother.” He grinned.

“You believe she’s real?”

“Yes. I know it.”

“What about the rest of it?”

“I don’t know.”

\*\*\*

Exactly twenty-two hours later, the Trellis Industries private jet touched down in Chicago.

Jacob interrupted Bella in mid-sentence.

“We’re back in Chicago. Bella, I don’t want to see you again. Ever. This thing between you and me is over. It’s not healthy. I’m ashamed it went on as long as it did.”

No one on the plane moved. Bella sat next to him, completely startled, mouth agape.

“Jacob, how can you say that? We have-”

“We have nothing. I’m saying it because it’s true. We’re through. You do whatever it is you need to do for closure. You don’t have anything in my apartment - we never visit my apartment. I don’t know what I have in your apartment, but I don’t want it back.”

Her eyes started filling with tears.

“Save the waterworks. They won’t help. It’s over. We’re done. I’ve transferred \$250,000 to your bank account to ‘see you through’ and guarantee you have no reason to ever reach out to me again. Lose my number. The town car waiting is for you.”

“Jake, I lov-”

“No. No, you don’t. You never have. Just as I have not loved you. If you think this is love, you’re seriously fucked in the head. I don’t doubt you love the money. But, it’s done.”

Jacob could see the anger and maliciousness simmer to the top of her emotional stew. “You’re a lousy lay. I’ve fucked a hundred guys while we’ve been together and you were too stupid to know it,” she spat at him.

“Then be glad to be done with me. You’re the one that’s begged and lied to stay together all this time. And I knew, Bella. I knew before Sam handed me the PI report three months after we started dating. I just didn’t care.”

When the plane door opened, Bella stormed out. Her suitcases were the first out of the luggage hold by design. She grabbed them as the driver came over to help her. She slammed the car door and was gone.

The rest of the Trellis family hadn’t moved. They all sat, staring at him.

“You know, when you said you were going to dump her the minute we touched down in Chicago, I didn’t think you

meant the *actual* minute we touched down,” William was full out laughing. “That had to be the best thing I’ve ever seen. Did you see her try to move those stupid suitcases?”

The family erupted in laughter.

“Well, that’s done,” Sam said.

Jake sighed in relief.

## Chapter 16 - December

Life used to be less complicated.

*Leave it to a bunch of damn billionaires to fuck me up.  
Rich people and I just don't mix well.*

Sam laid everything out at the conference and then left Matilda to deal with it on her own. Left her to decide what she wanted to do. In the end, she did nothing.

What was she supposed to do? He was dating a fucking supermodel. Matilda couldn't compete with that. Heartache was destined to follow if she tried.

Plus, Jake said it himself. Bella served a purpose as arm candy.

Matilda was many things. Arm candy wasn't one of them. Short and awkward with her limp, how could she possibly stand next to six-feet of dark-haired, soft brown-eyed perfection and expect to be anything but a joke?

She'd spent a fair amount of time studying his various bits and pieces over the last several months. He was damn near perfect. Long-limbed, with wide shoulders that had at least some muscle to them. Lean torso, tapered waist.

He had looked *really* good in the suits at the conference. Jake in a suit was delicious. Jake in t-shirts and jeans was better. More approachable.

*He looked really good getting a terrible blow job, too.  
From the supermodel girlfriend he hates. Don't forget that.*

"You're doing it again," Ellie said.

"Sorry, Ellie. I'm sorry. I know. I'm trying. I really am," Matilda said.

"Just so we're clear on this, I think you're a fucking idiot for not going for it. Prince Charming deserves a phone call, Matilda."

“It’s not going to leave me anywhere good in the end, Ellie. When do you leave for Charlie’s parents?”

“Day after tomorrow. We’ll be back after the new year,” Ellie was staring at her. “Are you going to Christmas at their house?”

“No. I just. Can’t. Eric and I are going to do a Christmas movie marathon,” Matilda said.

“I really wish you’d stop avoiding Jake. If you talked this out, maybe you wouldn’t feel so angsty,” Ellie suggested for the eighth time.

“What am I going to say?” Matilda asked.

“Here’s my suggestion: ‘Hey Prince Charming, your brother said you have the hots for me. Let’s get sweaty and slippery together because I’ve been flying solo thinking about you for the better part of the last year’. Or, something similar.”

“And then?”

“Then what?” Ellie asked.

“I’d have to follow it up with ‘Don’t worry, I won’t say anything to your absolutely fucking perfect bitch of a girlfriend.’ Oh yeah, we keep forgetting about that.”

“I’m pretty sure her ass would be kicked to the curb in a hot minute, babe. Honestly.”

\*\*\*

“Is she coming to Christmas?” Jake asked.

“Nope,” Sam replied. “Probably you should call and talk to her, like a fucking adult. I said all the hard stuff already. Own it, bro.”

“That’s the fucking problem, Sam. She’s actively avoiding us since you told her. She’s not fucking interested, and now there’s no going back to being friends.”

“Were you ever really just friends, Jake? It’s time. Be honest with yourself. There was no ‘friends.’ Ever.”



“She doesn’t want to see me.”

\*\*\*

It snowed on Christmas Eve. Eric stayed at Matilda’s apartment, drinking good whiskey and eating homemade pizza while watching a movie marathon.

The current movie was another adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*.

“I like the Colin Firth one more,” Eric mused.

“That’s because Colin Firth is delicious,” Matty said with a smile.

“It’s true, he is. But Emma Gracen is much better in this version as Elizabeth than what’s-her-face in the Colin Firth one,” Eric said.

“Emma Gracen is good in literally everything. She’s like Sam. Anything she touches is going to be amazing,” Matilda said.

There was a pause. *I mentioned a Trellis again. Fuck.*

“Should we change Jake’s nickname to Darcy? Is that more apt than Prince Charming? He’s kind of a bumbling idiot that doesn’t communicate well,” Eric wondered.

“Ha! I hadn’t thought of that, but it’s true,” Matilda said.

“You know the story ends the same way, right? Darcy and Charming both sweep the lady from her feet, riding off into the sunset to live happily ever after,” Eric said without meeting Matty’s eyes.

This was Eric’s way. Gentle prodding to get to the heart of things. Matty wondered how long he’d been waiting for the opening.

“Lucky lady, I’m jealous of that bitch,” Matilda said with a smile.

“Honey, right now, you’re passing on being that bitch,” Eric said quietly.

“I’m more of an ugly step-sister than a Cinderella, Eric. That glass slipper isn’t going to fit.”

“More Jane than Elizabeth?” Eric asked.

“With my luck, more like stupid, spaztastic Lydia Bennet than Elizabeth Bennet,” Matilda tried to smile.

“That might be more appropriate than you want. Lydia’s own poor choices and ignorance led to a hard life,” Eric pointed out.

They fell silent for a while. Eric pretended not to notice Matilda wiping tears away.

Moving to a lighter topic, he said, “Could you imagine going through life as Emma Gracen. Holy fuck, she’s beautiful. I’m as queer as a three-dollar bill. Given a chance, I’d probably go for her.”

“Most beautiful woman of the year, for the third year running. I don’t ever remember them naming the same person more than once.” Matty said.

“That honey-colored hair with starburst blue-green eyes. She’s funny, too. Cracks me up on Saturday Night Live. I love it when she sings,” he said.

“She’ll probably be Jake’s next girlfriend,” Matilda said.

Eric pulled her closer. “I don’t think so, babe.”

“What are we watching next?” Matilda asked.

“Something Colin Firth-y?” Eric asked.

## Chapter 17 – March

It was raining again. It rained more often than not when Matilda had beer meetings. She hadn't seen the beer team in four months. They were at the point in the project where everything was in motion - no more planning to be done. They had phone calls rather than meetings. Emails were sent rather than presentations given.

The branding was done. Aisling na Meala was brewing with Connor's oversight. Connor would monitor the brewing process for the first year to ensure the quality of the product. This project was almost done.

Today's meeting was with the advertising agency that would promote the beer regionally, then nationally. It was out of Matilda's depth. She was a strategist, not an advertising creative person. She'd heard of the creative director that would be leading today's presentation. He had a reputation for being brash and sexist.

*Ha. That'll be fun to watch with the Trellis men.*

The Trellis men. That's how she needed to keep thinking. They're a group. She would think of them as a group. Matilda was not going to think about Jacob in any other setting than work. They worked together. He was a client. Like Sam. Like Noah, Ethan, and Hank. Everything else was bullshit.

*He's dating a supermodel that gives terrible head.*

"No, Matilda. No," she told herself out loud. "That's none of your business. You need to be professional. Calm. Cool. Detached. He's a client. No more fantasies. There will be no relationship there. There is no future with him." She nodded her head at herself in her bathroom mirror.

*There could be a 'right now' with him. One good romp, and be done.*

"No, Matilda. You're better than that. You deserve better than that," she told herself out loud.

*I'm not better than that. I think that would be pretty fucking fantastic. I just can't get attached. That's all. It won't work as a relationship... but, fuck-buddies? Maybe. Can I do that?*

She smacked herself in the forehead. “No, Matilda. No. Stop thinking about this,” she told herself again. There was a red mark on her forehead. Great.

*Sam said Jake likes me. OK, Sam said Jake loves me, but Sam was overstepping. Jake wants in my pants. That's not a bad thing, right? A great fuck or two, and we just won't take it any further. I can do that. Sometimes people do that. I just haven't done that.*

“Ugh. You're dumb,” she told herself. “He's dating a supermodel.”

*Still... I'm going to wear a skirt today. I want to feel pretty and girly. Just because he's with a supermodel doesn't mean I can't be pretty.*

Light makeup and delicate silver jewelry to soften and highlight. Hair pulled up and back in a pristine bun. Silky button-down blouse with large pale purple flowers loosely tucked into a black knee-length pencil skirt, black stockings, and black dressy mary-jane flats. Perfect. Pretty. Feminine.

No suit today. Suits were for fitting in with the men. Today, she was a lady.

*I feel good.*

She ordered a ride and headed out.

\*\*\*

Jake didn't sleep well the night before the advertising meeting, too busy wrangling the nervous tension that came with the thought of seeing Matilda for the first time in months.

He had wanted to call her several times. They could go out and have dinner. A proper date. But, every time he picked up the phone, he thought of her shooting pool on the

last night of the conference. She wanted to be anywhere but there.

*But, Bella was still around. Bella was a horrible bitch to her. That's over now.*

Sam told Matilda. He told her pretty much everything, from the sound of it. She didn't express any kind of interest at all in being with Jake. He hadn't called her. But she hadn't called him, either. Matilda was bold enough to call if she wanted to see him. She knew he'd come running. She didn't call. He needed to let this go. She wasn't interested.

Maybe he could talk to her. Maybe he could convince her to have dinner. Hearing it from Sam was different than talking to him.

*We'll see how today goes. I'll know what to do after today,* he thought.

Today, he'd go through the effort to look good. Today was a day for a suit. Suits were a pain in the ass. Jeans and t-shirts are much more comfortable.

*But fuck if I don't look good in a suit.*

\*\*\*

When Jake got to his office, the advertising people were already setting up in the conference room. They did a round of introductions when he said hello. He wasn't paying attention. He didn't care about these people. He didn't even care about the product anymore.

Sam came into the conference room in jeans and a t-shirt. They looked at each other's clothes. Sam smiled. "I didn't know we were dressing up today. You should have told me."

*Fuck. Now I look like an idiot.*

Hank came into the room in his usual khakis and button-down. He also smiled at Jake. "A phone call would have helped."

*Double fuck. Now I look like a bigger idiot. She's gonna know I dressed up for her and it's going to be pathetic.*

Jake yanked off his tie, undid the collar button on his shirt, and threw his suit coat and tie in his office before closing the office door.

“Jacob, your mother would be appalled. Hang that coat up,” Hank chided.

Jake glowered at him.

Ethan came into the room, took one glance at Jake, and burst out laughing.

“How do you always know?” Ethan asked Sam while handing over a ten-dollar bill.

“Fuck you both. I hate you,” Jake said with a flat voice.

Noah came into the room with Gary and Ellen.

Noah chuckled while handing Sam ten bucks. “I bet on the Deadpool riding a unicorn through a rainbow t-shirt. You suck.”

“What’s the lesson here, kids?” Sam said to the room at large.

Ellen snorted. “You never, ever take a bet against Midas.”

“Ellen’s my favorite today,” Sam said.

After taking a quick survey of the advertising people, Sam’s gaze landed on the creative director. “Ah. OK.”

The creative director jumped up to introduce himself. “Mr. Trellis, I’m Ryan Popovich. Can I call you Sam?”

“No,” Sam said, declining the corresponding handshake and walking out of the room.

\*\*\*

Matilda was the last person to arrive. She'd gotten stuck in a line at the security desk for more than twenty minutes. She texted Hank but didn't get a reply.

There were still six people in the queue in front of her when Sam took her bag off her shoulder.

"You always startle me when you do that," Matilda said as she smiled up at him.

"I don't know why it startles you. I do it every time you're carrying something," he said as he took her hand and walked toward the elevator.

"Um, it startles me because you do it before saying hello," she was still smiling.

They got on an empty elevator and headed to the 43rd floor.

"I take it Hank got my text?" she asked.

"Oh. No. Security is perpetually backed up, so I thought I'd come to get you. Everyone else is set up already."

"I'm sorry to hold things up," Matilda knew being late was not good.

"It's not your fault security is a mess right now. We need to change the process. We're doing some government work that requires additional security checks for new people," Sam said.

"A William project, I take it?"

"Correct," Sam smiled his little smile.

Before they turned the corner to get to the conference room, Sam paused and handed Matilda back her bag. "Please sit next to Hank. Let me go in first and move my laptop. Give me a ninety-second head start."

"Assigned seats?"

He shook his head. "I have a headache."

Matilda didn't know what that meant in the world of Sam, but she nodded. She'd do as he asked.

\*\*\*

Sam came back to the room alone. When he walked away from the ad guy, Jake assumed Sam was going to find Matilda. But she didn't come in with him.

*What the fuck? Where is she? She's never late, except for that time with the puddle. What if something happened?*

"She's fine," Sam said. "She'll be right here."

Sam walked around the table and sat in the chair between Jake and the ad guy. Jake had intentionally positioned things so Matilda would be sitting next to him. They could whisper little comments and make jokes like they used to do. And then maybe play some pool and talk.

*What the fuck, Sam? You know I did this on purpose. What the fuck?*

Sam turned to look at Jake with a completely blank face. "I have a headache," he muttered.

Jake glared at his brother.

*Not good. But what the fuck, man? Matilda's not giving you a headache.*

At the sound of something being placed on the far end of the table, Jake looked up to find Matilda putting her stuff down in Sam's previous spot. She was taking off her coat.

Hank jumped up to take her coat and hug her. He actually picked her up to swing her feet a bit. "You've been away too long, sweetheart," he said.

Jake sighed. Seeing her, being near her, made him feel better. Calmer. Less irritated.

*Why does Hank get to call her 'sweetheart'? That's not fair.*

Hank was doing a round of introductions. Jake still wasn't listening. He didn't know any of the advertising people's names.



Matilda made a lap of the table, shaking new people's hands and greeting everyone else.

She whomped Noah teasingly on the head. Ethan got a cheek kiss. Hugs for Gary and Ellen.

Jake was next. He jumped out of his chair and reached to hug her. Then he thought of hugging her at the conference and the result of that hug. It ended up being a weird half-hug with very little bodily contact.

His brothers were trying hard not to laugh.

*Oh. My. God. She's wearing a skirt. She's never worn a skirt before.*

She took a step back and glanced at him. "Jacob Trellis, are you wearing a SUIT? Where's the coat? Is Darla here somewhere?" She poked his collar button. "No tie, though. It's like you walked to the edge of the adult-cliff and went no further."

She grinned at him.

*Holy fuck, I'm crazy about you. I can't even crack a joke right now.*

Sam was next. He grinned at her, a true smile. "Eh, 'sweetheart'. We still haven't picked the right condescending nickname for you."

Matilda bopped his head. "Behave. We have company," she said in her best Darla tone. Sam chuckled. There weren't many people that Sam teased, and fewer still that teased him back.

She turned to shake hands with the creative director.

"Yeah, hi sweetheart. Glad you're here. I'd like a large coffee with two creams and three sugars," he said as he gave her a dismissive little wave.

There was a general pause among all the Trellis employees. Hank was so taken aback, he didn't say a word. Sam's face lost all traces of humor as he put a staying hand on Jake's arm. Even if Matilda was the office assistant doing the

coffee run for a big meeting, Trellis employees just weren't treated like that.

Ethan stepped into the awkward silence. "Ah, Mr. Popovich-"

"Call me Ryan, Ethan!" The creative director said jovially.

"Ryan," Ethan continued. "I apologize for the confusion. This is Matilda Benton, the lead strategist on this project and the person that recommended your agency. I could understand how our casual greeting and good-natured teasing would seem unprofessional. But, I assure you, she's a vital part of this team and project. If you'd like coffee, the kitchen is just down the hall. You can help yourself whenever you'd like."

"Great! Are we ready to get started?" Popovich asked.

\*\*\*

Ryan Popovich was indeed an asshole. But, his ad campaign was golden. It was going to be extremely successful. Matilda attempted a few questions as the meeting carried on. He ignored her or was condescending to the point of awkwardness.

Ellen experienced similar treatment, but it was less apparent. Matilda was called 'sweetheart', 'honey', and 'babe'. Ellen wasn't referred to by name or nickname.

Ninety minutes into the meeting, Hank called a break. Matilda stood up and stretched.

At the same time, Popovich leaned over to Sam and stage-whispered "Fuck me, the tits on that redhead are unbelievable."

Before anyone could say or do anything, Hank had Popovich by the arm and was asking to speak to him privately.

Sam also dragged Jake away, seemingly by force.

\*\*\*

Hank dragged that fucking advertising dick out of the room before Jake had time to decide on a course of action.

Now Sam was dragging Jake out of the conference room.

After being led into Sam's office, Jake wrenched his arm free of Sam's vice grip.

“ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME? ARE YOU KIDDING ME? WHAT THE FUCK ARE WE DOING IN HERE?” Jake bellowed.

“You need to calm down,” Sam said.

“I need to go rip that fucker's head off and spike it like a fucking football,” Jake replied.

“You need to calm down,” Sam repeated. “Matilda's fine. He's an idiot. Hank will address it. If he keeps being an idiot, we'll fire the agency.”

“How can you fucking say that? That fucker is disgusting,” Jake growled. “We aren't working with him.”

“Then we aren't working with him,” Sam agreed. “We can ask the agency to fire him or find a different agency. Either way, it'll be fine.”

“Also, you ponder the magnificence of Matilda's breasts all the time. He's offensive, but not alone in his musings,” Sam pointed out.

“OH FUCK YOU! I WOULD NEVER-” Jake started.

“I'm not saying you would. But I happen to remember a garden incident during which thoughts of Matilda were less than professional. I'm not saying you're anything like that douche-bag. I am saying you need to calm down. She is a beautiful woman; she's undoubtedly dealt with this before.”

After several deep breaths, Jake nodded. The two brothers walked back toward the conference room.

\*\*\*

Matty got back from refilling her tea and sat down at the table to update some notes. She was hoping Sam and Jake would be back soon so she could go visit. Like good consultants do with their clients. Not because she wanted to breathe in the scent of Jake.

*Damn. I have to stop this. He didn't even really hug me earlier. Sam overstated things, and now shit was awkward.*

Popovich sat down next to her and scooted closer.

“Matilda, I’m so sorry for the misunderstanding earlier. I would hate to think I offended you,” he whispered.

“It’s fine, Mr. Popovich. No hard feelings,” she scooted her chair a little further away from him.

“You should call me Ryan. Do people call you Matty? Matty. Such an adorable name for such a sweet little babe. I’d love to-” He was petting her shoulder.

She jerked his shoulder away. “Mr. Popovich, I’m not interested in continuing this conversation. Please go back to your chair.”

“Aww, Matty. Don’t be so cold.” Popovich put an arm around her waist and pulled her back toward himself. “We can have a great time together.”

Matilda turned and looked at him with a smirking smile. “Ryan,” she drawled, “if you don’t get your arm away from me now, I’m going to break it.”

“Mmm, I like the feisty redheads. That’s a lot of hair you’ve got tied up back there.” His hand moved to pet her outer thigh. “I want to see it wrap-”

She abruptly stood up and stomped on his instep. He shouted in pain.

Matilda turned to walk away and found Sam and Jacob standing directly behind her, both faces lit with fury.

*Fuck. They’re going to freak out.*

“Hi guys,” she said. “Just need the little girl’s room.” She stepped back out of the room.

Sam was waiting outside the bathroom door when she walked out. Without a word, he walked her to Jake’s office. “Stay here.”

Matilda nodded.

*Why is there a suit coat and tie on the floor?*

She picked them up and hung them over a chair at Jake’s table.

\*\*\*

Popovich tried to play it off as Matilda’s chair running over his foot. No one bought it.

Shortly after Sam returned to the room, Ethan suggested that they wrap the meeting early because of a family emergency.

While the conference room was clearing out, Sam picked up Matilda’s computer and put it in her carry-all.

Popovich sauntered over. “Hey, listen. Sam. I don’t know what that little bitch said, but-”

“You will take your things and leave my office now,” Sam said quietly. “When you get back to your office, I suggest bracing yourself for the coming storm. I’m going to end your career just as soon as I get a free minute.”

“Now, Mr. Trellis-”

“No, sir. I know my father took you out of this room to talk to you about ‘that little bitch’ not ten minutes ago. Don’t claim otherwise. She is a daughter to him.

“You were warned. You ignored the warning. Now you’ll face the consequences. You do not touch those who are mine. And she is mine. As dear to me as my little sister.

“Leave. Now.”

The menace was so clear in Sam's quiet voice, no one in the room made eye contact with him as he walked out with Jake.

\*\*\*

"Why are you so pissed off? Matilda asked.

"I'm not pissed off," Jacob growled.

Samuel chuckled. "Yeah, not pissed off at all."

"I don't know what I did to cause the hissy fit. If we're going to fight, I'd like to know what the fuck we're fighting about."

"Think back on the day, Matilda. You can't come up with anything that would be rage-inducing? Nothing at all?" asked Sam.

"For fuck's sake, Matilda. That asshole treated you like you were invisible for the entire fucking meeting and then all but MAULED YOU during the break." Jake roared. "You just let it fucking happen! Fifteen fucking people in that fucking room and you didn't say a fucking thing."

"And? I took care of it." Matilda said flatly. She looked to Sam for help.

Sam shook his head. No help incoming. "And now I'm leaving." And he was gone, leaving Matilda and Jacob to their argument.

"Pool?" Matilda asked. At Jacob's nod, she racked the balls while he poured two tumblers of whiskey.

"Ugh. The hard stuff? That bad?" Matty asked.

Jacob met her eyes and drank his whiskey down in one gulp before handing her the other glass.

"I'm sorry you're upset. There was nothing I could do without causing a scene." She took a sip. Maybe whiskey was the right call after all.

“You were worried about causing a scene? He could have hurt you.” Jacob watched her closely.

“Yes. But he didn’t. He got the ‘fuck off’ message. Break.”

“Go ahead.” Jacob poured another drink for himself as Matilda walked around the table to break.

As she bent over the table and stretched for the shot, she heard Jacob sigh heavily from directly behind her. She didn’t turn around. “What?” She asked as she stood straight again without taking the shot.

“When I walked in and saw his fucking hands on you today, I thought you were into it. I have never been more jealous of anyone in my life.

“And then you clearly weren’t into it. My first reaction was relief that I wouldn’t have to watch that dick touch you. Then I wanted to rip his arms off. Now I’m just fucking pissed you let it happen and didn’t say a fucking thing.

The silence was heavy for a few heartbeats. Matilda took another sip of whiskey.

“Still looking for the damsel in distress? Did you know Ellie, Eric, and I call you Prince Charming?” Matilda said with a forced chuckle.

“Really?” Some of the anger and frustration was gone from his voice.

“Yep.” She took another sip of whiskey. “I would have asked for help, Jake. If I couldn’t get away from him, I would have let you know. I wasn’t *that* afraid of a scene.”

“If I’m Prince Charming, what does that make you?” Jake asked.

“Most days, Lydia Bennet,” Matty said with a chuckle.

“You’re crossing your analogies,” he said.

“I know, but I refuse to think of myself as the ugly step-sister,” she said, heavy on the irony.

His head leaned on the top of her head, but he didn't touch her otherwise. "Why not Cinderella?"

"I didn't know," Matilda whispered. "About the jealousy. That you wanted..." Matilda took a deep breath. Her heart was racing. She wanted to look at him but thought it might end the conversation.

"Yes, you did. Sam told you months ago," Jacob said.

"I didn't believe him."

"Why?"

Silence again.

"Why?" He asked.

"I don't think I can walk well in glass slippers, Prince Charming." She took a deep, calming breath. "No one trades a leggy blonde supermodel for someone that looks like the clearance section gimmick Cabbage Patch Kid," she muttered.

Jake snorted. "At the moment, I can't think of anything I wouldn't trade to be with you. I have never, in my entire life, wanted anyone as I want you."

"How's Bella these days?" Matilda asked flatly.

Jacob paused in his thoughts. Did she not know that was over?

"I have no idea," Jake said with complete honesty. "I ended things the minute we touched down in Chicago in November. I haven't seen her since."

Matilda's posture shifted. She exhaled in a whoosh.

"Matty?"

"Hmm?" She took another sip of whiskey.

"In roughly ten seconds, I'm going to start rambling about how crazy I am about you. If you don't want to hear it, if you're not interested, walk away. OK?"

Matilda closed her eyes and took another deep breath. *I should probably hear him out on this, right?* She thought.



“You have this gorgeous slope, right here.” He ran a shaking finger up her right hip to her waist. Matilda shivered.

“Every fucking time you bend for a shot, I think about holding on to that slope where it flares to your hips. Every fucking time - from that first day on - I’ve thought about the dip and curve of your waist, about the shape of your ass and the swell of your amazing breasts.” Jake sighed.

“Sam dragged me out of that fucking shit-show meeting to remind me that I’ve spent the last year eying your body and that I can’t blame someone else for looking.

“He’s wrong. I can blame that dick for looking,” Jake gave a sarcastic chuckle.

“Remember that first day? You came in here in just your tank top after getting cleaned up. I regretted giving you that fleece. Fuck. I’ve wanted you since the day I met you dripping in my doorway.”

Jake wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her closer. She didn’t pull away.

Matilda could feel his chest moving as he breathed deeply. Could feel his breath on her neck. She shivered again. “Cold?” He asked.

She shook her head. She wasn’t cold. His hands were running from hip to waist now.

*Can I do this? She wondered. Get it out of our systems. No relationship? There’s no way this is more than physical in the long run. Can I do this?*

Another sip of whiskey. For courage. He was confessing. She could meet him halfway.

She laced her fingers with his. “That night at the conference, after the garden.” She took a deep breath and continued quietly. “I orgasmed so hard thinking about you, I almost passed out.”

Jacob went completely still, afraid to even breathe. Matilda lifted their joined hands to her lips, kissed his palm,

and then sucked the tip of his index finger before scraping it with her teeth and tugging it back to her waist.

And then Jacob's hands and mouth were everywhere. Pulling her tight to him, he kissed her neck and earlobes. His hands were in her clothes, under her shirt, gently tweaking her nipples.

When she gasped and panted a bit, his hands plunged downward, unzipping her pencil skirt and pushing it to the floor. There was a growling, groaning sound when he felt her bare skin and stockings.

When she tried to turn to face him, he held her tightly to his chest. "No, Matty. Barely keeping it together now." He was panting hard against her ear and neck, sending tendrils of sensation down her body. "If you turn around, you'll be splayed across that pool table and fucked hard, ready or not."

*That sounds good to me,* she thought.

She pulled his hands to her breasts and ground her ass against him. "I'm going to start without you if you don't get a move on," she whispered.

He ran his hand down her body, shoving her tiny panties aside to access her small, wet slit. She gasped and jerked hard against him when he brushed her clit.

One finger, then two. *Oh my God, this is actually happening.* She gasped again.

"Please Jake. Please. Please now. I need..."

And then he was gone. His hands. His body. Gone. She almost cried.

\*\*\*

A hand pulled her hair out of its bun. Matilda gasped as Jake wrapped her flaming locks around his hand and then yanked her head down to the table, fully bending her over in front of him.

Seeing her, hearing her like that. He almost lost it. Before it was too late, he slammed his shaft into her.

She came immediately, the walls of her sex pulsing around him.

“Oh my God. Oh my God. Matilda. So. Tight. Ugh, Matty, stop moving. Grinding. I have to, I can’t...”

“Jake, please now. Please. Please. Hard. Please.” She begged in a whisper.

And then he was moving in her, hard and fast, one hand tangled in her silky hair, the other holding her hips steady and safe from getting slammed into the table repeatedly.

“I can’t wait, Jake. I have to...”

They exploded together.

\*\*\*

As she drifted back to reality, Matilda looked around and whispered. “Jake! We just had sex in your office in the middle of the day. This is not good.”

“Hunh. I beg to differ. We just had an amazing, phenomenal, mind-blowing quickie in my office. In the late afternoon. Probably no one noticed.”

They stayed there, quiet and peaceful for about 30 seconds more.

The sound of a tennis ball hitting the wall came from Sam’s office. “Jesus Christ. A year of buildup to three minutes of fucking,” he yelled. “I’m oddly unsatisfied.”

“I’m going to die of embarrassment,” Matilda whispered as Jacob laughed.

A bang on the other wall. “I hate you both. You couldn’t give it two more days?! Mom won the betting pool.”

“I think we get to start the weekend early,” Jake murmured in her ear.

## Chapter 18

Jake and Matilda made it off the 43rd floor without seeing anyone. Standing next to her in the elevator, it took effort not to touch her. She stood straight next to him, looking forward.

*We'll be out of here in a minute. I can be professional until then. 45 seconds. 30 seconds.*

They walked out of the main doors of the building without pause, perfectly in step. When they got to the sidewalk, Jake realized he didn't know where they were going. He touched her arm and paused.

"Your place? Mine? Somewhere else? Hungry?"

"I don't care. Wherever is fine. Not hungry." She said to his chest.

"Matty?"

She didn't meet his eyes. She was upset. Embarrassed. He'd beat the shit out of his little brothers later.

Jake had tried to reassure her before they left his office. Some hasty dressing and a round of quick bathroom trips later, all she'd say was "I'm fine." Or, "It's fine."

"My place is closer." He took her hand and started walking. Half a block later, she pulled her hand free to adjust her coat and then stuffed her hands in her pockets.

*She can't be that embarrassed. Sam and Noah love her, it'll be fine after a little teasing.*

Three blocks later, they entered his building and hit the button for the elevator.

"Matty, they won't give you a hard time. I'll talk to them. They love you, they don't want you to be upset. I would tease the fuck out of one of them in the same situation. But, never meanly. It's a 'brothers' thing. Promise."

“OK,” she whispered as they got on the elevator. “It’s fine.”

She still wouldn’t meet his eyes. They got off the elevator in silence as Jake sensed impending doom. Something was really wrong. Was she hurt?

He let her into the apartment and closed the door behind him before taking her arm to stop her.

*A year of longing and lusting, then I rushed it and hurt her. I am the biggest asshole on the planet.*

“Matilda, what is it? Did I hurt you?” His voice was shaking a bit.

Her eyes snapped to his. “No, you didn’t. You... I... It was... amazing. I’m OK,” she said quietly.

*‘Amazing’ was a good thing, right?* He wondered.

He kissed the palm of her hand. “What, then?”

She looked around. “I’ve never been here before. Maybe a drink and a tour?”

Jake took her coat and bag. They walked into the living room, where he poured her an oversized double of whiskey.

There wasn’t much to the apartment. Jake spent very little time there outside of sleeping. Some furniture in the living room. A big TV. His bedroom stuff. Two empty rooms. He’d been meaning to get a pool table for one of the rooms, but no one hung out here. It’d be a table for him to play alone.

*Not anymore,* he thought. He looked at Matilda’s stiff posture. *Maybe.*

“There’s not much to see, but sure.” He did the tour. Maybe she just needed some time?

When they ended back in the living room, her glass was half empty and her hands were shaking.

“Mat, you’re killing me with this. Please, wherever it is, we’ll fix it.” She flinched.

“Please, tell me what’s wrong.” He said as he pulled her into his lap on the couch.

\*\*\*

Matilda snuggled in close to him, her head on his shoulder, her nose touching his neck. She sighed. He smelled so good.

*So, I’m terrible at focusing on just the physical stuff. I can’t do that. OK. Learned something new about myself,* she thought.

What was she supposed to do now? She didn’t belong here, with him. She’d eventually get crushed and be destroyed. Again.

*Just for right now. Just for a little bit, I can enjoy this,* she thought.

They sat together for a while. At some point, Jake started rubbing his hand up and down her back gently.

*How am I going to explain? He’s so kind. He doesn’t get it yet. This won’t work.*

When their breathing was relaxed and synchronized, after the alcohol took the edge off, she spoke.

“Thank you for this afternoon, for wanting me, for being you. No matter what’s ahead, I’m grateful for you.”

He didn’t say anything, didn’t move. If he hadn’t been running his hand up and down her back, she’d think he had nodded off.

\*\*\*

*God, please. I know we don’t talk often, but I try not to use your name in vain and to be a good person. Please let this be ok. Please. I love her. Please.*

“Did I tell you that my dad raised me?” She asked.

He shook his head. “You’ve never talked about any other family, though.”

“I don’t have any family.” There was weight to the words. It hurt her to say the words. “Well, I do. But not really. I have Ellie and Eric and Charlie. And then some people that share a few chromosomes with me.

“I was born so early, and then I had problems and didn’t start walking at a normal time. I had seizures as a kid. My mom didn’t adjust well. She tried, I think. But it was hard on her. Watching me struggle to thrive had to have been hard on her.

“She made it until 3 days before my first surgeries. I wasn’t even two.

“‘Disability’ wasn’t something she could process. It didn’t fit in with her worldview. She came from money and was very sheltered. I was just a little too real. Too hard. Too permanent. Too ugly.”

“Wrong word,” he said quietly.

“No, not really,” she disagreed. “There are scars. And, as a kid, I didn’t move well. The limp was much more pronounced. I had some trouble with my hands.”

He wouldn’t argue the point. He wondered about the scars and wondered what was going on in her mind. “Scars aren’t going to bother me, Matilda.”

*Well, physical scars aren’t going to bother me,* he mentally corrected. It seemed likely emotional scars were fucking up his day.

She shook her head.

*OK, not the scars...*

In all the time they spent together over the last year, Matilda had never once mentioned her disability. She didn’t talk about it. This had to be a hard conversation for her.

Jake turned his head and kissed her temple. *Please, God, I love her...*

“So, it was my dad and me.”

He hugged her tightly to himself. *Please God...*

“My dad was a lawyer then but he knew he couldn’t do the single parent special needs thing and practice law. So, dad quit his job and bought the bar. He was available all day to be with me and then worked at night. We lived in an apartment above the bar.

“I had 15 surgeries throughout my childhood so I could walk. My gait isn’t great, but I’m mobile.”

“You’re magnificent.” Jake breathed. The thought of her going through that, being in pain, made his chest tight.

\*\*\*

She kissed him. A real kiss on the lips. They hadn’t really kissed before. She wallowed in the luxury of exploring his mouth, of tasting him.

*I can pretend, just for now, that we can have this. Then he’ll see and that’ll be it. Soon, but not yet. I can have just a little bit more time.*

This was going to hurt, but she had to make him see. It would just get more difficult, more painful.

\*\*\*

Jake kissed her back and tried to convince himself it didn’t feel like a goodbye kiss. *Please...*

“I did well through high school, got accepted at Northwestern. He was so proud. I met Ellie, then Eric. I was finding my way.

“I had two months left in my senior year when my dad was shot in the chest and killed over a \$28 bar tab.”

*Fuck.* He knew her dad was dead. He didn’t know her dad had been ripped out of her life. The thought of losing



Hank like that brought tears to his eyes.

“I lost some time after the police came to Ellie and me. I’m pretty sure Ellie planned my dad’s funeral. I don’t remember.

“The bar was a crime scene for more than a week. Ellie and Eric paid for a service to come in and clean up the blood. Did you know there are services that specifically clean up crime scenes and suicides?”

Jake shook his head. A few tears slipped down his cheeks. *Note to self: buy Ellie and Eric everything they could ever want.*

“After it was done, Ellie, Eric, and I went to clean out the apartment and found my graduation gift.” Matilda choked back a sob.

“It was a black leather carryall with shorter straps for my small frame. My initials were on a gold inlay. I only used it for special occasions because it was dear to me. You’ve seen it. It was ruined the day we met.

Jake sighed. He kissed her forehead.

She tucked her head back on his shoulder and fell silent.

“Can I help?” He asked.

She laughed. A real laugh.

“Hmm?”

“You must think I’m nuts. And you’re still trying to help me. You keep offering me help when there’s nothing to be done. You’re such a good person, Jake.”

He kissed her temple again. *Please, God...*

After a few minutes, she took a deep breath and let it out.

*Here it comes, he thought. We’ll fix it. Whatever’s coming. We’ll work through it.*

She started talking again.

“My mom came to my dad’s funeral. She said she hoped that we could get to know each other as adults. I couldn’t process it at the time, but I reached out to her several months later.

“She lives on the Gold Coast. She’s been within easy distance my entire life. She didn’t come to see me, not even for birthdays or Christmas.

“But, she was the only parent I had left. The only family I had left. My dad was an only child, and his parents died when I was a teenager.

“We had lunch a couple of times. She had remarried years ago. I have a couple of half-siblings that are three and four years younger than me. I’ve seen pictures, but haven’t met them.

“She’d talk about them over lunch. Where they were going to school. What they were planning to do when they finished. They were both deep in the family fold.

“I google them every once in a while. My brother is angling to take over the investments firm my grandfather built. My sister doesn’t work. She’s a socialite now, about to marry an investment banker that works for my grandfather. I’m not sure if they know I exist.”

Matilda looked into her empty glass. “More?” Jake asked.

She shook her head and reached to put the glass on an end table.

“When I asked to know them, my mom kept hedging. They were very busy, very focused on their studies. I kept bringing it up. I have so little family, I’d like to know them.

“Eventually, she made noises about me being better off not knowing them. She said I wouldn’t be comfortable with them. They are able-bodied, with no disabilities at all. She didn’t want me to feel bad in their company.

“I told her it wouldn’t bother me. I honestly thought she just didn’t know me well enough to understand that. The

disability is just part of who I am, I told her. I didn't think about it anymore than having freckles.

“I was foolish. More foolish than showing up to a meeting after being dumped in a sludge puddle, and that was fucking idiotic.”

Jake tried to smile. She wasn't looking at him, she didn't notice it was more of a grimace than a smile.

*Sam and I are going to find these people and make them regret this neglect. They will beg for her attention.*

Jake might not have enough money to make them squeal on his own. But, there were only a few people on the planet richer than Sam. *Midas will fucking strangle these people.*

“I didn't catch on and kept questioning her.” He hugged her again.

“In the end, she bluntly told me that I'm not welcome with her family. It was nice that we had lunch occasionally, and she was impressed with what I'd made of my life. But, I wouldn't 'fit in' with the family. My disability... I would embarrass them in society. I couldn't be involved in that part of her life.”

Jake tasted a rage so violent that he could not breathe.

\*\*\*

Jake stopped breathing. He understood.

*He sees it. He had not thought that far ahead. Maybe the sex could still happen, but it'd be our secret.*

Jake tipped her head back and kissed her.

*So sweet...*

“I'm sorry, love. I'm so sorry.” He whispered.

Her heart lurched at the endearment. Then her chest hurt, knowing what was coming. “Me, too. I understand. I really do. It's just hard.” A tear dripped down her face.

She kissed his cheek and breathed in the scent of him. “I’ll never play pool again or see Scooby without thinking of you. After some time, I would like to try to be friends if you’re willing.”

*Fast, like ripping off a band-aid.* It didn’t help.

She started to untangle herself from his lap.

“What?” He asked. “What the fuck are you talking about? Matilda, STOP!”

As she was trying to untangle herself, he kept trying to hold on. The end result was Matilda falling out of Jake’s lap and landing at his feet.

\*\*\*

*THIS CANNOT BE HAPPENING. SHE CAN’T POSSIBLY THINK ... THIS CANNOT BE HAPPENING.* He didn’t see the freight train coming. He should have seen it when she said her mom’s family had money.

She wiped tears from her eyes and started to crawl away.

“Jake, I know. It’s killing me too-” she said

“THEN STOP IT! This is fucking insane. Stop. Matty, stop.”

She looked back at him with tears racing down her cheeks, half kneeling on the floor. She had paused in standing up when he bellowed at her. “It’s better this way. It doesn’t seem like it now, but it’s only going to get more painful.”

Jake slid off the couch and grabbed hold of her. He pulled her back to the floor. She tried to yank herself away, but he had more than a hundred pounds on her.

“You cannot seriously believe that I’d be embarrassed to be with you! You cannot think that. What have I *ever* done that would make you think that?”

“Jake, stop. Let go of my arms.”

“Not until you promise to stop this nonsense.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do! Stop being a jackass. Get off me! You’re just making this harder.”

“MATILDA, STOP. STOP SQUIRMING.” He roared.

She stopped moving.

Jacob was breathing hard and trying to get a grip on his temper. “Matty, I love you. I love everything about you that makes you who you are. I am not embarrassed to be with you. You’re the most beautiful person I’ve ever known.”

Her hair was getting wet from the tears leaking off the sides of her face. “Jake, don’t. I’m trying to do what’s right. We *can’t* do this.

“Think about Bella,” she said. He flinched at the mention of Bella.

*WHY IS SHE TALKING ABOUT MY BITCHY EX?!  
WHAT THE FUCK IS HAPPENING?!*

“Think about Bella,” she said again. “Think about why you stayed with her for so long. You didn’t even like her, but you stayed with her. She was arm candy, remember? Remember that conversation? You need a date for social events. That can’t be me. We both know that.”

“WE don’t know that. I very much disagree with what you’re saying.”

“You’re not thinking clearly. And even if you are serious, the novelty of being with me will wear off over time. You’ll be ashamed to be seen with me eventually.”

“I am not ashamed of you. I could not be ashamed of you.”

Words weren’t working. He could tell words weren’t working. He wasn’t finding the right words. He was failing. He was failing her. And he was panicking.

*I have to do something. I have to do something. I don’t know what to do. She’s going to leave. She can’t leave. She won’t come back. I have to do something.*

He shifted his hips a bit to pin her with his body. Letting go of her arms, he propped himself up on a forearm, then turned her face toward him and kissed her.

*She's not fighting me...*

It was a forceful, possessive kiss, meant to surprise her. When she gasped, his kiss drifted to her jaw, up to her earlobe, and then down to the sensitive spot where the neck joined the shoulder.

Her pulse was beating chaotically. He shifted his hips again so she could feel exactly how much he wanted her. When her hips lifted to meet him, he moved against her. They both groaned.

He kissed her again and aligned the thrust of his tongue with the shifting of hips.

“Jake...” she murmured.

*Not like this... This is not right. She'll fuck my brains out and then walk out the door.*

He stopped all movement then picked his head up to look at her. “Do you want me to stop?”

She lifted her hips to rub against him.

“Answer me. I won't force you. Do you want me to stop? Do you want me to get off you?”

“No, I don't want you to stop.” She whispered. “We can pretend for a little bit longer. It's OK.”

*FUCKING FUCK FUCK FUCK FUUUUUCKKKK!  
FUCKITY FUCK FUCK.* How was he going to fix this? She'd decide they 'pretended' long enough and then leave.

“Promise you won't leave unless I walk you out.”

“Huh?”

“Promise. Please promise me? I don't want you to sneak out. I won't make you stay if you want to go, I just want to talk about it first.”

\*\*\*

Her eyes searched his face. He looked... Panicked. Scared.

*He hasn't thought this through, yet. He's thinking about sex. He'll think it through once he's calm.*

“OK,” she said.

“Say it,” he demanded.

“I promise I won't sneak out.”

He kissed her again, kissed her face, kissed her neck.

She started undoing the buttons of his shirt. He pulled it off over his head and took his undershirt with it.

He pulled at the buttons on her shirt. They popped free of the fabric like little pieces of popcorn.

*Fuck.* It was one of the only button-down blouses she had that fit over her boobs without gaping.

Her satin and lace bra was now visible and doing nothing to hide her erect nipples.

He sucked at each nipple through the bra. She jerked against him when he bit down on one and then the other.

“Jake... please...”

Jacob chuckled as he pulled her free of her bra. “So polite when orgasms are at stake.”

“Don't be a dick, Jacob.” She was short enough that she could bend to lick his nipple, even though she was pinned at the hips. He groaned.

This was going to turn out badly in the end, but holy fuck it felt good.

She finally got to run her hands over his shoulders. They were as defined and smooth as she had imagined. She dug her fingers into the tense muscles around his neck.

When she nibbled at his nipples again, he growled: “Behave yourself or fun time is going to be less fun.”

As she laughed, he shifted up to his knees and unzipped her skirt. He met her eyes as he yanked the skirt over her curves and down to her legs.

\*\*\*

“Of all your very interesting curves, these are still my favorite,” he said as he put his hands on the flare from her waist to her hips.

In a blink, he was on his feet. Jake bent over and scooped her up.

“I’m going to require some additional information, Matty,” he said with a grin.

She laughed when he tossed her on the bed and then followed her down. She tried to scoot for a position with more access. Jake wasn’t having it. Wandering hands might ruin fun time.

With a bit of shuffling and some wicked squirming on Matilda’s part, they ended up in roughly the same positions they held on the living room floor. He kneeled around her legs and pinned her hips with his hands.

“What information do you require, sir? And you seem to be overdressed for this occasion.”

*Pants muffle wandering hands. And lips. And glorious breasts.* He gave himself a mental head slap. *Back on task, Three-Minute Wonder.*

“Well, first, I’d like to understand these incredible stockings,” he said while running his hands up and down her outer thighs.

“Ah. My hips are too wide.”

“I beg to differ,” he said with a grin.

“If I buy nylons that fit my hips, they’re way too big in the waist and loose in the legs. I spend all day tugging them up.



“If I buy nylons that fit everywhere else, they’re too tight over my hips and ass. They inevitably get torn or pinch parts that shouldn’t be pinched.”

He ran his hands over her ass before massaging a spot on each of her hips.

*Are these birthmarks?* He looked more closely. Scars. They were faded old scars. Barely visible, but a different texture than the rest of her smooth skin.

She was tensing up. *Moving on...*

“Ah. Let’s talk about this little triangle of fabric and the connected floss. What purpose do these panties serve? There’s nothing to them.”

This question was more difficult to answer, as hands wandered around her upper inner thighs. She shifted, trying to encourage the hands to drift higher.

“Don’t rush fun time, Ms. Benton.”

“Mr. Trellis, tardiness is frowned upon.”

He grinned. “Answer the question, please.”

“They’re incredibly impractical, but they make me feel good.”

“They make you feel sexy?”

“Yes.”

He pulled the little triangle of fabric back and forth over her sex. “And now? What do you feel?”

She panted a bit. “Umm. Ready.”

“Well, that’s not the answer I wanted. It was much too sensible and didn’t involve bucking against me or gasping my name.”

He ripped the silly panties away.

“Oy! First the shirt and now the undies.”

He bent forward and kissed her. “I’ll make it up to you.” Then he sat back up.

“Next question?” She asked.

He pulled her knees up and forward, pinning her feet between his knees. Then he spread her legs wide open.

“OK?” he asked.

“I’m feeling a little exposed.”

“Mmm. You are. Painful?”

She shook her head.

“If I dropped my pants and shoved my dick in hard and fast right now, would you orgasm again immediately, like before?”

“I don’t know, we could try it and find out.” She said with a smirk.

“Mmm. I have plans. Don’t rush fun time,” he smirked back. “What is your personal best for the number of orgasms during one fucking?”

She raised her eyebrows at him.

“I intend to crush the record, so I need a goal.”

“Does another person need to be involved in the session?” She asked.

“Ungh. Don’t rush fun time. Yes, with another person.”

She blushed against his white sheets.

“That many?” He asked.

Matty shook her head. “You hold that record already.”

“Oh, sweetheart. So neglected.”

“I had no idea I was exposed before a multiple orgasm sex god. How many orgasms have you inspired in one fucking?” She asked, eyebrows raised.

“I make no such claim. But you came twice in the quickest fucking of my life. You’re capable of so much more.”

“I have untapped orgasm potential?” She asked with feigned hope.

“I believe in you, Matilda,” Jake said with a chuckle.

“You didn’t answer my question,” she said. “How many have you inspired?”

“Hmm. Not many. I have never loved anyone the way I love you,” he said. There was no hesitation. Maybe the raw truth would help her understand.

“With other women, their pleasure was in the periphery to mine. I tried to make sure things went well, but whatever happened was fine. I think maybe a couple; I didn’t count. Anyway, we’ll crush that number easily.”

“So confident?”

“Well, tell me how this feels.” She was completely unprepared for him to gently drag his thumb around and across her clit.

“Ahahaha,” she gasped while her hips moved against his finger.

“Hmm. Closer,” Jake said.

And then a finger was in her, looking for the right spot. It found it. She was very close to coming again.

“Jake... ” Two fingers stretched her as his thumb still rubbed slowly.

“Jake, please... “

“Please... I want... I need faster.” Her eyes were closed. She was panting hard.

*Just a little more, love...* He wanted it to build just a little more. His thumb slowed.

“Well, that’s not it either. Close, but not frantic enough.”

“JAKE!” she yelled in frustration as his thumb stopped stroking all together.

She exploded as his tongue replaced his thumb.

Watching her roll through her orgasm was fuck all hot, but feeling her clench around his fingers and tasting her on his

tongue made his dick painfully hard.

Fun time was definitely going to get rushed.

He stopped to wait for her to wind down. Just as she caught her breath, he put her knees over his shoulders and lifted her sex to his mouth.

Matilda bucked hard against him. She came quickly as he tweaked her nipples and licked the right places.

When she slowed down again, she threw her legs wide and sat up, reaching for Jake's pants. His dick was so swollen, it was difficult to unzip the fly. "OFF!" She demanded.

Jake chuckled as he stood to remove pants and underwear. Before he could get the pants off his legs, her mouth and hand were around him.

*My mother's birthday is on July 1st. My little sister is 23. My grandmother liked lilies. 64 times 3 is...*

"Matilda, I need to be fucking you. Right now. Fun time is over." He was biting his inner lip for control.

And then she was spread before him, legs dangling off the bed while he stood there with his damn pants around his ankles.

He tried to go slow. She was wet, but also tiny and tight. But then she came on the second stroke. And the third.

She grabbed his arms to leverage herself up, then kissed him as she came down from cloud 9. Or cloud 4.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and said: "If you're not going to go faster, lay down and let me drive."

Jake laughed. With her arms around his neck and legs around his waist, he stood up straight and started shifting Matilda up and down the length of his cock.

"JACOB! OH MY GOD!"

She was just one long rolling, nonstop orgasm now. He brought her back to the bed and slammed into her once more before letting loose.

When he landed back in reality, he was standing, bent over her, at the edge of the bed with his pants still around his ankles.

He laughed. He laughed so hard tears dropped from his eyes. Matilda looked confused. He pointed to his pants.

“That’s just ridiculous,” he said.

## Chapter 19

Matilda woke up to the sound of running water and an empty spot next to her. She felt like she had a particularly long, hard work out immediately after having the flu.

*The workout is true enough, she thought, but the flu makes no sense.* Then she thought about the whiskey. And the crying.

*Self, you are so fucking stupid. This is going to break you. Ellie and Eric and Charlie are going to have to put you together again.*

As she shifted out of bed, she realized she had on nothing but her stupid stockings. She had no idea what time it was, but certainly, time for the stocking to come off.

Naked as the day she was born, she peeked around the partially open bathroom door. Jake's bare ass was bent over a bathtub built for two. He was adding something to the water that smelled fresh, and a bit like muscle balm.

"Hi," she said over the sound of running water.

Jake turned and smiled at her. "Hello, love. How are you?" Eyebrows raised.

She tried not to flinch at the endearment. "Mmm. Good, I think. Maybe a little hungover. Muscle weary - too many orgasms."

"No such thing. You just need more practice."

*That grin. Ugh.*

She turned to walk down the hall.

"Where are you going? You're scheduled for this nice hot bath, you know." His voice was just a bit tense.

"Where could I be going bare-assed naked?" She called.

“I don’t know, but I’d like to follow you. The view is magnificent.” He smiled.

She stuck her head back into the bathroom. “I have to use the little girl’s room, and I’m not into an audience for that kind of thing. I’ll go to the smaller bathroom. Then I’m going to sift through my bag to see what kind of drugs I have with me.”

\*\*\*

He heard her walk down the hallway to the other bathroom.

*I’m 90% sure there’s toilet paper in there.*

He headed out to the kitchen to grab two bottles of cold water. Then he looked through the cabinets to see if he had any Advil.

*Huh. We’re going to have to order some food. All I have is beer, pickles, and peanuts.*

He heard her come into the room behind him. “I’m no use on the drug front. And we should order some food. The only fridge contents I can vouch for are beer and water. I don’t know where the pickles came from.”

When he turned to look at her, she was wearing an obviously confused face. “I opened the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. You have more drugs than Walgreens.”

“Huh. Well, OK. Did you find what you needed?”

She nodded.

He handed her a bottle of water, then walked down the hallway to the master bathroom to turn the water off and the tub heater on. Then he went into the little bathroom.

There were indeed all kinds of Tylenol, aspirin, Advil, cold pills, allergy pills, and other assorted things in the cabinet.

“Well, that’s good to know. I wonder if my mom did that.”

“Jake, how could you not know what’s in your apartment?” She was laughing at him. It made him a little more hopeful for the future.

“Eh, I don’t spend much time here. Most nights, when nothing is going on, I stay in a room at Sam’s. He does better with sleep when someone’s around.”

“Bath?” she asked.

“Bath! I do use the tub when I’m here. It’s like sitting in a glass of champagne.”

She snorted and laughed. “That’s not very manly of you, Jake. You’re ruining your image.”

“I’m perfectly fine with that.” He grinned again.

\*\*\*

“This is the best bath I’ve ever taken,” Matilda said.

“It’s not even a sexy bath. You need to take more baths,” Jacob replied.

She had her head tipped back and her eyes closed, resting on the edge. Jacob was facing her from the other end of the tub, rubbing her feet, ankles, and calves.

*I’ve seen all the scars now, Matilda.* He had kissed each one as he found them under the bathroom lights. *I’m not running.*

“Why isn’t the water getting cooler?” she asked.

“There’s a built-in heater. It’s why the tub doesn’t feel cold under your head and neck.”

“I’m going to pack this tub in my bag and take it home with me.”

“I’m not sure how that would work for you. Probably you should bring your home to the tub.” It was a test balloon.



*How are you, love?*

“I mean, you don’t live here,” she said. “It feels like someone should keep the tub company. I’m going to steal your apartment. It’s much nicer than mine and incredibly underappreciated.” Her eyes were still closed, but she was smiling.

“That sounds good. It can be your apartment, so long as I get to stay here, too.”

Her face tensed a little bit. “Bah. You live with Sam. What did you put in the bathwater?”

“Nope, not telling,” he said. “If you want more baths like this, I have to make them for you.”

“Huh. Shows what you know. I don’t even have a bathtub.” He could feel her stress increasing.

“You have this very luxurious tub we’re floating in right now.”

Her eyes opened. She was staring at the ceiling. Her voice was flat. “This will end badly and I will be broken. If Ellie, Eric, and Charlie don’t put me together again, I will be destroyed. Can’t you see that? If you can’t see ending this for your own good, would you think of mine?”

*Well, fuck. From DefCon 2 to DefCon 5, zero warning.*

He pulled her foot toward his chest, yanking her head off the edge of the tub and into the bathwater.

As her face went under, he yelled “FUCK! That didn’t go according to plan!” He grabbed her hand to pull her head up out of the water again.

\*\*\*

Matilda emerged, snorting water and laughing hysterically. Her red curls were a mess, stuck to her face and neck. She dipped her head back into the water up to her hairline. When she pulled her head forward, her mass of wet hair was gathered behind her.

She slapped a little water toward his face.

“I’m sorry! That wasn’t what I was trying to do.” He was laughing, too.

She slapped more water toward him. “What were you trying to do?”

“I was trying to pull you closer.”

“This is an appropriate metaphor for our relationship,” she said in a teasing tone.

Jacob’s laughter died immediately.

*I’m so sorry, Jake. We weren’t supposed to end up here,* Matilda thought.

“In your mind, is there really no hope for us?” He asked the question quietly, but it echoed in the bathroom.

She scooted alongside him and wound her fingers with his. “Let’s talk through a hypothetical. We’re at the holiday conference. You’re working through a competitive deal, where calm negotiation - not one of your many strengths - is needed. All your competition needs to do is get you fired up in order for you to lose the deal.

“We can put aside the embarrassment and shame factors. For now. In the middle of a meeting, your competitor says something snarky about your disabled girl-”

“Wife.”

“Your competitor says something snarky. What do you do?”

“This is a faulty hypothetical,” he declared. “I wouldn’t have to do anything. Will would fucking strangle the dude. Or Sam would extend the effort it takes to make a phone call to financially destroy the competitor’s livelihood.”

“That’s not helping your case. Irrational responses from your entire family sound like the fucking worst-case scenario.”

“Why? Why is that a bad thing, Matilda? Do you think their responses would be any different if we aren’t

together?”

\*\*\*

*What the fuck with this stupid hypothetical?* He wondered.

“Let’s go with your hypothetical. But, instead of making a comment about your ‘disability’,” he spat the word in frustration, “he says something about your glorious tits. Do you think the reaction would be any less intense?”

“Let’s do another one,” he said before she could answer. “Will and I are walking down the street. We see a guy grab some woman’s ass and try to back her into an alley. We don’t know her, but you know the reaction’s going to be the same.”

“Or, maybe Sam and I are getting on the L and see someone with arm crutches going up the stairs because the elevator’s broken. Or, a mom with a kid in a stroller. Or some dude carrying a stack of boxes. Or, I don’t know, a fucking lost kid, a cop chasing down a purse snatcher. Pick a scenario, any scenario.”

“The answer doesn’t change, Matilda. We are who we are. We’re not going to look at the situation and say ‘Not my problem.’”

“The hypothetical guy doesn’t get to insult my guests, no matter who he is. The dude on the street doesn’t get to grab some lady’s ass. Someone that needs a hand, gets a hand. To do otherwise would be to change who I am.”

Matilda gathered her legs under her and stood up to leave the tub.

\*\*\*

Jacob tried to say something as she toweled off.

“Please, Jake. Just a few minutes. Let me process things for a bit, and then we can talk more.” Matilda said.

He left the bathroom without saying another word.

She sat on the edge of the drained tub and cried for a solid ten minutes.

*This is not going according to plan. I don't even know why I'm crying. Stop crying. Stop it.*

She heard Jake come to the doorway and then walk away again. She heard him talking. The sobs kept coming.

Jake gently touched the back of her neck. She looked up at him with snot and tears running down her face.

*What am I doing? What am I doing? What am I doing?*

“It’s for you,” he said as he handed her a phone.

“He- Hello?” she swallowed a sob.

“Babe, what are you doing?” Ellie asked.

\*\*\*

Ellie said not to push anymore right now, so he wouldn’t push.

Ellie said to take her home and let her sleep, so he would.

Ellie said to have patience, so he’d have patience.

*God, please let Ellie understand. Let Ellie be on my side.*

*Also, when did I start praying this fucking much?*

Matilda didn’t say much after coming out of the bathroom.

“Thank you,” as she handed him the phone back.

He nodded while chanting *I love you* over and over in his head.

“Home?” he asked.

“Please.”

Jake wrapped Matty in a t-shirt, loaded her in his car, and drove to her apartment. They got out of the car together, walked to her apartment, got in the front door, and then went to bed, sound asleep wrapped around each other in minutes.

\*\*\*

It was raining on Saturday morning. Jake woke up to the sound of thunder outside. Matilda was next to him, warm and sleeping, at peace.

He untangled himself from her bed and went in search of the bathroom. After that, he went in search of food. Hopefully, Matilda actually lived here and there would be food.

Twenty minutes later, he was pulling bacon out of a frying pan as Matilda wandered into the kitchen and sat down at the breakfast bar that served as her dining room. “I was just about to wake you up,” he said.

“Good morning,” she said quietly.

“It is a good morning,” he replied as he put a plate of eggs, bacon, and a buttered English muffin down in front of her.

“Wow,” she smiled up at him. “I wouldn’t have expected you to know how to do this.”

Jacob gave a feigned gasp. “Matilda Benton, are you suggesting that Darla would raise a child that didn’t know how to make a proper breakfast?!”

“You couldn’t account for the presence of pickles in your fridge,” she reminded him.

“Well, ‘don’t’ and ‘can’t’ are two different things.” He sat down next to her with his own plate of food. “Eat. I’m supposed to have you at Ellie’s by 9:30 for ‘best friend shopping’ and I have no idea where Ellie lives.”

“Girl, you look like ten miles of bad road,” Eric said as Matilda walked in Ellie’s front door. “What is happening? Ellie is *freaking* the fuck out.”

“Is she here?” Ellie yelled from the kitchen.

“Yep!” Eric called.

“CHARLIE!”

Charlie beat Ellie to the room by about ten seconds. He came bounding down the stairs and then fully stopped three steps from the bottom when he got a look at her. “Fuck.” He whispered.

Ellie came into the room with a silver tray of teapot and settings. She flinched when she saw Matilda.

“Sit,” Ellie directed.

Matilda sat in a battered wingback chair they’d had since college. “What’s with the tea tray? Where’d that come from?”

“I bought it at a garage sale a couple of months ago. It was going to be my reciprocating birthday friend gift to you this year. But now it’s mine.”

“Oh,” Matilda said.

Everyone stared at her. She shrugged. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I don’t even know what the fuck is going on. Can someone give me the short version?” Eric said, the tone of annoyance clear. He hated being left out.

“Matilda?” Ellie’s tone was clipped.

“Eleanor?” Matty hated feeling defensive.

Ellie sighed. “Yesterday, our girl had a torrid, sexy encounter with Prince Charming and lost her DAMN MIND.”

Eric gasped. “Sorry, Charlie, but I’m going to need some details on this. How torrid, how sexy?”

Charlie grunted, an unusual sound for him. “I’m going to go make some coffee.”

Eric looked at Ellie.

“I don’t have any details on this part,” Ellie said.

They both looked at Matilda. “Spill,” Eric said.

“We had a meeting with the ad agency yesterday. The creative director was a tool of epic proportions. In short, he tried to put his hand up my skirt. I stomped on his instep, got up, and turned around to leave. Jake and Sam were directly behind me and I didn’t know it.”

“Holy fuck,” Ellie said.

“I ended up back in Jake’s office. He and Sam told me off for not asking for help. Sam left-”

“Talk faster!” Charlie yelled.

“We sort of accidentally had an afternoon quickie on the damn pool table. Then we-”

“Wait,” interrupted Eric, “Scale from one to ten?” Matilda looked up at him. “Never mind.”

“You left for nothing, Charlie. There was no talk of dick size.” Ellie called.

“I know,” Charlie said. “I was lingering in the hallway, ready to plug my ears and run when comparisons to the dildo happened. The afternoon quickie on the pool table is relatively tame.” He patted Matty on the head as he walked back to his seat with his coffee.

“Then what happened?” Eric asked eagerly.

“Then she went back to his apartment with him and told him they couldn’t be together because her mother is a goat fucking lizard dick sucking whore,” Eleanor said.

Matilda stared at Eleanor.

“Do I have that part wrong?” Ellie asked.

The room was completely silent.

“Then she tried to leave, he freaked out. He ‘rambled on’ - his words, not mine - about how much he loved her, she told him that they had to end things now. They were in the

bath tub together, got into a little bit of argument - over the bath tub?"

Matilda started laughing and shook her head.

"- they got out of the tub, Matty broke down crying and couldn't stop. He called me - AT 1:30 IN THE GODDAMN MORNING. I told him to take her home and then bring her here. I told her she was fucking up her life and that we'd talk this morning."

"Oh, Matty," Eric sighed. Eric looked at Ellie. "Who's the good cop, who's bad cop?" Eleanor glared at him. "OK, Ellie is the bad cop. Scoot..." He waved his hands at her to scoot over in the chair and then plopped down next to her and hugged her. "It's going to be OK."

"No, you know what, Eric? No good cop, bad cop. Here it is, straight, babe: You don't throw away chances at happiness because something *might* go wrong."

Matilda swallowed hard. "Ellie, I don't disagree with you, but there is no 'might' about this. In what world does a relationship between Jacob Trellis and me go right? I jus-"

"THIS ONE! THIS WORLD, Matilda May Benton. Do you know how I know? Because that guy was at a complete fucking loss last night and still called me. HE LOVES YOU. He's loved you since you fell in the fucking puddle and then wandered into his office. LITERALLY, EVERYONE ELSE WHO HAS SEEN YOU TWO TOGETHER KNOWS THIS - HAS KNOWN THIS - FOR MONTHS. EXCEPT YOU.

"He loves you like Eric and Charlie and I love you. He loves you enough to call and spill his guts to me. We don't throw that away. You can be scared and you can be neurotic, but do NOT throw away this chance at happiness."

\*\*\*

At 12:30 exactly, Jacob called Matilda's phone.



“I told him last night that he could call you after 12:30 today,” Ellie said. “We’re usually done by now.”

“Hello?” Matilda said. She could feel all the eyes on her.

“I’m not home yet.”

“No. I mean, no thank you.”

Ellie growled.

“I don’t need a ride, you don’t need to come all the way back here.” Ellie nodded.

“Uh, it was rough, but I’m fine. They’re all staring at me right now.”

“Wait! Wait, Jake. Don’t hang up. Do you want to come over for dinner later?”

“Seven? Or earlier or later. Whatever.”

\*\*\*

At 4:30 that afternoon, Ellie started a group message thread with Matilda, Jake, Charlie, and herself.

ELEANOR: Jacob, don’t push right now. I shoved her hard today. Calm dinner and great sex would be ideal.

MATILDA: ELEANOR! We are not doing this group thread.

CHARLIE: This might be the best thing I’ve ever seen.

\*\*\*

Jacob had dinner plans with Matty today. It was more than he hoped for when he dropped her off this morning.

*We’ll let it ride with Ellie, for now.* He thought.

\*\*\*

CHARLIE: Eric's gonna be pissed.

ELEANOR: Gay boy hasn't met Prince Charming. We can't add him yet.

CHARLIE: He has the video.

JACOB: What video? Will I like it?

ELEANOR: My birthday party is next Saturday. Bring good wine for 30 people that like wine, Prince Charming.

## Chapter 20

“Are you sure you don’t want to come to dinner? Darla will be sad,” Jacob said for the sixth time.

“No, she won’t. It’s ok. You should go without me.” Matilda wrung her hands. The anxiety was clear. Jake just didn’t know where it was coming from.

He kissed her. “Are you absolutely sure? She probably made something special.”

“You go without me. There are things to be discussed. I understand that.” She felt a little nauseous. He was leaving.

“What things? Matty, are you o-?”

“I’m fine.”

“Why do you do that?” He asked.

“What?”

“Whenever I ask if you’re ok, your immediate knee-jerk reaction is ‘I’m fine.’ Your head could be on fire, and you’d still say you’re fine.”

“I didn’t realize I did it,” she said.

“It makes me crazy,” he admitted with a smile.

Her eyes were sad orbs in her face. “I’m sorry.”

*Holy fuck. What’s going on in her brain? She’s been a mess since I...*

Matilda was standing in the living room looking at her feet. She had been standing in the same place since he started gathering his things to leave.

“Mat, do you want me to stay?” he asked.

Her head jerked up to meet Jake’s eyes.

“I don’t have to go. I can stay here with you.”

“You go every week. You have to go,” she said.

“I really don’t, though. I can skip a week,” he said.

*Is she fucking kidding with this? Please ask me to stay!*

“You should go. I’ll just... umm.” She swallowed. “I’ll see you when I see you.”

A couple heartbeats of silence passed.

“When will I see you?” Jake asked. “How long do I have to stay away?”

“Huh?” She asked.

“Matilda, you’re the brakes on this relationship. You need to tell me when you want me to go away and when I should come back. If you leave it up to me, I’ll be back between nine and ten tonight.”

“You don’t want to come back over here tonight,” she said, sounding like she was hoping for disagreement.

He kissed her again and made it good. They were both breathing hard when he pulled away. “Babe, I really do. So, I’ll come back after dinner?”

She half smiled up at him. “Only if you want to. If you’re tired or busy or change your mind or whatever... I understand.”

“Babe, I will totally skip Sunday dinner if you want me to. I don’t even need to go.”

“No, you should go. They’ll be waiting on you.”

“OK.” One more quick peck, then he turned to go.

As he opened the door to go, she said “Jake?”

He turned back to her.

“Umm, have fun.”

He nodded.

As he stepped out the door, “Jake?”

*Say it. I know you fucking feel it. Say it. Say it.  
FUCKING SAY IT.*

“I... I’m glad you might come back tonight.”

“Me, too.” He turned away slowly. Again.

“Jake?”

*This is fucking ridiculous. Why is she doing this to herself?*

He walked back to her and touched his forehead to hers. “Here. Let me help. Those words you’re struggling with are ‘I love you.’ Just like that. I. love. you.” He straightened again.

She nodded, looking at the floor again. “Thank you for coming over.”

He tilted her chin up so their eyes met. “You’re leaking again.”

*Fuck. How do I make the tears stop?*

She smiled as the tears dripped down her face.

“I love you,” he said. Then, he was gone.

“Bye, Jake,” Matilda whispered.

\*\*\*

Darla came charging into the foyer when he walked through the door.

“Hel-” she stopped mid-greeting, arms above her head like she was about to force a hug on someone. “She didn’t come with you?!”

From the big room, he heard Noah yell, “YES, SHE DID!” followed by a lot of laughter.

*Ah fuck. I forgot about that.*

“Jacob?” His mom asked.

He blinked hard and shook his head. “Ah. Things are a little complicated.”

“Complicated how?” Darla asked with a furrowed brow.

Jake cleared his throat as he gathered his thoughts. *How the fuck do I summarize this?* He'd been thinking about how to explain this to his family on the drive over. He still had nothing planned.

Darla's face showed her concern. "Jake, what? What happened? Are you OK?"

"The disability," Jake said. "Her mom... well, she's a piece of work."

"Well, what does that have to do with anything?" Darla asked.

Darla hugged him then - a really good mom hug.

*She's never had this. Matty has no idea what this feels like.*

Hank came out of the big room. "Hey, why's everyone lingering-" He stopped short.

"What's happened? Where's Mat?" Hank asked.

Jake shook his head then let go of Darla to shake Hank's hand. Mid-shake, Hank pulled him in for a hug.

"What's for dinner?"

"Lasagna," Darla choked out. "I thought it'd be funny."

As they walked back into the big room, Sam called, "Hey, it's the three-minute ma-"

And then all the humor fell out of the room.

\*\*\*

Hank was rubbing his forehead. "I guess I've never thought of her movement issues, outside of wondering if we could make her more comfortable or help somehow. She's so incredibly capable, I can't imagine anyone being anything other than impressed with her."

"What is the actual disability? Do you know?" Adrian asked. "I've never been sure if she had a joint issue or

something more involved.”

“I’m not sure. She might have said it on Friday, but I don’t think so.” Jake said.

Sam had been staring at the wall, his jaw clenched, for the last half hour. “Cerebral Palsy,” he muttered.

“How do you know? She doesn’t talk about it.” Jake asked.

“I asked,” Sam said.

“When?” Jake asked.

“The day I met her,” Sam said, in a flat tone.

“YOU ASKED? Before we really knew her? YOU ASKED? You can’t ask that type of question in a work setting, Sam. You KNOW that.” Hank was horrified.

Sam smirked at the wall. “I asked.”

“Wow. She’s amazing. That’s a hard road. But, CP is not typically degenerative. It pretty much is what it is by adulthood, assuming she takes care of herself. Explain again why we’d be ashamed,” Adrian said.

Jake glared at him.

“You lost me in the middle of it, man. Her dad got killed and her mom will only have lunch with her and she’s never met her family? What was the mom’s reasoning?”

“They’re vapid socialites that think having someone in the family with a disability makes them look weak.”

“That doesn’t sound right,” Adrian said.

Jake snorted.

“No, I mean it doesn’t sound even remotely plausible. There are socialite families with medical considerations. We use them as an excuse to have fundraisers and throw parties and shit. There is no social shame associated with it, especially because she is so successful despite the CP.

“There would be whispers, but it’s more like the ‘Bless her heart...’ sort of whispers. She’s made a hell of a life for

herself.”

In the middle of the thought, Adrian’s voice shifted to thinking out loud. “But, how does it look that her mom completely cut bait and ditched her when Matty really needed support?”

“The socialite problem is not Matilda’s CP. The problem is explaining why the mom abandoned her. If the mom has never mentioned her in social circles, it looks *really* bad when an adult daughter pops up all of a sudden.” Adrian said.

Sam nodded, still staring at the wall. “Yes. That makes more sense.”

Jake shook his head. “Maybe, but I’m not sure that helps any.”

“So, where do things stand?” Noah asked.

“Meh. I don’t really know. We’re together, I think because Ellie bullied her into it. She’s a nutcase right now - wringing her hands and crying a lot.” Jake admitted.

“I can’t imagine her like that,” Hank said.

“It blows my fucking mind. She’ll be fine and we’ll be laughing and teasing and then I make a joke about the future and she shuts down again.”

“This just doesn’t sound right. Everything about this is off. You two have been dancing around each other from day one. This has been building up for a year. There’s been a pool going since last April. How could she be this out of sorts?” Ethan said.

“When I left to come here tonight, I’m pretty sure she was afraid that I wasn’t coming back. I asked her when I could come back and she looked fucking startled. Like she didn’t know she had a fucking say in it.”

“So, she needs to get her bearings. Maybe some time will help sort this out. You’re willing to deal with this for a while?” Hank asked.

Jake stared at his dad.



Hank smiled. "That's my boy."

*Darla hasn't said a word. She must be upset. She's not even scolding about language at the table.*

"You OK, Mom?" Jake asked.

Darla met his eyes and said, "Knock her up."

Hank winced. The table went silent. "Honey—"

"No Hank, don't," she said. "It's not a lack of love or compatibility. It's not a lack of happiness. It's fear - paralyzing fucking fear. It's bullshit. Knock her up. Bind her to you with love and children and let the rest work itself out."

"Ok," Hank said. "Let's call that plan B."

"Is there a plan A?" Darla demanded.

"Patience, time, love... showing her the truth of what family means," Hank said.

"My way is faster," Darla declared.

"I have a question," Sam said quietly.

"I don't know who her mother's family is," Jake said.

Sam nodded, then turned to Hennessy. "Find them."

It was not a request. The room was completely still.

Hennessy nodded. "Sure thing, Sam. S'cuse me." And then he picked up his phone and started typing.

"Sam, that was my first thought, too. 'Make them pay' and all that. But it won't help her right now, and I think it might spook her," Jake said.

"No. Sorry Jake, but no. They're going to grovel at her fucking feet and beg for her forgiveness." Sam was as calm and quiet as ever, but rage radiated off him. His voice felt like the rumble of thunder in an approaching storm.

"What are you going to do?" Jake asked.

"Don't worry about it."

An awkward silence fell over the table.

“So, that happened,” Noah said. “Also, Darla swore at the dinner table. Mark today down in the record books.”

\*\*\*

Jake buzzed Matilda’s apartment at ten minutes after nine.

“You came back!” She exclaimed as she opened the door.

“I told you I’d be back tonight. You look better... happier. Feeling better?” Jake asked.

“I wasn’t sure you’d come back. How did it go?”

Jake shrugged. “About as well as can be expected, I guess. They’re disappointed you didn’t come with but they understand. They’re worried about you.”

“Oh. That’s good,” she exhaled hard.

*Is that relief on her face? What the fuck?*

“Darla sent you lasagna and chocolate cake. Did you eat?” He asked.

“Oh. No, I wasn’t hungry. That was really nice of her.”

“She wants to do a girl’s afternoon when you’re up for it,” Jake said.

“Oh. That sounds... awkward.”

“Awkward how? It’s Darla. She wants to do the huggy kissy mom thing that she does. Want me to warm this up for you?”

“Um, sure. Thank you.” She sat at the breakfast bar.

“So, awkward how? I’m pretty sure she’ll only mention marriage and grandkids a dozen times.”

Matilda stared at him.

“What?” Jake asked.

“She doesn’t mind the idea of... this?” Matilda gestured between the two of them.

“What? Why?”

She shifted uncomfortably on the bar stool. “I thought they would be opposed to this being... More than physical.”

His temper flared.

“Matilda,” he said quietly, “Darla mentally married me off to you roughly three minutes after she met you.

“They were disappointed that you didn’t come to dinner, that our road is bumpy, that you’re so mixed up, that you don’t trust them to continue loving you as part of our family. They were NOT disappointed that we’re together.”

“Really?” She asked quietly.

“FOR FUCK’S SAKE! Yes! They had a fucking betting pool going for most of the last year for when we’d finally hook up.”

“But that was just the sex, scratching the itch. They might not feel the same if...” Her words slowed to a halt at the look on his face.

He put the plate of lasagna in front of her and walked out of the room.

\*\*\*

Matilda looked at the plate. Her eyes filled with tears. Again.

*I’m so tired of crying. Why do I keep fucking things up?*

She took a bite and thought over the conversation.

*They want him to be happy. They don’t care about the scars, Matilda. You’re the only one that cares about the scars. Well, you and your anteater mother.*

Somehow the voice of reason in her brain always sounds like Ellie - without the aptitude for swearing.

The apartment door didn't slam. *He's still here.*

She took another big bite and got off the stool. He wasn't in the living room. Around the corner, he was sitting in the hallway between the bathroom and bedroom. She slid down the wall to sit next to him.

"I'm sorry, Jake."

He nodded.

"My mother looks like an anteater."

He snorted. "What?"

"She does. Once you see the resemblance, you can't not notice it.

"She has a really long, skinny head with a long skinny nose. And she's had something done to her lips so she can't close them properly.

"Her body is sorta blocky. So, it looks like she has this skinny, pointy head and then a body that just swells from there."

Jake stood up and walked away.

*OK. Wrong approach.*

He was back a second later with her plate. "Darla thinks I should knock you up."

"Oh my God!"

"Her words. And she swore at the dinner table. It was one for the record books for sure."

"I'm sorry they were upset. That I upset them."

"They're worried about you."

"I'm envious of your family. You have a whole shit ton of people that love you as my dad loved me. That must be... something."

“Darla was waiting at the door when I got there. When it was clear that things weren’t sunshine and puppies, I got a mom hug. I thought about you not having mom hugs.”

She shook her head. “Nope. Never. The Anteater does this weird cheek bump-kiss-noise thing.”

She thought for a second. “Great dad hugs, though.”

“When I came in the door tonight, you said ‘you came back.’ Not ‘you came back tonight.’” he said.

Matilda nodded.

“Did you think I wasn’t coming back - ever?”

She shrugged. “I thought they might talk some sense into you and that there would be a gentle dumping in my near future.”

He sighed. “Ugh. ‘Talk some sense.’ Matty... ” He banged his head back on the wall.

“Why are we sitting in the hallway and not on the couch?”

“I could still see you in the living room. Then I was going to make us a bath but you really don’t have a tub. That’s just wrong.”

“Sorry, but rent is high in this neighborhood and some of us aren’t billionaires. 536 square feet of fine Ikea living.”

“I might not be a billionaire. Not sure. Haven’t looked in a while. We can ask Sam.”

“Whatever. I’m sure you’re comfortable. What? You have an ‘I just thought of something’ look.”

“So, I feel like I should tell you something but I’m worried about it upsetting you.”

“Why would you worry about that? I’ve been oh so very logical this weekend.” She rolled her eyes.

Jake laughed. “You just rolled your eyes at yourself. There’s hope yet.”

She smiled a sad little smile. “I’m more or less resigned to getting crushed at some point in the near future. What do you need to tell me?”

“I’m going to choose to ignore the crushed comment for now,” Jake said with a similarly sad smile. “I think Midas is going to smite your mom.”

Matilda rocked back. “Oh.”

“He didn’t take the familial snub well. At all.”

“Well, it was my mom. I have no idea what others think.”

“I suspect we’re about to find out. Sam treats everyone outside his circle of love with the same respectful, good-natured indifference. But, God help you if you make him mad. Even as kids, before the money... he can be savage. He was into the ‘rage’ category tonight, well past ‘mad.’”

“He’s always been so nice to me, gentle. I can’t reconcile ‘savage’ with that,” she said.

“He loves you,” Jake said simply. “He’s never been indifferent toward you.”

“I don’t really deserve it. But he should just leave them be. Not worth it. I don’t wish her ill.”

“That’s what I said - about leaving them be. My family loves you, Matty. Whether we’re together or not, you have a shit ton of people that love you, too.”

She looked doubtful. “What did Sam say about leaving them be?”

“Told me not to worry about it.”

“Ominous,” she said.

He nodded. Her plate was almost finished.

He kissed her fingers.

“So, what’s the record for a solo session?”

# Chapter 21

JAKE: Where and when should the birthday wine be delivered?

MATILDA: You really got wine?

ELEANOR: Of course he did. Mat, stop being a dumbass.

JAKE: Ellie, be nice.

ELEANOR: Jacob, don't you know how to do good/bad cop? WTF man? You stop being a dumbass, too.

JAKE: I didn't realize that we were doing good/bad cop.

ELEANOR: That's why the Gay Boy is so helpful. He intuitively knows.

JAKE: So, you're the bad cop?

ELEANOR: You're supplying the orgasms every ninety seconds, Jake. That's not the role of the bad cop in this particular situation.

CHARLIE: Woah OK. The wine can be delivered to the townhouse anytime today, Jake. Matilda has the address.

JAKE: Will it all fit?

ELEANOR: That's what she said.

MATILDA: ELEANOR!

CHARLIE: ELEANOR!

ELEANOR: Shut it, Charlie. I can hear you laughing down the hall.

JAKE: There are 15 cases of wine.

MATILDA: That's a lot of fucking wine!

JAKE: There is a variety. I wasn't sure what people would like.

ELEANOR: Challenge accepted!

MATILDA: Tomorrow, my brain will be mad at you, Jake.

ELEANOR: Jake, prior to you, she was unable to orgasm during sex. Just FYI. A little carrot of hope for you. Thanks for the wine.

MATILDA:...

CHARLIE: I mean, even I knew that. You gotta let a guy know he's doing good work, Matty.

MATILDA:...

JAKE: This text thread is amazing.

\*\*\*

“Never?” Jake asked, for the fourth time. Matilda kept dodging the conversation.

“Can we please talk about *anything* else?” Matilda begged.

“Wanna go to Vegas and get married tonight?”

“Jake...”

“Tell me you love me,” he said.

She stared at him.

“So, we're talking about orgasms. I want to understand,” he said.

“Ugh. I should not have allowed you and Eleanor to speak to each other. I never should have introduced you. She is the female version of you and nothing is sacred,” Matilda whined.

“Woo, full pout. That might be a first, love. Don't give me side-eye. I will tell you anything you want to know.”

“Would you tell me why Sam doesn't sleep?”



*Whoa. Why would she go there? Are we at DefCon 5 and I don't know it?* Jake wondered.

The teasing laugh turned brittle on Jake's face. "That's not mine to tell."

She nodded. "This is the same thing. It was not Ellie's to tell."

"Matilda, do you think for one second that I'm asking because I want to embarrass or humiliate you?"

There was a long pause.

"No. I think you're asking because you want bragging rights," she said.

"OK, that's accurate. But that bragging would never happen in front of anyone but you and Ellie and Eric and maybe Charlie. Because nothing is sacred to Ellie. Eric and Charlie know everything."

Matilda laughed. "You get points for honesty."

Jake smiled. "I also just want to understand."

"Question for question?" she asked.

"Wooo, I like it. The question game has treated us well in the past."

Saturday had rolled around quickly. After a solid week of sleeping over, Jake's stuff was slowly taking over Matilda's limited apartment space. He needed to push her toward his place so they'd have more room.

As they were spending the evening at Ellie's birthday bash, best friend Saturday shopping was canceled for the week. Saturday morning was off to a slow start.

"Before we get distracted, though... Why did you ask about Sam's sleep?" he asked.

"Because I know it's a closely guarded secret that you wouldn't easily share."

"Why...? Why do you know it's a secret? Why would you even think of asking about it?"

“Oh, Jake. Is that a little bit of caution and protectiveness I hear in your voice?”

“Matilda, do you know? Did he tell you?”

“At the conference in November. During the same conversation, he told me you liked me.”

Jake’s smile was sad. “He told you I love you, had loved you, from the beginning. He didn’t use the word ‘like’ in the conversation.”

Her eyes were sad, too. She knew she was hurting him, and hated it. “Yes.”

He nodded. “But he told you about his sleep?”

“Yes.”

There was a long pause.

“Jake, are you mad?”

“Mad? No. Not at all. I’m just surprised. I’m not sure Luke or Beth know why he doesn’t sleep. Hennessy certainly doesn’t - he’s asked Will and me before. That is a very dear secret for him to share. If he didn’t make that clear when he told you, you should know it now. That was an act of trust he’s not offered to parts of our immediate family.”

“If I had known it was so dear, I wouldn’t have asked him the question. I didn’t actually ask why he doesn’t sleep. I asked why he doesn’t date.”

He kissed the tip of her nose. “Interesting bit of information, right there. He could have sidestepped the dating question, as he often does. It doesn’t distract from our original topic for long, though. Tell me about the lack of orgasms!”

“Was there a question in there somewhere?” Matilda asked teasingly.

“How many people have you been with?” He asked.

“Three, counting you. How many for you?” Matty asked.

“We’re counting full sex, right?” Jacob clarified.

Matilda's eyebrows climbed her forehead.

"There was a hand job in high school. If we're counting full sex, you were number seven. If we're counting the number of women who have touched my penis, you're number eight."

Matilda couldn't stop giggling. "Thank you for the extremely precise answer."

He smiled at her laughter. When things were like this, just the two of them without outside interference or stress, he couldn't keep the hope from swelling in his chest. He loved her giggle and the feel of her tucked alongside him as they snuggled in bed. "You're welcome."

"The number was not as high as I expected," she admitted.

He shrugged. "I'm not Noah. Both of your previous experiences were with men? You and Ellie haven't gotten freaky, right?"

Matilda laughed again, as he knew she would. "We do have some boundaries. Even best friends don't... OH SHIT. Please remind me to tell you about Ellie's last birthday party before we go to this birthday party. I don't want to talk about it this second, but we have to talk about it. There's a video."

It was Jake's turn to laugh. "I am so incredibly curious."

"You're going to love it. It's going to make you even smugger than this conversation."

"Who's turn is it?" he asked.

"Mine. Best sex you ever had?"

"Pool table," he said without pause.

She was laughing again.

"Who was the first?" he asked.

Her laughter died off quickly. There was a long pause. "Ech. You really want to talk about this?"

Jake's head tilted in concern. "I really do, but now I'm worried that you clearly don't. Did someone hurt you?"

She shook her head. "Not in the way you mean. They're just not happy memories."

Jacob kissed her. "We'll make better memories."

Matilda's sad smile was back. "Uh. Sophomore year in college. A guy named Dan was in my English Lit class. He was nice, really nice. For a while, at least. Funny. The first guy to really pay any attention to me. He invited me to his room one weekend for a movie marathon and pizza. It just sort of happened.

"We spent a couple of weekends bouncing around his dorm room. Then I asked to go on a date. To a party or a movie, anywhere that wasn't the dorm room.

"He asked why I thought we were dating, that he couldn't go out with me. His friends couldn't see us together. He'd never live it down. That was that. Well, almost. I punched him and then Ellie dumped medium hot coffee in his lap. Hot enough to hurt, not hot enough to permanently damage. He is known as the Selfish Pudwacker."

*For fuck's sake. No wonder she doesn't want to talk about this.*

"Each and every story that involves Ellie affirms my love of her," he said.

Matilda burst out laughing. "That's because she is the female version of you. My turn?"

Jake nodded.

"Best sex you had before me?"

Jake chuckled. "That's a good one. I'll give you another very precise answer. Best before you, in the moment, before I really understood how absolutely horrible it was in reality, was the blow job in the garden."

"That's a lie!" Matilda laughed. "She sucked at sucking."

“I would like to point out how absolutely fucked in the head I was at that point. I was fucknuts crazy about you, you showed no signs of being interested in me, and I couldn’t shake her. I had spent an hour and a half fantasizing about all your very interesting dips and curves in that damn silver tank top over dinner. By the time we got to the garden, I was fully immersed in thoughts that were decidedly not related to Bella and convinced you were a figment of my imagination, peeking around the corner of the path. I’m not sure I needed contact with anyone or anything for that to be memorable.

“If we’re not counting that because it was not full sex, I would say it would have to be a woman named Mary Lou in college. She wore a lot of sweaters.”

Matilda was laughing again. “Sweaters?”

“Yup. They were fitted. It was a thing. Anyway, that pales in comparison. My turn?”

She kept laughing. “OK.”

“Number two?”

She smiled up at him as he propped himself up on an elbow to look at her. “Promise me something first?”

“Hmm?”

She bit her lip. “Don’t get mad. Don’t let this ruin our morning.”

“You think I’m going to get mad?”

“Oh, I know you’re going to get mad.”

“At you?”

“No. At least I don’t think so.”

“You think I’m going to get mad enough at some random guy from your past to ruin our morning? I’m not quite that jealous, Matilda. He may have had you at some point, but your mine now.” He made an evil chuckling sound as he nibbled the sensitive skin at her collarbone.

“Promise?”

“You’re serious?”

She stared up at him.

“OK. I promise.”

“I was with someone for almost two years. At the end of college through the first phase of the vodka project that led you to me.”

“Two years?!”

She nodded.

“Two years of sex with no hallelujah?”

She nodded again.

“How? Why did that happen? He was really that lazy?” Jake asked.

She laughed a little. “No, I didn’t think I could.”

“You didn’t think you could have an orgasm?” Jake’s mind was completely blown.

“I could when flying solo, but muscles move differently during... and I just didn’t think I could.”

“OK, but then before? Or after?”

She shook her head. “Not unless I...”

“Wow. You’re right, I am kind of mad,” Jake mumbled.

“That wasn’t what would make you mad.”

“What happened?”

“I had thought we were on our way to getting married. We’d been together for a relatively long time. Ellie and Charlie had gotten married about six months beforehand. During their wedding, he rambled on about how much he was looking forward to getting married and starting a family.

“He had just gotten a nice promotion at work and talked about how the college years were behind us. On to bigger and better things.

“Then, I got home from a late dinner with the vodka people one night to find my stuff packed in the entryway. He was on to bigger and better things with someone else. He said he couldn’t be serious with someone like me. My ‘defect’ might get passed on to children. He had gotten a raise with his promotion, so he could afford the rent on his own. It was time for us to split.”

Jake dropped off his elbow to lay flat on his back.

“To be fair, I think we’ve had more sex in the last week than he and I had in the first six months. And things slowed down from there.”

*She’s trying to lighten the blow.*

Jake turned his head to look at her. “I can’t say you didn’t warn me.”

“Hmm.” She agreed as she kissed the corner of his mouth.

“Were you dating him when your dad died?”

“Yes, we had been together for about six months.”

“Where was he when you were going through that? Did you leave him out when you told me about it?”

“No, I didn’t leave him out. He came to the wake but was focused on finals. In retrospect, I should have taken that as a sign, but I wasn’t in that headspace.”

They were quiet for a few minutes.

“Matilda, has anyone in your life before me - before my family and besides your dad - ever just seen you? I mean, you as you are, with or without the CP? Just noticed and appreciated you for who you are from the start?”

“Ellie. Eric and Charlie, too. But, Eleanor saw me from the start. I’ll never forget it. It was one of the funniest days of my life. We were paired as college roommates, we didn’t know each other beforehand. I figured she’d treat me with some level of scorn between mocking contempt and throwing rocks at me-”

“Rocks?” He looked appalled.

She shrugged. “Kids are mean.”

“Holy fuck,” he said. Then gave a sheepish smile. “OK, I didn’t mean to say that out loud. But fuck those people. We should give Midas a list of people to smite.”

Matilda laughed. “I’m telling you about Ellie.”

“OK, I’m sorry. Tell me about Ellie.”

“I had prepared myself for some level of scorn and/or pity. She stormed into our dorm room as I was unpacking, and in a single breath complained about campus parking, called me a bitch for having boobs and an ass with a tiny waist, literally smacked me on the ass, and then suggested I rub my boobs on her brother so he’d buy us pizza.”

Jake was laughing. She went on.

“I think the entire conversation went like this:

“She barged into the room and said, ‘What the fuck is with parking on this campus? It blows. You bitch, I already hate your petite little self with giant boobs, tiny waist, and great ass.’”

Jake was full-on laughing, all signs of previous seriousness gone, as intended.

Matilda continued, “She smacked me on the ass. I couldn’t stop laughing.

“Then Ellie goes on: ‘My brother’s gonna get a hard-on immediately when he gets up here and sees you. It’s gonna be dog-fucking awkward. We should find lunch, I’m starving. Did you eat? Let’s order pizza. Huh. Limp? Does it hurt? No. K, cool. My brother will probably spring for pizza if you bounce around a bit and ‘accidentally’ rub your tits on his arm. Why are you laughing? I’m being serious. Do the bounce. Oh, come on. How can you have boobs like that and not know how to bounce ‘em. We’ll work on it.’ And that’s how Ellie entered my life.”

Jacob was wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. “I need to buy that woman some diamonds and shit. She’s



priceless.”

“My turn?”

Jake quirked an eyebrow. “Sure.”

Matilda rearranged things so she was laying on top of Jake, head on his chest, her legs spread around his.

“Hmm. I think I might like this question,” Jake murmured as he played with her hair. “This is OK?” he asked.

“Yes.” She pushed herself off his chest a bit so she could see his face.

He bent his knees up so she could lean back against his legs.

“Oh, well, that’s convenient,” she chuckled as she sat up astride him and did a little wiggle.

Jake wiggled back. “I aim to please.”

Matilda grinned. “I noticed that about you.”

“If the question is ‘Do you like this?’, you have your answer.”

“Hmm... That wasn’t quite the question.” She shifted and lifted more with his help, and then he was inside as she gently rocked and rotated her hips.

They both gasped. “OK?” He asked.

Matilda nodded. Her eyes closed as she oh so gently continued to rock with him.

When she opened her eyes to look down at him, he was watching her, waiting for her to catch up.

“That thing that you wanted me to say earlier, that I didn’t say... can’t seem to say... You know I do, right?”

He grinned at her. “What thing was that, Matilda?”

His hips shifted, changing the angle. She held on.

“That you like me?”

“Well, that too.”

“That you like this?” He shifted again. And again.

“Hmm...”

“That you want a kiss?” He pulled her to him for a kiss. And then some serious kissing.

“Jacob.” She said as things sped up.

“You want to go get married? I thought you’d never ask.”

This was not going the way she planned.

“Jake.”

The feeling was building.

“Can you say it, Matilda?”

“I’m so scared.” Her eyes were closed again.

“I know. Look at me, Matty.”

When their eyes met, Jacob said, clearly and slowly, “I love you.”

And then she was flying apart, and him with her.

She caught her breath, resting her head on his chest, listening to his heart. Quietly, she whispered, “Love you, too.”

When Jake paused in running his hands up and down her back, she knew he heard.

\*\*\*

“Matty, what did you need to tell me about Ellie’s last birthday?”

“Oh, fuck.”

There was a rumble in Jake’s chest as he laughed. “You know, we could be having this conversation in a bathtub. Just saying.”

\*\*\*

ELEANOR: If you two are late to my birthday because you're busy fucking, there are going to be words.

MATILDA: We stopped for flowers and are stopping for whiskey. Need anything else?

ELEANOR: I thought we were drinking 15 cases of wine. I didn't know whiskey was an option.

JAKE: It's your party. Dream big.

\*\*\*

“Are you sure you're ready for this?” Matilda asked again.

Jake was still grinning. “But, how did she *know*?”

“She's Ellie.”

“I appreciate you both gave me the benefit of the doubt, compared to Little Jake.”

“You're welcome.”

“Are you ready?” She asked again.

“Babe, ring the bell. Let's do this.”

She stepped on Ellie's stoop and reached up to kiss him. “I don't ring the bell.”

Matilda opened the door upon Ellie's crowded living room. The video of her swallowing a dildo was on the TV, in high def.

Everyone in the room cheered as everyone on the video cheered.

“Of course. Of course. Why wouldn't I have expected that?” She asked Jake.

“I'm not sure why you didn't expect it, I sure did,” Jake said as he bowed to the cheering crowd.

\*\*\*

“So, you’re... Jake? Right?” Vivian poked him playfully in the chest.

“Yup.”

“And you have six brothers?”

“Seven brothers and a sister.”

“Are they all as hot as you?” Vivian asked.

Jake rolled his eyes. “Haven’t checked out my brothers recently.”

“I love this little bit of beard,” she said as she ran her fingers through his facial hair. He didn’t shave this morning, so his stubble was more than a five o’clock shadow. Vivian moved closer and pressed her chest to his.

Jake moved her hand and stepped back. As if they planned it, Ellie sprayed Vivian with the kitchen sink sprayer the second Jake was clear.

“SHOO!” Ellie yelled at Vivian. “Begone, money fucker.”

Realizing she’d made a fool of herself, Vivian decided to continue the trend. “Woo! Wet t-shirt contest!” She cackled at Jake.

Jake openly and unrepentantly laughed at her. “You’ve met my girlfriend, right? Her boobs are way, way nicer than yours.”

“Oh-oh! Say it, Viv! Please say it,” taunted Ellie. “Talk smack about my girl and her *billionaire* boyfriend. Billion. With a B. You’re dating Charlie’s friend, not mine. I’ll toss your skank ass out of here.”

“You know, I might not actually be a billionaire right now. It changes. I haven’t checked recently.”

Eleanor sprayed him with the kitchen sink sprayer. “Shut it, Prince Charming. Don’t ruin my fun on my birthday. I want Matty to gloat endlessly about you, and she’s not playing along.”

“I asked her if she wanted to get married this weekend. She said no.”

“Aww. Poor Jake. I do sort of agree with her. Marriage after a week of good sex seems fast.”

“It’s been a year of flirting.”

“It’s been a year of lusting,” Ellie said. “I can’t get behind marriage until you’ve been together for at least a month. Maybe two. The longer you date, the better the resulting post-divorce trust fund.”

Jake grabbed his chest, “Ouch!”

Ellie smiled. “I heart you, Trellis. Don’t make me sorry.”

“Ellie, if you weren’t married to Charlie, you’d be perfect for Noah,” Jake said with complete sincerity.

“So, which one is Noah? The man-whore, right? Yeah. That could work. I’m pretty sure Charlie would go for that so long as he got a piece of the action on the side.”

“No,” Charlie yelled from somewhere across the room.

“We’ll discuss it later,” Ellie stage whispered to Jake.

\*\*\*

“Matilda! It’s time,” Ellie called.

“I’m not doing it this year! Make Gay Boy do it.”

“No.” Ellie said, swaying in place just a bit.

“Why?!”

“Because it’s funnier when I make you do it! Get your sweet little ass up here,” Eleanor demanded.

Jake, already laughing, boosted Matilda onto the kitchen table.

Once she was standing next to Ellie, the crowd cheered.

“Welcome to another round of Ellie’s Dirty Dares, where even the losers win! As is dictated by the best friend code, one Matilda May Benton will be our first contestant.”

The room exploded in catcalls.

“Now, in case you haven’t been in the living room tonight, I will remind you that *last year’s dare* was amazing. Epic. Unable to be topped. Especially because Prince Charming himself, Mr. Jake Trellis, is at this very moment standing right here. Wave to the crowd, Jake.”

After a cheeky little wave and some more cheering, Ellie said “By the by, tonight’s extensive wine selection was acquired by Mr. Trellis, as was the extremely expensive whiskey that disappeared roughly thirty seconds after arrival. You’re all assholes; I didn’t even get a sip.”

“I’m good for more whiskey, Ellie,” Jake called.

Ellie shrugged. “Eh, give it a minute and then tell me that.”

Matilda whipped her head around to look at Ellie in alarm.

“Oh, yeah babe,” Ellie said, “you’re going to hate this. But it’s my birthday party and I was told to dream big. See the crown. My birthday.” Ellie waved her hand at her plastic tiara. “Well, not my actual birthday. But, close enough. You will do as I ask.”

“Now, for this year’s dare, I originally intended to make Matilda take her top off and dance on a silver platter. We can all agree that would have been entertaining.”

Once the crowd settled a bit more, Ellie continued. “But, then last week, love finally bloomed, I got called at 1:30 in the morning by a panicked Jake, and I realized I really had to up my game.

“Mr. Jake Trellis, please bring your fine ass up here. Don’t bang your head on my ceiling, you tall fucker.”

“Uh, Ellie. I don’t think your kitchen table was meant to hold the weight of two and a half people,” Jake called.

“It’s fine. I’ve already decided which one you can buy me if we break it.”

The room cheered again.

“Tonight’s dare requires Jake to take his shirt off. But he’s not going to dance on a silver platter, because it turns out I like having a silver platter. Take your shirt off, Jake.”

“Uh. Really?”

“Yes, Jake. Really. Now, do a little circle. Lovely.”

The ladies whistled and clapped.

“Can I put my shirt back on?”

“No. Matilda, how long have you known Jake?”

“It will be exactly a year on Friday.”

“And how long have you been romantically involved?”

“A week yesterday.”

“Thank you. Matilda, which of your parents do you have more respect for: mom or dad?”

“Ellie...” Alarm bells were ringing furiously in Jake’s brain.

“Nope. I’m bad cop. Matty, answer me.”

“My dad.”

“Uh-huh. And which parent raised you, on his own, with no support, into the magnificent woman you are today?”

Matty stood on the table, looking at her feet. The room had quieted dramatically.

“Oh. This question is harder. Jacob, are we in agreement that Matilda is, in fact, magnificent?”

Jake reached for Matilda’s hand and gave it a squeeze.  
“Yes.”

“Matilda?”

“My dad raised me,” she said as she swallowed a little lump in her throat. She knew where this was going.

“I had the honor of knowing your father. Do you think Darren would have liked Jake?”

“Very much so.”

“I agree. Would Darren be proud of the woman you are today?”

“Yes,” Matilda said without hesitation.

“I agree. Would he be proud of the stress and strain you’ve put on your relationship with Jake? Would he agree with your general outlook on the relationship?”

Matilda stood silently, still staring at her feet.

Ellie let the silence sit for a solid 30 seconds. It was a very uncomfortable eternity for Jake.

“Come on, Matilda. You can do this. It’s my birthday wish,” Ellie said.

“No, he would not be proud of it. No, he wouldn’t agree with it.”

Matilda was visibly shaking. Jake moved to pull her close. Ellie stopped him. “Not yet. We’re almost there, but not yet.

“Matilda, have you ever known Jake to be anything but kind and supportive? Dare I say, he’s loving?”

“He has never intentionally hurt me,” Matilda said.

“Nope, I won’t accept the compromised answer. Has Jake ever been anything but kind, supportive, or loving - even before there was romance?”

“No,” she whispered.

“Has Jake’s family ever been anything but kind, supportive, or loving toward you?”

“No.”

“Final question. Get it right or you don’t win the prize. I’m going to go out on a limb and say that actual Jake is preferable to Little Jake. So, don’t fuck this up. I want an



honest answer from you as my birthday gift. Matilda, do you love Jake?"

The room was completely silent.

"Very much," she said quietly.

Ellie smiled and hugged Matilda as the crowd cheered. "Thank you. Matilda, this year I gift to you one Jacob Trellis. May he always treat you like the magnificent creature you are."

Jake was extremely relieved but also very confused. "Hey, what the fuck? Why did I have to take my shirt off?"

"Because it's my birthday and I wanted to see what you look like without a shirt. You're lucky I didn't make you drop your pants. We'll save that for next year."

\*\*\*

The Lyft ride back to Matty's apartment was quiet. When they got into the apartment, she began packing a bag.

"What are you doing?" Jake asked.

"Tonight or tomorrow, we should go to your place. There's more space."

He wrapped her in his arms and kissed her forehead.

"I'm so scared, I don't want to get hurt again. Please tell me now if you're not all in on this." She sounded desperate for some kind of reassurance.

"I'm pretty sure there are still only mystery pickles in the fridge. We should stay here tonight and go there tomorrow. What do you think of putting a pool table in one of the bedrooms?"

## Chapter 22

“Matilda?” Jacob said as he ran his fingers through her hair.

“Mmm,” Matilda responded, still asleep.

“Matty?” Jake whispered.

“Wha?”

“Matilda, wake up!”

“Gah! What?”

“Hi,” Jake said.

“What time is it?”

“3:13 AM,” Jake responded.

“Why am I awake at 3:13 AM?” Matilda asked.

“Because I woke you up,” he said, slightly sheepish.

She blinked her eyes a couple of times. “Why did you wake me up?”

“I had a thought,” Jake said, all of a sudden looking nervous. “Maybe I should have just waited. Go back to sleep. I’m sorry.”

“What, Jake? I’m awake. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Go back to sleep. I’m sorry, Matty.”

“I don’t know your middle name,” Matilda said, a tone of surprise to her voice.

“It’s George.”

“Oh. That’s not as fun to say when irritated as Matilda May.”

“Nope, the alliteration is off. Darla says she should have made my middle name James.”

Matilda continued to stare at him.

“What?” He asked.

“Why am I awake? What was your thought?”

“Oh.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong.”

They were quiet for a minute.

“Jake, are you rethinking things?”

“What? No. Not how you mean.”

“How do I mean it?”

“I’m not rethinking things in a bad way.”

“Well, how are you rethinking them?” She asked, becoming more alarmed. It had been a whole six hours since the fiasco at Ellie’s party.

“Don’t sound so panicked.”

“Jake!”

“I think we should get married.”

“Huh?”

He swallowed hard. “Hear me out on this... Don’t say n-”

“Jake, that isn’t something to joke about. I know you were joking earlier to make a point, and it was fine, but if you don’t want to tell me what you were thinking, then don’t. It’s fine.”

“Matty, really. I think we should get married. Like now. Today or tomorrow. Let’s go to Vegas and get married.”

“Why in the world would you think that?”

He sighed. “I’m doing this wrong.”

Matilda stared at him again.

“OK, listen. Just hear me out. I love you. And there has been a history of truly fucking terrible people in your life. The day is going to come when I meet your mother and I may

actually punch that bitch. And boyfriend number two. What the fuck, man? Two years without noticing-”

“Jake.”

“Oh. Sorry. Before now, people that loved you with their whole heart have been in short supply, and I get that. I get why this”, he gestured between them, “would make you nervous. But, I don’t want you to be nervous. I don’t want you worried that I’m waking you up at 3:13 AM because I’m heading out the door. I’m not going anywhere. People go through the dating process, trying to figure out what and who they want. I already know that. I don’t doubt where this is headed.”

“I do,” she said.

“I know, and that’s the problem-”

“Jake, rushing into getting married isn’t going to fix me.”

“I’m not trying to fix you-”

“You are.”

“I am not!”

“Jake, think about what you just said! You are looking for ways around my hesitation in this. You’re trying to fix me.”

“I’m not. I’m trying to make it clear that you can trust me!”

“I do trust you, Jake.”

“You just finished saying you have doubts about me.”

“No, I didn’t!”

“Matilda! You just said it!”

“NO, I DIDN’T,” she yelled at him. “I said I doubted where this was headed.”

Jake closed his mouth.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly after a pause. “It didn’t occur to me that I might not be the half of this relationship you

didn't trust. That was foolish of me."

"Jake, I..." she stopped talking as he got out of bed.

He leaned over and kissed her head. "I'm wide awake. I'm going to take a shower."

\*\*\*

Roscoe the Rottweiler charged the door as Jake pulled it open for Matilda. "Roscoooooe," she said as she scratched his head.

"I feel like the moment of optimal teasing has already passed," Ethan said as he walked into the entryway. "I'm kinda mad at you, Tillie."

"I'm sorry?" she asked.

"Damn right you are!" Ethan said. He picked her up off her feet and swung her around.

"Oh, yes. This is much better. Hello, sweetheart," Darla said as she kissed Matilda's cheek.

"How come I don't get 'Hello sweetheart'? I don't even get an acknowledgment," Jake teased as he kissed his mom on top of her head.

"You're my son. I get to take your attendance at Sunday dinner for granted. Come on, sit down. Turkey dinner tonight."

"She means Thanksgiving dinner. She doesn't go halfway," Jake clarified.

"Ah," Matilda said.

Darla looked at her with narrowed eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Huh? Nothing, I'm good!" Matilda said.

"Mmm," Darla replied as she looked at Jacob.

"Are you fighting?" she asked.

“Nope,” he said. They weren’t fighting. They weren’t talking. They weren’t not-talking. They just didn’t say much to each other.

“Were you fighting?” she asked.

“Huh?” he said with wide, innocent eyes.

Darla rolled her eyes. “Let’s sit down.”

\*\*\*

Once everyone was seated and had made plates, Darla asked, “So, what happened?”

Jake met her eyes. “Mom, everything’s fine.”

“Jacob George Trellis, don’t you lie to me,” she scolded.

“Huh. I guess it does kinda work together,” Matilda muttered.

“I’m not!” Jake proclaimed.

The table was quiet as Darla got up to refill the mashed potato bowl.

“Matilda,” she called from the kitchen. “What happened?”

The entire table of people turned to stare at her. “Holy cow.”

Jake grinned. “Remember when you told me not to sass my momma and I told you to be careful, that she effectively bullies her boys? It was in preparation for this moment.”

Matilda started laughing.

Darla’s eyes returned to slits. “What did you do?” she asked Jake.

“Ugh! I woke her up at 3:13 this morning and suggested we go to Vegas and - Ah!”

Darla had taken the serving spoon out of the mashed potato bowl and hit him upside the head with it.

“Ow, Mom!”

“Why would you do that? That’s dumb!” She whacked him again.

“Would you stop?! You’re getting mashed potatoes everywhere!”

“I taught you better than that! A woman doesn’t want a spur of the moment, middle of the night, ‘Hey!’” she whacked him again.

“‘Babe!’” Whack.

“‘Let’s get’” Whack.

“‘Married’ wedding proposal!” She scolded.

“What the fuck, Mom!”

“You will not swear at the table!” She yelled.

“Holy fuck-”

“JACOB, YOU WILL NOT SWEAR AT YOUR MOTHER-” Hank yelled.

“Last week we were all swearing! At the table!” Jake yelled.

“That was last week!” Darla yelled.

“You told me to knock her up last week! Why is getting married worse?!”

“Because Jacob. It just is. Little girls are taught to dream of their wedding dress and rings and all that CRAP! ‘Let’s get married’ is not a way to bypass building a relationship. A baby is different - she’d have time to adjust to that. It’s not like you knock her up and the baby’s here tomorrow!” Darla yelled.

Matilda glanced around the table while choking back laughter. Everyone was staring at their plates, not making eye contact.

The laughter burst out in a choked snort; she couldn't help it.

“You have mashed potatoes stuck to the side of your head!” she told Jacob as tears of mirth dripped down her face. The room erupted into laughter.

Jake met Darla's eyes.

She smiled. “You're welcome. Go wash your head.”

\*\*\*

They were holding hands in the car again. Things seemed better between them.

“I don't doubt you, Jake. I don't doubt me, either. I know my heart. But, sometimes other things get in the way,” Matilda said quietly.

“I know,” he said.

“I love you,” she said, even quieter.

“I know that, too.” He grinned.

They were quiet for a couple of blocks.

“I realized it was not the right thing to do after I woke you up last night. It seemed like a great idea until you were wide awake, looking back at me. Then I knew rushing was not going to help things, but it was too late. Then you were worried and I didn't want that. It spiraled,” he admitted.

A couple more city blocks went by before they got stuck at another traffic light.

“I love you, too,” he said.

She kissed his hand.

“How's your potato head?” The giggles were coming back.

“Smashed,” he laughed.

“My dad would have loved that.”



“Darla beating me up with a serving spoon? She does that sometimes. It’s all fun and games until you’re the one getting whacked. Fair warning.”

“He would have loved the whole thing. We didn’t have dinners like that. Even when my grandparents were alive, even holidays weren’t like that. At most, there were four of us. Nine of you kids, Hank, Darla, Hennessey, me, Noah’s friend - who I didn’t actually meet?”

Jake shrugged. “Me neither. We don’t get attached anymore. They must have done introductions before we arrived.”

“There was even a dog under the table.”

“No dog under your table growing up?” He asked.

“No. Dogs and apartment living don’t mix. We didn’t have a yard.”

“Cat?”

“I’m allergic.”

“Bird?”

“I had some really nice goldfish for a while,” she smiled.

“At a friend’s house?” he asked.

“No,” she said quietly.

“Surely not all the kids threw rocks at you?” he asked, in a teasing tone.

“No, not at all. I just didn’t have close friends before Ellie and Eric.”

There was a subdued quality to her voice. He wanted the laughter back. “How did Eric find his way into your life?”

“Ellie and I took a Women’s Studies course during the second semester of our freshman year. We decided we needed to find our inner Boss Bitches. He was the only boy. Ellie walked up to him and said ‘Hi Gay Boy, can we sit with you?’”

“Did she know him?”

“Nope,” Matilda laughed.

“What if he wasn’t gay?!”

“That’s what I said. She looked at me deadpanned. ‘It’s a Women’s studies course. He’s here to find his inner diva.’ Then I looked at Eric and he was nodding in agreement. He’s been Gay Boy since.”

Jake laughed. “Why did he keep sniffing me last night?”

“He’s trying to determine if ‘obscenely wealthy’ has an odor,” she grinned.

“Does it?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I haven’t sniffed Sam that well!” And then the giggles were back.

“Walked right into that one!” Jake laughed.

*Mission accomplished.*

\*\*\*

“Did you have close friends growing up?” Matilda asked. They were walking to the elevator in the underground parking garage attached to his building.

“Yup. Sam, Ethan, and I have always been close. But I also had friends outside the family. You met some of them. A bunch of them work for us.”

“Well, that’s awkward,” she said.

“No, not really. They’re the people that know us well enough to tell us when we’re wrong without fear of being fired,” he said. “The people that started early with Sam got rich with Sam. Gary has to be worth about a hundred million by this point. He doesn’t have to work.”

“Gary?!”

“Yes. He was Adrian’s closest friend growing up. From Kindergarten on up through college. He works in Marketing instead of with the Foundation so they don’t have to argue over stupid shit.”

“Ellen?”

“We hired her about five years ago.”

“Who else is part of the circle of trust?”

“Circle of trust?” he laughed.

“You know what I mean!”

As they got on the elevator, Jake threw an arm around Matilda’s waist and stepped closer. “You. You are definitely in the circle of trust.”

“Mmm.” She tipped her head up as he tipped his head down.

“Bath?” he asked.

“Sexy bath?” she asked.

“Even better!”

\*\*\*

Friday came fast the following week. The pool table was ordered. Matilda set up a little office in the other bedroom. Her elliptical and weights had taken up residence with her office setup. All of a sudden, the apartment felt like home.

Jake was nervous as he walked in after work. It was possible they’d be back at DefCon 5 in short order. He wasn’t sure how Matilda was going to do with the idea of attending a fancy fundraiser, and even less sure about *shopping* for a fancy fundraiser.

“Matty, I’m back!” He called.

“Hi! Let me finish this thought.”

He took a calming breath.

As she stepped out of the office-bedroom, she paused.  
“What’s wrong?”

“I want to talk about something you might not like,”  
Jake said.

Her face fell. “Oh. OK.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. I’m not going to break up with  
you,” he clarified.

“OK. Then, what?”

“You have best friend shopping tomorrow, right?”

“Yep. Do you not want me to go? I can cancel, it’s not  
a big deal. I’ll call-”

“No. No, I want you to go.”

Her face looked concerned again.

“Ugh! I’m not asking you to cancel shopping.”

She stared at him.

“What?” he said.

“I’m waiting.”

“For what?” he asked.

“For you to tell me what it is that you have to tell me!  
We suck at the guessing game.”

“What’s the guessing game?”

“The game where we try to predict what the other  
person is going to say. We get it horribly wrong and freak each  
other out.”

“Yeah. We do that a lot. How was your day?”

“Oh my God, Jake.”

“What did I do? I haven’t done anything!”

“Jacob, what do you need to talk to me about?!”

“Oh, that.”

She waited.

And waited.

“Jake!”

“Oh. Yeah. So, tomorrow’s best friend shopping.”

She kept waiting.

“I know you like to shop.”

She nodded.

He stopped talking.

“Jake!” she yelled.

He started. “What?!”

“What am I not going to like, aside from this conversation?”

“I was hoping you’d shop for an evening gown to wear to a fundraiser next weekend,” he blurted.

“Oh! OK. I can do that. Why did you think I wouldn’t like it?”

He opened and closed his mouth a few times.

“Wait.” Then he turned around and walked out of the apartment.

Matilda could hear him talking in the hallway.

*What the hell is he doing?!*

“OK, wait,” he said as he walked back into the apartment. Then he handed her the phone.

“Hel- Hello?” Matilda said, looking at him like he lost his mind.

“Hi, sweetheart,” Darla said.

“Hi Darla,” Matilda said, a question in her voice.

“Matty, the fundraiser is full of rich people and it’s a black-tie event. You need a designer dress. He got credit cards for you because designer dresses and all the crap that goes with them are expensive.”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense. Why did he call you?”

“He thought you’d be offended. The last time he offended you, I beat him up with a serving spoon. He didn’t want to do something wrong again.” Darla was trying not to laugh.

Matilda looked at Jake with wide eyes as she shook with silent laughter.

“He’s a boy, Matty. They need positive reinforcement to balance the negative responses. I’m burning dinner. Tell him it’s fine.” Darla smiled. She could hear Matty laughing as she hung up.

\*\*\*

“THAT IS A BLACK AMEX! They do exist!” Eric yelled as they walked down Michigan Avenue. People were staring at them.

“It is, indeed,” Matty said. “I googled it last night. That card is stupid. It’s got like fifteen thousand dollars in fees, just to have the card. Who does that?”

“I WILL TELL YOU WHO DOES THAT! RICH PEOPLE! PEOPLE THAT WANT TO BUY THEIR FRIENDS ARMANI SUITS!”

“Eric, I’ll buy you whatever the fuck you want so long as you stop screaming,” Matty said in a quiet voice. “I really don’t want to get mugged over a few pieces of plastic and the twelve dollars in my wallet. For fuck’s sake, stop sniffing me!”

Ellie squealed and hopped up and down. “Something amazing just occurred to me. Matilda, I feel very strongly that we should stop at that bank and see if they’ll give you ten thousand dollars in cash.”

“What?! I don’t want ten thousand dollars in cash!”

“I do. And I’m not boinking the billionaire. Here, I’ll get the door for you,” Ellie said.

“Ellie, I’m not doing this,” Matilda said.

“Why? It is imperative for my life-long happiness that you do this. At this branch. Right now. It’ll be fun. I just want to see if they’ll give it to you. Please? For me?”

Matilda was turning red.

“Seriously, Matty. Let’s just see. I’m so incredibly curious about what they’ll say. You have that Reserve card for this bank. Let’s just try it. You don’t know these people. What the fuck does it matter? Let’s just see,” Ellie was so excited she was continuously bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“Can we do this next week, when I’ve had the cards for more than 12 hours?”

“Matilda, stop it. You’re ruining my fun,” she scolded. “I would never do this to you. You wouldn’t gloat last week at my birthday party. Now you refuse to go ask for a ridiculous amount of cash. Please do this. Please?”

“Oh yeah, let’s talk about your birthday, Ellie -” Matilda started.

“OK, you can yell at me later. But we have to do this now. Please? I need this so bad. You need this too, you just don’t know it yet,” Ellie said.

“I need ten thousand dollars? Why?”

“You don’t need ten thousand dollars. You need to go into this branch and demand ten thousand dollars. Please?” Ellie bounced a little more.

“The boob bounce doesn’t work on me. I’m straight,” Matilda said.

“It’s not a boob bounce, it a best-friend bounce. Please, Matty?” Ellie continued to beg.

“What if they say no?” Matty asked.

“Then they say no. Oh well. But they’re not going to say no. This is too perfect. Please?! I really need you to do this because I know something you don’t.”

“What do you know?”

“I can’t tell you because then you won’t do this!”

“Ellie!”

“Matty, please....”

“I’m not doing this,” Matty declared.

“Peter works in private banking at this branch. Charlie ran into him about a month ago when he was here getting something notarized. I don’t know if he’s working, but he might be,” Ellie spat out.

“OH, WE ARE FUCKING DOING THIS!” Eric shouted.

“Oh,” Matilda whispered. Peter was her former long-time boyfriend that worried she might contaminate future children.

She cleared his throat. “Why is he here? I mean, what happened to the job with the Board of Trade?”

“He got laid off or something. I don’t know. You can ask him. He’s been working here for almost a year. He spent a solid twenty minutes trying to talk Charlie into switching primary banks for the firm.”

Matilda looked down at herself.

“You look great. You’re fucking glowing with great sex and happiness. The only way this gets better is if there’s a giant diamond on your finger. Please, we have to do this.”

“If they say no, we’re going to look like idiots,” Matilda wavered.

“I don’t really care about the cash. If they say no, fuck ‘em. He’ll still know you’re rolling around in the sack with a really rich, good looking guy. And he deserves that little bit of knowledge, don’t you think?”

Matilda looked at the branch door, then Eric, who nodded enthusiastically, then Ellie, who continued to bounce

“How do I do this? Do I walk up to the teller?” Matilda asked.

“Oh. I don’t know,” Ellie said. They both looked at Eric.



“You’re looking at me? I have \$37 in the bank,” he laughed.

Matilda pulled out her phone.

\*\*\*

Five minutes later, Matilda led the way into the Chase branch. She walked up to the receptionist and tossed her card and ID down on the counter. “I need to withdraw some cash from my account. I’m not waiting for a teller.”

“Yes, of course. Please have a seat, someone will be right with you. Would you like some coffee or water?” the receptionist said as she hopped out of her seat.

“No, thank you,” Matilda said.

*Holy fuck! She’s actually running to get someone.*

Matilda, Eric, and Ellie sat down in the waiting area. As Jake suggested, she gave the receptionist thirty seconds, then put an annoyed look on her face as she pulled out her phone to check the time.

As she was putting her phone back in her purse, a middle-aged man in an oversized suit was walking briskly toward her.

“Ms. Benton,” his voice boomed. “My name is Alex Baker, I’m the branch manager. Thank you for stopping by; I’m so sorry for the wait. How can I help-”

“Matilda?!” Peter was in a cubicle desk area behind the waiting area. He must have heard her name.

*Holy fuck. Holy fuck. Holy fuck. I’m actually doing this. I can’t believe I’m doing this.*

“Peter. Hello,” Matilda said with a nod of her head.

She turned back to the manager. “Mr. Baker, I need to withdraw ten thousand dollars if you have the cash on hand. If you don’t have the cash, a cashier’s check will be fine, payable to Eric Rodriques “

Eric squeaked.

“Yes, of course, Ms. Benton. I’d be happy to assist. Do you have a moment to spare while I check the cash reserves? Otherwise, I can get a cashier’s check immediately and get you on your way.”

“I have a few minutes, but Jake is waiting for me,” she said, with a deliberate emphasis on the name. “Please, be quick. Either solution is fine.”

“Of course, Ms. Benton. We won’t keep Mr. Trellis waiting. Please, have a seat. I’ll be right back.”

*Did...? Did the branch manager just name drop on purpose? Is he smirking?*

As she was talking to the manager, Peter had walked over to say hello to Ellie and Eric. Matilda turned to join them.

“-work every other Saturday morning,” Peter was saying. “A lot of people open accounts on the weekends.”

Peter was staring at her. “Hi, Peter. What happened with the Board of Trade?” Matilda asked.

“Oh, ah. I left. Almost a year ago. And then the company that hired me from the Board of Trade closed about a month after I started. How...? How are you? I saw the vodka,” he asked.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I’m good, thanks. I finished the vodka label a little over a year ago and then went to work on a beer branding,” she said.

*He looks... slimy. Smarmy. Did he always look like this?*

“Oh, what kind of beer? With who?” Peter asked.

“The Trellis family,” Ellie blurted. She was vibrating with joy.

“Oh. Wow. Big money,” Peter said.

“Mmm,” Matilda muttered. *This is so awkward.*

“So, you do Jacob Trellis’s banking?” he asked, sounding puzzled.

Ellie snorted. Eric grinned.

“No, Peter. I don’t do his banking,” Matilda said. *Fuck you, Peter.*

“You’re picking up the check for him, then?” he asked.

“No, honey. I’m picking up the check for me, or, more accurately, for Eric,” Matilda said with a sigh.

Peter looked confused. He turned to look at Eric, who waved.

“He’s too fucking stupid to see it, babe,” Ellie said. “Just say it.”

“I’m with Jake, we’re together,” Matilda said quietly.

Peter’s mouth dropped open, “Together? Like, a couple? You’re dating?”

Matilda nodded. His incredulous expression pissed her off. So, she also added, “We’re living together. And fucking. A lot. The orgasms are unbelievable.”

Ellie burst out laughing. Eric threw himself back into the chair in the waiting area before he could fall down.

“He does this thing with his tongue... It’s amazing. Anyway, too much information. How’s your love life?” She asked.

“Oh. Ah- ” he said.

An arm came up around Matilda’s waist, “Holy fuck, what is taking so long, babe?” Jake said.

Matilda lifted an eyebrow. Not only was Jake here, but Sam and Noah were behind him. Eating popcorn.

*Assholes*, her look clearly said.

Jake was at Sam’s place when she called him. Sam lived a few blocks from here, but she wasn’t expecting them to actually show up.

“The manager wanted to check the cash reserves. I told him it was fine. I’m sorry, I didn’t think it’d take this long. Can I introduce you to an old friend?” She turned and smiled at Peter.

“Peter, this is Jake, Noah, and Sam Trellis,” she said conversationally.

“Peter?” Jake said while shaking hands, trying to sound surprised. “Ex-boyfriend Peter?”

“Indeed,” Matilda said.

“Huh. Anyway, are they almost done? Pete, go check on your boss, would ya?” Jake said as he casually bent down to kiss her. “What are we having for lunch, love? Are you done shopping?”

\*\*\*

“‘He does this thing with his tongue’ is going on your tombstone. It is literally the best thing you’ve ever said in my hearing,” Ellie cackled.

“I’m not going to lie. That was one of the most satisfying moments of my life,” Eric said. “It was so Matty just rambling and spazzing like she does when shit is awkward and she tells too much truth. What makes it better is that Peter *knew* that it was too much truth. Also, his face when she said ‘orgasms.’ Priceless.”

“I’m sorry, but when he asked if I was doing Jake’s banking, I had enough. Fuck that guy.” Matty high-fived Ellie.

“He thought you were doing my fucking banking?” Jake said in a tone of incredulity.

“Yes! He didn’t get that we were together.”

“Yeesh. I could have been there sooner to enjoy it, but we had to stop for fucking popcorn,” Jake glared at Sam.

Sam smiled his little smile. “I’m not sorry.”

## Chapter 23 – April

“Wow.” Jake’s mouth hung open.

“Really?” Matty said.

“Wow.”

“You can blink, you know,” Matilda laughed.

“Ummm,” Jake said.

“Your eyes are bugging out of your head.”

“Yep,” Jake said.

“Can I get more than one word? Is it OK for tonight?”  
Matilda asked.

Matilda looked down at her dress. “Ellie has dubbed it the Mermaid dress because it’s so fitted to the knee and then flares.” The dress started at the halter neck as a shimmering silver color and got darker as it went, such that the hem was pitch black with shimmering silver highlights. It had a plunging neckline. And no back.

The dress was decidedly more revealing than Matilda was comfortable with.

Jake continued to stare.

“Jake?” She asked again.

“Mmm?” He asked.

“Is it OK?” She wasn’t sure what she was going to do if it wasn’t right for the fundraiser.

Jake continued to stare.

“JACOB!” She snapped.

“Sorry! Sorry. You look amazing. It’s sparkly. It looks like the dress was made for you.”

Matilda’s cheeks heated. “It was.”

Jake smiled. “How did that happen? You’ve been very secretive about this.”

“When I didn’t find anything last weekend, Darla called her shopper.”

“Deo found this dress?” Jake asked. “I should do something nice for him.”

“Wow, I wouldn’t have expected you to know his name,” she laughed.

“He’s shopped with Darla for years.”

“He came over Monday to measure me. He’s in agreement. My hips are too big,” Matilda sighed.

“Deo has no respect for the female form. He’s gay. And, he thinks Bella is the most beautiful woman on the planet.” Jake made a face.

“Well, People Magazine thinks Bella is the fourth most beautiful woman on the planet, so he’s not far off the mark.” Matilda made a face back at him.

Jake rolled his eyes. “Clearly, they’ve never talked to her. Anyway, back to the dress.”

“Wel-” Matilda started.

“Wait, are there stockings under that dress?” Jake asked. “When we last talked about your hips, you were talking about why you were wearing stockings. Are there stockings involved in this dress?”

“There are several interesting things under this dress. You can look at them later,” she grinned.

“Fuck. It’s going to be a long night with that much cleavage showing *and* knowing there will be show-and-tell later,” Jake said.

Matilda’s face fell. “It’s too much, isn’t it? I told him it was too much. I don’t have to go. You should go-”

“Matilda, you look amazing. Stop it,” he said in a surprisingly firm tone.

Her gaze snapped to his face. “Jeez, sorry. I’ve never been to anything like this before. I have no idea what to expect.”

“I didn’t mean to snap. I’m sorry. I just don’t want you to start doubting how amazing you look. It’s not too much. You’re absolutely radiant. This is not my favorite Matilda, but it’s close,” Jake said with a half-smile.

She laughed. “Am I your favorite Matilda when I’m naked?”

“Duh,” he grinned. “I like jeans and t-shirt Matilda better than fancy Matilda too, but fancy Matilda comes with stockings. It’s a toss-up.” He shrugged.

She grinned back at him. “I like Shaggy-Jake more than tuxedo-Jake, too. You’re intimidatingly pretty in a tux, sir.”

“Pretty?” he scrunched up his face.

“Yep, you’re a pretty boy right now,” she giggled. His normally-messy hair was styled with a bit of product so it stayed neat. His light brown eyes glowed with joy.

He laughed. “Are you going to wear your hair down like that tonight?”

“Why? Should I put it up?” Matilda asked.

“I got you a present,” Jake grinned again.

Matilda raised her eyebrows. “You got me a present other than this dress? That seems excessive.”

“Meh,” he shrugged. “Do you not want your present then?”

She looked a bit concerned. “I didn’t get you a present. I was going to, but then I didn’t. I thought it’d be silly.”

“I’m pretty sure my present is under that dress,” Jake called over his shoulder as he went into the bedroom. “It’s like a Christmas tree - all the good stuff is hidden under it.”

He came out holding a large jewelry box. “I may have peeked at the dress on Thursday. However, looking at it on the hanger in the wardrobe bag did it absolutely no justice.”

Jake held the black velvet box out to her.

Matilda put her hands behind her back as she turned beet red. “You bought me jewelry?”

“Sort of,” Jake said. “Open it.”

“I don’t even know what to do with all these feels,” she said. Matilda didn’t reach for the box. “Maybe you should give me that some other time.”

“What? Why? What’s wrong?” Jake said.

“I’m a little overwhelmed right now!”

“Why?” Jake was confused.

“I dunno!” Matilda laughed.

“Matilda? Are you going to start crying?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I’ve never felt this fancy and pretty before, and now you’re giving me jewelry. Too much!” She covered her face. “I feel ridiculous.”

“Oh, Matty,” Jake sighed.

She peeked over the top of her hands at him. He had his sad smile on display. “I’m ruining this,” she whispered.

“Not ruining, just delaying,” Jake waved the box at her. “Take it! They’re for tonight.”

Matilda wrung her hands before taking the box. “Thank you,” she squeaked.

“You haven’t even opened it yet!” Jacob laughed.

“I know. Still, thank you,” she said again.

“You know, if that’s an empty box, you’re going to feel really stupid,” he teased.

She chuckled and relaxed a bit. “OK.”

“Matilda, this is the part where you’re supposed to open the box,” Jake coached.



“I know,” she said.

“So, open the box. Stop freaking out. It’s too big of a box to be an engagement ring,” he laughed. “Though-”

“No! I’m opening it,” she said.

The box held a set of opal and diamond hair combs with a set of matching earrings. Matilda gasped. “Jake, they’re beautiful.”

“I thought so, too. Darla said she’d keep her stylist at the house until after we got there in case you wanted her to do your hair or makeup, which is why we’re going early,” Jake said.

“I was thinking about that earlier, that I didn’t schedule someone to do my hair and that I probably should have done that and then I felt stupid for not knowing that I needed to do that so I was just going to do something else but now-”

“Matilda. This is like a bitchier version of prom. It’s going to be fine.”

“I didn’t go to prom,” she said.

“I know, but you’re going to be magnificent tonight,” he said with another little smile.

\*\*\*

Hank was watching Sam make a sandwich. “Sam, adults don’t eat peanut butter and jelly.”

Sam looked at him with a serious expression. “I beg to differ, sir. Tell me again why I have to go to this thing.”

“Because it’s important. Breast Cancer impacts a lot of lives and we should work to eliminate it,” Hank said with a sigh. They had this conversation three times in the last two days.

“That’s why we donate lots of money to it. My attendance at a snobby party isn’t going to end breast cancer,” Sam replied.

“Samuel, you’re going.”

“Dad, I’m *oh so* bad at this shit. All I do is offend people. I’ll stay here and watch Roscoe,” Sam volunteered.

“Samuel, you’re going,” Hank said again. “We’ve accepted the invitation on your behalf, you’ve been on the list for two months. Other people are donating to the cause to buy a seat and get the chance to talk with you. You’re going.”

“That makes other people fickle, selfish assholes that support a good cause for the wrong reasons. I don’t want to talk to those people. You go and pretend to be me,” Sam said, trying to sound reasonable. He wasn’t whining. Much.

Hank glared at his middle child. “You’re going. Go get dressed.”

“I’m not going,” Sam declared.

From the entryway, Sam and Hank heard Jake say, “Roscoooooe. Don’t jump. We’re fancy.”

Sam could taste Matilda’s anxiety and stress mingled with excitement from more than thirty feet away. “Well, fuck. So much for PB & J.”

He climbed the stairs to the bedroom he used when at his parent’s house. He’d been staying there more often since Jake lived with Matilda these days.

\*\*\*

It took three limos to get all of the Trellis family and their assorted guests to the fundraiser in Naperville. Hank, Darla, Jake, Matilda, Sam, and Luke were in the first limo. William, Beth, Adrian, and his date, Susan were in the second limo. Noah and his date, Emily, Matthew, and Ethan were in the third car.

Matilda gasped as they joined the line of cars waiting for entrance. “There are cameras up there.”

“Yep, they’ll take pictures for the society newspaper sections and blogs and whatnot,” Jake said.

“They’re going to take pictures while we’re walking in? Why wouldn’t they take pictures once we are seated?” She asked, a bit of panic in her voice.

“Most people prefer to be photographed while standing. It’s more flattering,” Hank said. “What’s wrong?”

“So, they’ll take pictures when we’re standing still?” Matilda asked. She was having trouble catching her breath.

“You look gorgeous, Matty. Don’t be scared of some cameras,” Darla laughed.

“Can we tell them not to take pictures?” Matty asked, breathing hard.

“Matilda, what’s wrong?” Jake asked.

She didn’t answer.

“Matilda?” Jake asked again.

“I can’t do this, Jake. I’m sorry. I can’t,” she said, gasping for air.

“What? Matilda? What’s wrong?” Jake was alarmed. “Should I call Adrian? He can run up here.”

“I just won’t get out of the car, you guys can go and I’ll just wait here, I’ll be here when you’re done, it’ll be fine,” she babbled.

\*\*\*

The anxiety rolling off Matty made Sam actually gag. He waited for Jake to say the right thing, to get it.

*Come on, man. She’s asking about pictures when walking. Put it together. Please, put it together. Please. Fuck,* Sam cursed silently.

The feeling of Other-Sam was coming. Sam pushed against Him. This couldn’t happen now. Other-Sam couldn’t be in public like this. *She needs to calm down.* She’s pulling Him forward.

Sam opened his mouth to speak, but the words wouldn't come out of his mouth. His vision was spotty. He looked at Hank and Darla. They didn't get it, didn't get why Matty was upset. Other-Sam pushed him back.

*No. No. NO! Not now, go back. Not no-*

"*Matilda,*" Samuel's quiet voice echoed through the limo, rolling like a wave. Her eyes snapped to him.

Sam snapped back to the forefront. *Oh, I'm back. OK. That wasn't bad,* Sam thought. He could still feel Other-Sam around the edges, but He seemed calm.

"You'll walk in with Jacob on your right arm and me on your left, behind Hank and Darla, and Luke will follow. No one in the crowd will risk my ire by publishing an unflattering photo of your walking," Sam said. "It'll be fine."

Jacob gasped. "Matty!"

*What the fuck, man. How did you NOT put that together, you fucking idiot?*

"Ah," Hank said. "I didn't think about that."

"I didn't, either," Darla looked at Matty with concern.

Matilda's gaze fell to her lap. Very close to tears, she would not make eye contact with anyone. "Please don't make me do this," she whispered. "They're going to laugh at me."

"They will not," Jake said. "They will not. You're absolutely stunning."

And Matty was gorgeous tonight. Vibrant red hair gathered into a tail, falling down her bare back with the hair combs positioned to hold it, green eyes highlighted with heavy makeup, glowing skin everywhere. She and Jake looked like a matched-set of beautiful people.

*She doesn't see it, though. She can't see it. Her colors are all fucked up again.*

"Jake, please don't make me-"

"No one in their right mind would laugh at you. How could you think -"

”*Matilda,*” Samuel said. Other-Sam surfaced again without warning. Then He stepped back again. *What the fuck? Other-Sam has never done this before.*

“Look at me,” Sam said.

She shifted in her seat before slowly meeting his gaze. “They will *not* laugh. Jake will be on one side. I’ll be on the other. I’ve never been photographed in a social setting with someone outside my immediate family. They’re not going to laugh.”

“Fuck,” Jake swore. “Fuck. I didn’t... I’m sorry, Matilda. But you can do this, I know you can. Maybe just go in with Sam. Just walk in with him. He’s right. They won’t question him. That might be better.”

“Jacob, you will walk with your Lady,” Samuel said.

*Whoa.* Sam fought a wave of vertigo. *Were the Other and I both driving on that one?*

“Sam, they’re going to-”

“No, Jacob. They will not. Lucas, you will follow.” Samuel said.

*Holy fuck, what is happening to me? Other-Sam just talked to Luke, but not Luke.* Sam looked at his youngest brother. *Does Luke have an Other, too?*

“I will follow, Samuel,” Luke said quietly, gaze focused down, avoiding eye contact and breathing deeply.

\*\*\*

*Luke knows. He knows this is going to be bad, that I shouldn’t be here, that I don’t belong. He’s the only one that understands. He won’t even look at anyone right now, he is so embarrassed,* Matilda thought.

“All will be well,” Hank said quietly to Matilda. “You’ll see.”

He stepped out of the car, then reached back for Darla's hand. Jake squeezed her cold fingers. "I love you. Think of the Christmas tree."

Matilda tried to smile. She was going to do this. She was going to make a fool of herself. They were all going to see and they would laugh at her, laugh at Jake. Laugh at Sam.

"Take Jacob's hand, Matilda. When you step out, pause for pictures. Don't move until Jacob does," Samuel said, voice still heavy with command.

Matilda took a deep breath and did as she was told. Getting out of the limo was awkward, but Jake was standing in front of her. They couldn't see her, yet.

Once she was on her feet, Jake turned to the crowd and stepped to the right so she was visible. Camera flashes popped.

Jake leaned down to whisper, "I can see right down that dress to some of the fun things waiting for me." He was so serious before his grin exploded, she couldn't help it. She smiled a bit.

Wrapping an arm around her waist, he moved a step further to the right and took her with him. The crowd of reporters began calling questions, asking for Matilda's name. Jake didn't answer and Matilda couldn't speak; her mouth was too dry.

Arm still around her waist, Jake stepped closer and met her eyes. "It is going to be fine," he said as he bent to kiss her neck. Somehow more intimate than a typical kiss, she flushed as the cameras snapped and the reporters continued to call questions.

Before she knew it, Sam had her arm tucked in his. Jake's fingers were laced with hers and they were moving slowly forward, perfectly in step.

"Jake, who is your-" someone called.

"Jacob, have you split with-" another called.

"Who designed the dress-?"

"May I have your name-?"

“Samuel is this your-”

Over the cacophony of questions, one was clearly audible and frequently repeated. “Jacob, where is Bella Morgan tonight?”

*That’s why he wanted me to walk with Sam. He didn’t want to have to explain going from Bella to me. I shouldn’t be here. He finally understands why I shouldn’t be here.*

Luke was out of the car now, walking behind her.

Sam’s calm voice boomed out as all other sound fell to the Earth. “My brother’s guest is Matilda Benton, a beloved part of our family and as dear to me as another sister.”

A wave of peace washed over her, calming her and making it easier to breathe. *I should have trusted that Sam would handle it, that he would help me.*

She looked up at Jake to find him watching her, love clear in his eyes. *I should have trusted both of them.* The cameras continued to flash, but there were fewer questions.

\*\*\*

As the second limo turned to enter the line waiting for drop-off, Adrian’s date giggled. “This is so exciting!”

Beth mentally rolled her eyes. Adrian’s dates were better than Jake’s old girlfriends and vastly preferable to Noah’s sex-kitten women. But, Adrian’s ladies were dumb as a box of rocks, one and all. This one worked in a telemarketing call center for as-seen-on-TV diabetes monitoring products.

*I wonder if Adrian has a dating service. ‘Yes, I need a pretty lady to go to a fancy event. She has to be stupid, though, so I’m not intimidated and can form complete sentences around her.’* Beth chuckled to herself.

*That’s not nice, Beth. Be nice. She’s nice enough.*

As per usual, Sam did exactly what Sam wanted, without regard for anyone else. He jumped right in the fun

car. And the limo only sat six people.

Beth and Luke had flipped a coin. The winner got to ride with Mom, Dad, Jake, Sam, and Matty.

*Note to self: Be more like, Sam. Don't ask permission,* she thought.

A wave of fierce pain stabbed into Beth's head. She doubled over and groaned.

"Beth!" Will and Adrian said simultaneously.

"My head, oh God, my head," she mumbled.

"Do you have the migraine meds in your purse?" Adrian asked.

As quickly as it hit, the stabbing pain was gone. "Ah, actually. I think I'm OK. That was weird," she muttered. "I'm a little dizzy, but it doesn't hurt anymore."

"Are you up for this thing? I don't think you need to be there," William said.

"I think- AH!" She doubled over again, grabbing her head. The pain was so sudden and sharp, she had to swallow stomach bile to avoid vomiting.

"I'll take you home, Beth. You can't do this tonight," Will said.

"Here, water. Where's your purse? Do you have that medication with you?" Adrian asked again.

"I didn't bring it," she groaned.

William was talking to the driver, arguing about driving back to the city. Beth wasn't listening. Her head was going to explode.

Adrian was talking to her, but Beth wasn't listening to that, either.

Will touched the back of her head. She lifted her face to him. "I'm going to call for a car. This guy can't take us back to the city."

"I'll be OK in a minute," she said.



“I don’t think so, princess,” Will’s lips turned up at the corners. “You’re toast for tonight. You can wear your fancy dress some other time. No one’s gonna see you in it.”

“Don’t you have to go to this, Will?” She asked. “I thought there was some super-secret covert meet up happening here.”

Will kinda smiled. His little Will smile, not the real smile. “I was supposed to talk to a senator about some defense stuff, it’s not super-secret. He’ll just have to find some other time for us to talk.”

“I’ll just order a Lyft and go home,” Beth said through another groan.

*What the fuck with the waves of pain?*

“You’re not getting into a car with a stranger like this,” Adrian said firmly. “I’ll take her home, Will.”

“What?!” Susan the not-smart-date sounded affronted.

William sighed. “Let me see what Hennessy is doing. He’ll come to get her if he can. Otherwise, maybe Ethan or Matthew will take her home. Luke is supposed to play piano later tonight at this thing.”

Will hit his speed dial.

\*\*\*

As the third limo approached the mansion, Noah’s date, Emily, giggled. Again. She was trying to tickle him. While he was in a tux. In a limo. With his brothers.

Noah could sense Ethan’s inner sigh.

*Sorry, man, he thought. I think this is ridiculous, too.*

Matthew seemed to be successfully ignoring them by staring out the window. *Smart man.*

As the limo slowed, Noah got hit with an intense wave of lust.

*What the fuck? She didn't touch any of the good bits! I can't get a hard-on right now. Think of something that is not sexy. Not sexy! Beth in pigtails. Awww, so cute. Mom when she's pissed. Not working. Not working. Fuck!*

And then it was gone. Just like that. Gone.

*Oh, no. Is this some new form of erectile dysfunction? Is this how it starts? Have I slept with the wrong woman and done something funky to my junk?*

The car was completely silent. Emily was staring at him. Ethan was staring at him. Matthew was holding the sides of his head and looked like he was going to puke.

*Did I say that out loud? I hope I didn't say that out loud.*

The wave of lust hit again. From completely soft and confused to rock hard and ready for action in 0.3 seconds.

*Oh, my God. Ummm, I wonder if Emily and I can stay in the limo for a little bit...*

\*\*\*

Claire Dermot disliked crowds. Waves of chaotic energy rolled off people and made her skin crawl. But, her husband, Thomas, came from old money. Social events and fundraisers came with the territory. She'd be burning calming sage to deal with the anxiety and migraine tonight.

As her face tingled with the sensation of happy energy, Claire looked to the door. Hank and Darla Trellis had just walked in.

Hank and Thomas grew up together, long-time close friends. When Hank parted ways with his family to marry Darla, the old nags of society said he'd be miserable and divorced within a year with nothing but a modest trust fund left to see him through.

*They got that one wrong, Claire thought. Really, really wrong.*

Hank and Darla had always been a source of light, joy, and happiness. They deserved the good that had come to them. But, their joined light was different tonight. Dimmer. Darla's energy looked... not right.

As Claire studied the pair, Jacob followed them in the door. Claire gasped.

Thomas leaned over. "Are you alright?"

"Jacob is in love," Claire whispered. Jake's gold-colored energy was brighter. Much brighter. Shared with the person next to him. Jake was bound.

"Hank said he was seeing someone new and that it was serious, so I guess I'm not surprised. Why the gasp?" Thomas asked.

"I can't see her through the crowd yet, but she's brilliant," Claire tried to explain.

"She's some sort of liquor consultant. She's supposed to be really good," he said.

Claire shook her head, then thought better of it. "Probably like that too, but her light is bright. Radiant. Shin-" Claire groaned.

"Claire?" Thomas asked, concerned.

"My head," Claire whimpered as she tried to turn away to look for a bathroom. She'd have to go out to the hall to get to the bathroom. She wasn't sure she could walk that far.

Thomas took her hand. "Claire?"

"I might be sick, Tom. We should go," she whispered.

"We can't go, yet. Take some deep breaths," he instructed.

"Tom, I can't... I'm going to be sick."

While Thomas watched, Sam Trellis walked into the room.

\*\*\*

Luke's head felt like it was going to explode. *How can he stand it? How can he not recognize it, feel it? How could she touch him, walk with him, without feeling it? Holy fuck.*

Luke surveyed the room. Even after the giant pulse outside, there was too much energy. He was going to be ill if he didn't shed it soon.

He began making a lap of the crowded room, touching as many people in greeting as he could, leaving a sense of calm peace behind him.

Someone in the front corner was trying to sponge energy. *Whoever's doing that is about to be sorry, he thought. Serves you right, asshole.*

A man in the front corner staggered over and started to snore as Luke approached. The people standing with him joked about one too many drinks on an empty stomach. *Yeah, we'll go with that... too much liquor.*

"What happened?" Matthew Trellis asked as he caught up with Luke.

"Matty got upset. Sam pulled too much energy then told me to follow." Luke shook his head, still trying to shake the sense of vertigo. "He spoke to the crowd outside, and I followed."

"You dropped the leech in the corner?" Matthew asked.

Luke snorted.

\*\*\*

After greeting the organizers, Jake pulled Matilda toward a quiet corner. She was walking with her head down, not making eye contact with anyone.

*FUCK! I should have thought about the damn Bella questions. FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!* Jack continuously mentally cursed.

The only woman he'd been photographed with at social events for almost two years was Bella. He hadn't dated anyone after ending things, and this was his first society shindig with Matilda. Of course, the photographers would ask. Bella went out of her way to pose for pictures.

"Matty?" Jake asked quietly.

She shook her head.

"OK, I'll talk. You don't have to talk. Would you look at me, though?"

Her grass-green eyes were glowing with unshed tears. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"No, Matty. No. I'm sorry. I didn't think about the Bella angle. I haven't been photographed with anyone since we split and she went out of her way for pictures at shit like this. I didn't think about them asking after her."

Matilda shook her head and sighed as her eyes dropped again. "Arm candy."

"Matty..." Jake knew the words were wrong again. "In all the conversations we've ever had, if I had the ability to take back one sentence, it'd be the one where I referred to a woman as arm candy. It was ugly and rude, and also the nicest thing I could truthfully say about Bella. Fucking 'arm candy' is going to be the death of me." He sighed.

"The irony of this," he said with a forced laugh, "is that you're radiantly beautiful. Every man in this room, and more than a few women, have given you a second and third glance."

"Jake, they're not looking because I'm pretty. They're looking because I can't fucking walk right and they're wondering what the fuck you're doing with me," Matty muttered.

"I don't think so, love." Jake tried to smile. "We could take a survey. 'Excuse me sir, is my girlfriend hot?' I'm not sure how scientific it'd be, but..."

Matty shook her head again.

“What are you doing, standing over here?” Sam asked in his soft voice as he approached.

“Fucking up words again,” Jake laughed without humor.

Sam scrunched up his face. “You do that a lot.”

Jake glared at his younger brother. “Fuck you, too.”

Sam sighed. “Matilda, why does it matter what other people think?”

She looked up at him, quiet. Sam was pale, his blue eyes more sunken than earlier. His face looked thinner. As she watched, he rubbed his temples and winced.

“Headache?” Jake asked.

Not distracted, Sam said, “I’m going to stand here and stare at you until you answer me, Matilda.

Matilda sighed and swallowed hard. “I don’t want to make anyone look foolish.”

“And you’re afraid that you look foolish?” Sam asked.

She nodded. “I do look foolish. People are glaring at me. I don’t belong here.”

“I’m confident you do belong here. You don’t know anyone here. Why does it matter if they glare at you?” Sam asked.

Matilda sighed again. “They’re laughing at me. And Jake. And you.”

Sam laughed. “Matty, that’s the funniest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

He kept laughing. When Matilda looked up at him, he was showing a grin. He was really, truly laughing like she made a joke.

“OK, I’ll bite. Why is that funny?” She asked.

“For a lot of reasons. But I’ll give you the top three,” Sam said, still chuckling.

“First, this is a fundraiser. These people want money and exposure and time for something. No one’s laughing at the richest person in the room. I could have shown up in a Hawaiian shirt and shorts. Everyone in the fucking room would be wondering why no one told them we were having a luau.

“Second, every asshole in this room has spent the last ten years trying to be a part of our family’s ‘inner circle’. They’re not glaring because of your little limp-”

Sam turned to a middle-aged man that was approaching them. “Go away. I don’t know who you are, but this is not the time to kiss my ass. Go away. But, thank you for proving a point. I’ll come to find you later. You can have three minutes.”

He continued in a gentler voice, “They’re not glaring because you’re beautiful. They’re glaring because you succeeded where they failed. And, you weren’t even trying.”

“Lastly, it is fucking hilarious that you think *anyone* in this family gives a flying fuck what *any* of these random people think of us. Those who are dear know better than to think us fools.

“You didn’t back down from Bella over Sunday dinner. I’ve never seen you back down in meetings over this shit. You laughed off your stupid ex-boyfriend and his ignorance. I don’t understand why this is different. You’re making this harder than it needs to be.

“Use your colors without fear, even when they don’t match. You are welcome among us. And, you can call me.”

Sam bent forward to kiss her forehead. “Stop this. Now.” His voice was heavy with command again. He turned and walked away without another word.

“He keeps telling me to use my colors. What fucking colors? I don’t get it,” Matilda said.

Jake laughed, a true laugh. “I never claimed Midas made sense, but he’s always right. Better at words than me, too, apparently.”

Matilda's lips turned up. "I don't think he's better at words. I think he's just more distracting. Plus, now I'm trying to think of him in a Hawaiian shirt. I don't think I've ever seen him in anything that wasn't a solid color."

Jake grinned. "Nope. Midas doesn't do patterns. Not even when he wears a tie."

"How do you not even have drinks yet? Jake is a fail date," Noah said as he walked up behind Jake. After handing them each a tumbler of whiskey, he said, "You know, I called dibs. He also has no respect for dibs. Jake sucks. You should come home with me."

"Fuck off, Noah," Jake said.

"See? He sucks. Do you know what doesn't suck? That dress. If I stand just right and angle my head perfectly, I can see the shadow of a turquoise bustier bra thing. It's killing me."

"Oh my God, Noah," Matilda said, laughing.

"Noah, where is what's-her-face, your date?" Jake asked.

"Emily," Matilda said.

"In the bathroom, doing girl things. Is it really turquoise? Because good grief. With the red hair and the green eyes. Holy hell," Noah fake panted.

"Deo will never shop for me again," Matilda told Jake.

"See, I think Deo should *always* shop for you," Jake joked.

"Your brother's panting at me."

"He does that," Jake smacked Noah in the forehead. "Go away."

"That dress is like a Christmas tree!" Noah proclaimed as he went in search of his date.

Matilda started to giggle.



*Ah. Brothers. Assholes, but good assholes,* Jake thought. *We're back to DefCon 2.*

“So, there are probably four couples in this room that my family actually likes. Want to meet them?” Jake asked.

Matilda's lips turned up at the corners. “OK.”

“Fair warning: Pretty much everyone else falls into the ‘asshole’ category Sam mentioned. They're going to be sneering and rude because you're with us. If that's going to bother you, we can leave now. I really don't care about staying. We made an appearance, and we can now make a disappearance. Preference?”

“Let's meet your friends and see how it goes,” she said.

They made it another forty-five minutes. After the sixth random woman made an obvious pass at him while completely ignoring Matilda, Jake asked her if they could leave. Matilda agreed immediately.

## Chapter 24 – June

“I’m back!” Matilda called as she came into the apartment.

“How was best friend shopping?” Jake asked from the pool room. He and Noah walked out to the living area together.

“Filled with shopping,” she said with a little kiss for Jake and a cheek kiss for Noah. “Anything fun going on around here?”

“FOOOOOOODDDDD!” Noah groaned. “Feed me!”

“Don’t look at me,” Jake said. “I ate breakfast like two hours ago.”

“I already ate,” Matilda laughed. “There’s food. Feed yourself.”

“Are the mystery pickles still in the fridge? What kind of wager can I get going on a dare to eat one?” Noah asked.

“No dice,” Jake said. “Those pickles need to stay there until the apocalypse.”

Noah’s eyebrows quirked. “They’re sentimental pickles, now?”

“More just funny,” Matilda said as she chuckled.

“Well, you both suck. I’m going to go find a sibling that will feed me. See yas tomorrow!” Noah called over his shoulder as he left.

“So, what’d ya buy? Are there fun under-things in that bag? Should I be excited?” Jake asked.

“I got you a present. It’s a little present, so don’t get too excited. But I thought it was fun and I hope you like it. But if you don’t like it, you don’t have to wear it. I won’t mind,” Matilda hedged.

Jake grinned. "I got a present? Is this a 'we've been together for three months' present?"

"That did occur to me a few days ago. We've been together for three months. Like, really really together." Matilda turned a bit red.

"I know," Jake said. "We went from not talking on a Thursday to office quickie and living together by Friday."

"You snuck up on me," Matilda said.

"I'm stealthy like that." Jake grinned.

"So, I've been pondering what to get you," Matilda said. "It's incredibly hard to shop for a rich person. Just so you know."

"The suspense is killing me," Jake said.

Matilda handed him the bag.

Jake threw his head back and laughed. "It couldn't be more perfect," he said as he pulled his shirt off and put on the new Scooby-Doo t-shirt. "I'm still keeping the old one, though."

Matilda's eyebrows lifted. "It's a sentimental holey t-shirt?"

Jake nodded. "And also comfortable."

He kissed her. "Thank you for the t-shirt, love. I got you something, too, but I'm nervous that you'll be upset. If you don't like it, we'll undo it, ok? I made sure we could put it back if we had to."

"OK?" Matilda said, unsure what to expect. Ellie had spent most of the morning coaching her on how to accept a marriage proposal while trying to get her to try on engagement rings.

Jake came out of the bedroom with a large white box.

"Where was that hiding?" Matilda laughed.

"Under the bed," he smiled a bit. "Just know that we can change it, OK? If you don't want it like this, we can put it

back.”

“OK,” she said, even more unsure. Jake put the box down in front of her on the kitchen island.

“It’s not jewelry,” he teased.

Matilda untied the bow from the box and lifted the lid. The leather carryall from her dad sat under a layer of purple tissue paper.

“How?!” She gasped, as she took it out of the box.

She, Ellie, and Eric had taken the bag to every last leather repair shop in the greater Chicago area over the course of a year. The bag was beyond repair.

“It’s not the same bag. I found a leatherworker to replicate the bag and then move the inlay from the original bag,” Jake explained.

Matilda opened the bag to see the same gold engraved inlay. Tears were streaming down her face. “How?” She asked again. “How did you get the bag? It was in the closet at my apartment.”

“Eric got it for me. I couldn’t ask Ellie. Nothing is sacred to her, she’d let it slip,” Jake tried to smile. “Do you like it? We can put it back. Eric put the original back in your apartment.”

Matilda wrapped him in a hug. “Thank you,” she choked out. “It’s wonderful.”

\*\*\*

“You know, I should have known you and Eric were up to something,” Matilda said later, as they were loafing on the couch. Matilda was reading, head resting in Jake’s lap, while Jake watched TV and played with her hair. He liked running his fingers through the curls.

“Why? What did he let slip?”

“Absolutely nothing. Ellie spent most of this morning trying to nag me into looking at diamond rings. Eric didn’t really participate. I should have known. He’s a sucker for fancy shopping, and he wasn’t really into it,” Matilda said.

Jake’s eyebrows shot up. “Was Ellie successful in her nagging?”

“Not really, you can keep breathing,” she laughed.

“Pfft. Matty, I have zero anxiety about diamond rings and your finger being in the same sentence together. I thought *you* had anxiety about those things hanging out together,” he said.

She scrunched up her face. “I do.”

“Less anxiety these days?” Jake asked.

“Mmhmm,” she nodded.

“Do you want to have that conversation?” He asked.

She considered it. “Are you going to be unhappy if we don’t have that conversation?”

“No, we don’t have to have it right now. I’d like to have that conversation at some point, though,” he said.

“We don’t need to hurry?” She asked.

“No, love. No rush.”

“OK. Not yet, then. OK?” She asked, chewing on her lip.

“How about a less intense conversation in the same general neighborhood?” He asked.

“What conversation?”

“When is the lease on your apartment up?” Jake asked.

“Oh,” she said, sitting up.

“You only go there to pick up mail and check on stuff. Do you want to keep it?” He asked.

“Um,” she said. “I haven’t really thought about it. The lease is up at the end of August. I’d need to tell them

soon if I'm not renewing. What would I do with my stuff?"

"I don't know. You could donate it. We could donate my stuff and keep your stuff," Jake said.

"Your stuff is nicer than my stuff, Jake," she said.

"It's stuff, Matty. I don't care. Whatever you want to do. We're just never at your place anymore. We're effectively living together, anyway. Let's pick a place and call it ours. It doesn't even have to be *this* place. We can move if you want. Be closer to Ellie and Charlie or Hank and Darla. Whatever. I'll be happy wherever you're happy."

"Can I think about it?" Matty asked.

"Of course," he said. "Should I be concerned that this is alarming to you? You haven't seemed to miss your place."

"Well, I mean, the bathtub is here..." She tried to joke.

Jake pulled out his sad smile.

"I don't miss my place. And I don't want to be away from you. It's just comforting to know it's there," she said quietly.

"Still making fallback plans?" He asked.

"I haven't really thought about it, that's all. It didn't occur to me before now," she said.

"You'll think about it?" He asked.

"I will."

"Are you going to lay back down now or are you too freaked out?" He asked with a grin.

"Can I go get my phone and then lay back down?" She smiled back.

"Ahh, I see. There needs to be a best-friends consensus on this. I should have floated this in the group thread first," Jake teased.

"Ellie's gonna be pissed that you didn't ask her permission," Matilda grinned as she got off the couch.

Matilda came to a full stop after picking up her phone. Her face fell.

“Matty? What is it?” Jake asked.

She didn’t respond.

As she turned pale, Jake got up to look over her shoulder.

MOM: Matty, darling! I hope all is well with you. We haven’t talked in forever. Are you open for lunch sometime this week? I’d like to catch up. Maybe Miranda can join us.

“Who is Miranda?” Jake asked.

“My sister,” Matilda mumbled. “I haven’t heard from my mom in almost two years. Do you think she has some sort of awful news to tell me?”

“I don’t think so,” Jake said. “I think Midas has been smiting while we’ve been distracted. She popped up suddenly offering up a meet and greet with a sibling she had previously denied you. She wants something from you.”

“Oh,” Matilda gasped. “You don’t think Sam actually did that, do you?”

“Matilda, that ad agency guy that grabbed you a couple of months ago is working at a UPS Store these days,” Jake said. “There’s not an ad agency in the country that’ll hire him, even at entry-level. Sam can be savage.”

“Well, he needs to not do that!” Matilda said, panicked. “To either of them. I probably broke that asshole’s foot when I stomped on it. He learned not to touch me the hard way.”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure he’s learned not to touch *anyone* without consent the hard way by now,” Jake chuckled.

“It’s not funny, Jake!”

“Sorry Matty, but neither of them gets sympathy from me. Your mom can rot in hell as far as I’m concerned. I’m more apt to forgive the ad guy, and that ain’t happening any time soon, babe.”

“Matilda! Where are you going?” Jake called as she was pulling on shoes.

“I have to talk to Sam. He can’t do this,” she said.

“Wait, I’ll come, too. This is a conversation I’d love to hear,” Jake said, laughing.

\*\*\*

“No,” Sam said.

Jake and Matilda were sitting at the kitchen island in his apartment as he made himself pasta.

“What do you mean, no?” Matty asked.

“I mean no. Ryan Popovich is on my shit list for another nine months, and I told him as much when he was fired from his job. He will learn to keep his hands to himself.”

“Sam! Holy fuck!” Matilda said, shocked.

“Why are you upset?” Sam asked.

“You can’t go around ruining people’s lives like that! Who died and made you the decider of appropriate behavior?” She snapped.

“Well, Matilda. With great power, comes great responsib-”

“YOU ARE NOT SPIDER-MAN. STOP THIS!” She yelled. “And you both need to stop laughing! This is not funny.”

Sam looked at Jake. Jake looked at Sam. “Yes, it is.” They both said at the same time.

“UGH!” Matilda groaned.

Sam sighed. “Matty, the man assaulted you-”

“AND I BROKE HIS FOOT!”

“Yes, you did. Then he hobbled over to me and started saying something like ‘I don’t know what that little bitch told you...’ Those are not the words of someone that learned a



lesson. Those are also not the words of someone that had a momentary lapse in judgment. Those *are* the words of someone that habitually mistreats people and expects to get away with it.

“I was in the room with him for less than thirty seconds before I got a splitting headache from his... foulness. The man belongs in prison. He got off easy. So, no. I won’t be making nice with him anytime soon.”

“That’s it? End of story?” She asked.

Sam shrugged. “As far as I’m concerned, yes.”

“What about my mom?” She asked.

“Oh. That,” he said.

“What did you do?” She asked, quieter.

“So, I don’t have as much moral high ground to stand on with your mom. But, people don’t get to treat you like she has treated you. I’m not really crushing them, just making things painful,” Sam said.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Matilda said. “What did you do to her?”

“Oh, I didn’t do anything to her,” Sam said with another shrug.

“Sam? Please?” Matty said quietly.

He sighed. “I’m just making things a little uncomfortable for the investment firm. Your mom doesn’t work, and even if she did, I don’t think I’d hurt her like that. I’m just making the family business a little tighter. Just enough for them to know I’m displeased. I’m not hiding the fact that it’s me. And it’s actually me doing it, not my company. I’m making it as clear as possible that I am, personally, very displeased with them, specifically.”

“To what end?” Matilda asked.

“I feel like they owe you an apology at the very least. I would like you to have whatever level of relationship you want with your mom and her family,” Sam said.

“So, you’re forcing them to talk to me, whether they want me around or not,” she said with a frown. “How sincere would that apology be, Sam? What kind of relationship would that be? ‘Don’t make me mad or Sam will destroy you.’”

Sam paused to consider her point while stirring butter into his pasta. “I can’t force them to be good people. You’re right about that. I can’t force them to love you. You’re right about that, too, and it’s their loss. I guess I want them to know that you can hurt them.

“And, you can hurt them, you know? I’d crush them without a backward glance or second thought if you asked. But, I know that’s not what you want.”

Matilda shook her head. “That’s not what I want.”

“You want me to stop?” He asked.

“I want you to stop. I don’t want to be where I’m not wanted,” Matilda said.

“Then I’ll stop. But they don’t get to hurt you. That needs to be clear.”

“Thank you,” Matilda said quietly.

“Are you really just eating butter and noodles?” Jake asked, somewhere between fascinated and disgusted.

“No, salt and pepper, too,” Sam said defensively.

“I feel like you’re getting weirder, Sam. Maybe Ethan should come live with you now that I’ve moved out,” Jake said.

\*\*\*

MATILDA: Hi, Mom. It’s good to hear from you. I talked to Sam. He’ll stop doing whatever he was doing. You don’t have to see me. Hope you’re well.

MOM: Matty, don’t be silly. I want to see you. Wednesday lunch? Italian Village?

MOM: Miranda can't do this week, so maybe we can do a girls' weekend or something soon.

MATILDA: OK. I'll see you at 11:30 on Wednesday.

\*\*\*

"Do you want me to go with you?" Jake asked for the fourth time. They were on their way to Sunday dinner.

"No, I'll be fine," Matilda said without excitement.

"Do you want us to 'happen' upon you at lunch on Wednesday?"

Matilda smiled a little. "No, please don't."

"I won't let Sam bring popcorn this time. Promise," Jake laughed. "But, I have to admit. The popcorn made it better in retrospect."

"No, Jake. I'll have lunch and see what she wants."

"Are we telling the family about this?" He asked.

"Your family? I don't know. Why?" She asked.

Jake sighed. "Never mind."

\*\*\*

"I'm going with you," Darla declared. "You message that woman and tell her I'm coming, too."

"No, Darla. Really. It'll be fine. You don't have to-"

"Matilda. You message her right now. She and I have some things to discuss," Darla said.

"Darla, you don't have to do that, really. I'll be fine. I'll see what she wants and then be done with it," Matilda said.

"I wasn't asking. If you don't message her now, I will get her information from Hennessy. I know he has it," Darla snapped.

Darla glared at Hennessy as if daring him to disagree. "I'll send it to you right now," he said.

"Hennessy-" Matilda said.

"Can we record this?" Noah asked.

"Fuck that, let's make reservations," Ethan suggested.

"That's what I said," Jake agreed.

"Honey," Hank said. "How about we let Matilda field the first one? Then you can get involved if needed from there."

"No, Hank. Stay out of this," Darla warned.

"Matty, do you want any of us there?" Sam asked.

"I don't even know why she wants to see me. I'm afraid of what she's going to say to you if you're there. The last time I saw this woman, she literally told me I was too ugly to be seen with her in public. She's not tactful. I'm going to feel horrible if she treats *any* of you strangely, and I'm a little worried that Darla will go to jail for murdering my loser mom over pasta," Matty rambled.

"So that's a no?" William asked.

Matilda looked around the table. "I love you for wanting to go with me, but I don't think you should go with me. I think more people there will make her more obnoxious or make things tenser."

"What if we did like a 12:15 lunch reservation? Lunch would be well underway, maybe even wrapping up. And, if she's an asshole, you can give me a sign and I can glare at her and be scary," William said. "I can be scary."

"If she's an asshole, they can go back to dealing with me," Sam said with no emotion. "You can be scary, I can be savage."

The table was silent.

Sam took a bite of bread. "So, that's settled. Can I take leftovers home, Mom?"

\*\*\*

Matilda spent more than an hour getting ready for lunch on Wednesday. Her hair was completely straightened and back in a loose knot. Her makeup was perfect. Form-fitting black pants, the shimmery silver tank that Jake liked so much, and some fine silver jewelry.

She laughed to herself when she stepped out into misting rain. *Of course.*

It was less than four blocks to the restaurant, so she took out her umbrella and started walking. Her mind kept wandering back to the day she met Jake, and how much had changed in her life since then. How much *more* there was to her life now.

Eighteen months ago, this lunch date would have been the most important thing on her calendar. She'd have spent an untold number of hours mentally preparing to put her best self forward. To make herself appealing to her mom and prove that she could be a part of that family.

Now, more than anything else, she wanted to get it over with. Once she knew what Megan wanted, they could resolve it and move on.

*I guess I don't really need her, after all. I've made do without her for so long, now it just feels like noise,* Matilda thought.

Then she mentally chided herself, *She's the only parent I have left; I shouldn't think like that.*

Matilda arrived five minutes early and was surprised to find her mom waiting. Megan was usually late.

"Matilda, honey! You look so beautiful!" Megan gushed as she did her weird not-hug-kiss sound thing.

"Hi Mom, you look well. How have you been?" Matty asked as she sat.

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm just so glad to see you! We haven't seen each other in forever. How come you never call

your momma?” Megan said teasingly.

*I have no idea how to answer that,* Matilda thought.

After a minute, Matilda said, “I had no idea you wanted to hear from me.”

Megan’s face fell. “Matilda! Of course, I want to hear from you. Why wouldn’t I want to hear from you? You’re my daughter! Now I know your dad kept us apart while you were growing up. And I know you wanted to meet your brother and sister, but they weren’t ready. I don’t know why you’d think I wouldn’t want to hear from you or see you, though.”

The waiter approached to take drink orders. Megan ordered a martini. Matilda had water.

“Miranda and I usually have martinis together. You two are just gonna be peas in a pod!”

Matilda stared at her mother, at a complete loss for what to say.

Eventually, she cleared her throat. “Ah, Dad didn’t keep you away, Mom. You stayed away. Those are two different things. And I thought you didn’t want to hear from me because the last time we talked, you told me you couldn’t be seen with me in public because I’m disabled.”

Megan’s eyes got huge. “What are you talking about? I said no such thing.”

When the waiter returned, Matilda ordered a double shot of whiskey on the rocks.

“Um, how do you remember our last conversation, Mom?” Matilda asked.

“You wanted to meet Max and Miranda, but I hadn’t even talked to them about you yet, and Miranda had just met Lawrence and Max was just getting settled in the business. You wanted to meet them and I said the timing wasn’t right. There were a lot of social things going on where you wouldn’t feel comfortable because things weren’t accessible.

“I vividly recall telling you how much I enjoy our time together and how proud I am of you. Now, why in the world

would you think that I wouldn't want to be seen with you?! That's right up there with your father telling me I'd just get in the way while you were growing up." Megan's eyes were actually shining with unshed tears.

*What the fuck? Did I misinterpret that whole conversation with her? Did I... take it out of context?* Matilda wondered.

"Mom, Dad didn't keep you from seeing me when I was little. He and I talked about that. Often. Until I was a teenager, he maintained that you were away doing critical things and that you left me with him because you knew he'd take good care of me. The man never said a word against you. There's no way he kept you away. You didn't even call," Matilda said.

"Matty, yes, he did keep me away. Now, I admit, I was young and stupid and I hit the road when times got tough. I'm not proud of that. But, I grew up a lot after Charles and I got married and after your brother was born. I tried to be a part of your life constantly. He kept telling me I'd just confuse you, confuse things. He told me that being around your siblings would make you feel bad, that you were struggling and didn't need to see me with kids that didn't have problems. That it was unfair to do that to you.

"Your daddy was a good man, and he did an amazing job raising you into the woman you are. Look how beautiful you are! But he wasn't a saint. And he wouldn't let me see you. I tried. I tried every last Christmas and birthday and random times in-between. He said no.

"Charles wanted to get a lawyer and sue for custody rights, but I couldn't see pulling you out of everything you knew in the world and dropping you into a high-stress environment. I was the one that left, after all.

"When I heard Darren died, I came to the services because I was hoping I could know you. Why else would I go to the services?" Megan asked. A few tears were dripping down her face.

*What the fuck? What the fuck? What the fuck? What do I say to this?* Matilda wondered. *I can't imagine Dad kept her away. He and I talked about this. He would have told me. Right?*

Matilda swallowed her whiskey in two gulps and then ordered another.

“Now, enough about that. It’s all in the past, we can’t take it back even if we wanted to,” Megan said, wiping her eyes. “Tell me about you. How are you? I saw a picture of you in the paper wearing a dress that took the breath right out of my chest! I clipped it from the paper and told Charles ‘That’s *my* girl!’ He’s still laughing about it. Tells me I should take up scrapbooking like some suburban housewife!”

“Mmm. That was two months ago. Why not reach out then?” Matilda asked.

“Well, we hadn’t talked in so long, I didn’t want to crawl out of the woodwork just because your picture was in the paper. Your sister was getting married right around then and things were crazy, so I waited for them to settle down,” Megan said.

The waiter took their orders. Megan got a salad. Matilda ordered lasagna and thought of Darla. *What would Darla think of this?*

“Your sister and I always split a salad. Lasagna. So heavy!” Megan said.

Megan reached across the table and grabbed Matty’s hand. “Now, you didn’t answer me, sweetheart. How are you? What is going on with you?”

“Uh, well. I think you know some of how I am and what’s going on with me,” Matilda said.

“What do you mean?” Megan asked.

“I’m dating Jake Trellis,” Matilda said, somehow embarrassed by this conversation.

“You’re dating someone named Jake now? Jacob? Last we talked, it was Peter, right? Moved on, huh?”



“Yeah, Mom. Peter and I split shortly after the last time we talked. He left me for another woman. That’s over and done with. I’m... Yeah. Over and done,” Matilda said.

“Oh, Matty, I’m so sorry honey. Men are like that, though. They have a wandering eye. Can’t help themselves. And Peter was at the Board of Trade or something, right? He’s on his way up in the world. And, well, the bigger the britches, the more room for bitches.” Megan nodded like that made sense. “Let’s just hope he ends up getting what he deserves in life and you and I just move on!”

*I need more liquor for this lunch. I wonder if the waiter would just leave the bottle.*

“Ah, so Jake and I have been together for three months. Three months this last Saturday,” Matilda said.

“Oh, are you getting serious?” Megan asked with a wink.

“Mom, I’m having a really hard time understanding what’s going on. What is it that you want?” Matilda got right to the point.

Megan’s face fell again. “I... I wanted to see you, darling.”

“And?” Matilda asked.

“There’s not really an ‘and’, Matilda. Miranda has been wanting to meet you for a long time. Max, too. Now that the wedding is done, everyone’s more available,” Megan said, looking hurt.

“And what is it you need from Sam?” Matilda asked.

“Sam? I thought his name was Jake? I’m sorry I got that wrong. I could have sworn you said Jake.”

“No, my... his name is Jake. Jake is my boyfriend,” Matilda said.

“Who is Sam? You mentioned Sam in your text, too. I’m sorry, I’m a little confused. Maybe I drank that martini too fast!” Megan chuckled.

“Sam Trellis. Of Trellis Industries,” Matilda said, completely dumbfounded.

“Trellis! Yikes. Big money there. Scary big money. Why would I need something from him? We try to fly under that type of radar! He’d squash me like a bug if I look at him cross-eyed. Do you know Sam?” Megan asked.

“Uh, yeah. I know Sam. I did work for Trellis last year into this spring as they launched a beer label. And Jake is Sam’s older brother. That picture you saw of me in the paper was taken at a fundraiser with them. I didn’t look at the paper that day, but I’m sure they were in the picture with me. I was with them.”

Megan’s mouth was hanging open. “Uh. Well. Matty. Um.” She took a deep breath and let it out. “Matty, I need to ask this and I don’t mean anything by it, but I still need to ask it because I’m your mother and I know about these things first hand. Don’t get mad, OK?”

Matilda watched her mother with morbid fascination. *This is like Bella with the blow job. I just can’t help myself.*

“O-OK,” Matilda agreed.

“Are you sure this is what you want? That family, the Trellis family, they’re really big and have a horrific amount of money. If things go south, they could destroy you without another thought. If you did something this Jake didn’t like, he could just ruin your life in passing and move on to the next woman.”

“They wouldn’t do that, Mom. That’s not how they are.”

*Unless Sam decides that’s how they are, Matilda mentally corrected herself. But he wouldn’t do that to me. I know he wouldn’t do that. He’d have to be really really angry to do that.*

“I’m sure it seems that way. I’m sure it does. And I’m sure Jake is a wonderful person. But, those ultra-rich people get it in their heads that someone or something needs to be

punished or changed or adjusted, and they just do what they want.

“Your grandfather is nowhere near that rich and he did it to your father and me. While I was pregnant with you, he was unhappy that your dad gave up law and bought the bar, said he was a washout and a loser and cut us off, it made everything so hard.

“I just don’t want to see you get crushed, honey. I don’t want to see you miserable. And, I mean. Those Trellis boys. They’re all good looking, right? How long before Jake has a mistress on the side? Talk about big britches, he’ll probably have a harem going before long. How serious are you two, anyway?”

“Uh, we’re living together. He wouldn’t have a girlfriend on the side, Mom. He just isn’t the type. Mom, Dad gave up-”

“Living together!? I thought you had only been together for a couple of months. Matilda, why move so fast? What happens when he gets tired of being with one woman? Are you OK with him having someone on the side? I had to live like that for a while with Charles and it was terrible.

“I’ve never felt so low in my entire life. I didn’t deserve it and you don’t deserve it, either. You need to find someone without all the complications. You deserve an uncomplicated life, where you can be comfortable. I mean, that kind of lifestyle, that can’t be good for you!

“We all get what we deserve, honey. And you just don’t deserve that level of nonsense. You leave that in the rearview mirror.

“I told your sister the same thing and she didn’t listen and now she’s dealing with Lawrence stepping out on her. I told her before they were married not to do it and she said they’d been together too long to split up and now look at her. Miserable. And your grandfather told her that she made her bed and she could just lay in it, that Lawrence is too important to the business to be losing him over some damn marriage.

“Now, I love my daddy, but he’s not a good man like your daddy was or like Charles is. My poor girl is unhappy and stuck. So, now they’re married just two months and going to therapy. Can you believe it?”

Megan paused in her ramble to finish off her martini as the food arrived. Matilda ordered her third drink.

\*\*\*

JAKE: How did lunch go?

JAKE: Matty, are you OK?

JAKE: I’m getting worried. It’s after 2:00.

(Missed Call: Jake)

MATILDA: hI. come get me? Drunk

(Missed Call: Jake)

MATILDA: missed it

JAKE: Where are you?

MATILDA: Italy

JAKE: Italian Village still?

MATILDA: k

\*\*\*

“Hi,” Jake said with a smile for the hostess. “Is there a tiny drunken redhead hanging out in here somewhere?”

“Oh yes. We were just debating who to call for them,” the hostess said.

“Woo, they’re both here. OK. This is going to be great,” Jake said, still smiling.

He could hear a woman cackling as the waitress walked him back to the table, “Oh boy.”

“Should we flag a cab or anything? We cut them off about a half-hour ago. The older one almost fell down the stairs.”

“I’ll get it sorted out. Is the bill paid?”

“Not yet.”

“OK, here’s a card. Go nuts. Everyone gets a tip. Sorry about this,” he said as he handed over the black AmEx. The hostess’s eyes bugged out.

While he agreed with Matty that the card was stupid, Jake liked it for occasions like this. It communicated, “I don’t give a fuck if you overcharge. Sorry my girlfriend is drunk and silly.”

“Why, hello lady-love. How are you?” Jake asked as he sat down in the booth next to Matilda.

“Jake! You’re here!”

“I am,” he said.

“I’m drunk!” Matty said with glee.

“I see that. Want to introduce me to your mom?” He asked.

“No,” Matty said solemnly.

“Why not?” Jake asked, trying to keep a straight face.

“She thinks your britches are stuffed with bitches,” she said while shaking her head.

Megan sat across the table, watching Jake closely.

*Is she drunk? She looks pretty focused to be drunk,* Jake thought.

“Megan, do you need help getting home?” Jake asked. He’d be polite, but nothing more.

“No, I’ll be fine, thank you,” Megan said slowly. Clearly.

Jake met her eyes. *Yeah, there’s no way she’s fall-down-stairs drunk. What the fuck is going on?*

The hostess reappeared with the check and the credit card.

“Thanks,” Jake said. Without looking at the check or the woman, he scribbled his name on the paper and handed the folio back to her.

After the hostess walked away, Megan said, “That girl undid extra buttons and is wiggling her ass for you.”

Jake shrugged. “I don’t care. Are you ladies done?”

“I don’t have buttons to undo, but I’ll wiggle my ass for you when we get home,” Matilda said in a stage whisper.

Jake grinned. “Promise?”

“Uh-huh,” Matty nodded, serious again.

“Did you eat? Like actual food?” Jake asked, laughing.

“Yup. I had lasagna and thought of Darla.”

“OK. So, there’s something in your belly. Are you ready to go?”

“Yup. Bye, Mom!” Matty made kissy sounds at Megan. “Let’s not do the weird not-hug-air-kiss thing anymore.”

“Bye Matty. I’ll see you soon,” Megan said, still watching Jake closely.

\*\*\*

Matilda woke up Thursday morning with a splitting headache. Jake had pumped her full of water, food, and aspirin Wednesday evening. They had sex at some point, she remembered that. But she didn’t remember going to bed.

She walked out into an empty apartment. There was a note on the kitchen counter:

I hope you’re still sleeping when I get back. I’ll bring lunch with me.

Her mind was slowly getting fired up. *Yesterday was a shit-show*, she thought.

After a shower, a good tooth brushing, and more water, Matilda felt almost human again. It was 11:30. She missed half the day.

After starting up her laptop, she went on a search for Illinois Property records. So much of the prior day was odd, she felt the need to reaffirm something concrete.

*When did Dad buy the bar? He told me he bought the bar when I was two. Not before I was born. He never said he left his law practice because of me, but I'd always believed that was true because of the timing.*

The search was complicated by the fact that the bar had been demolished more than a year ago. That address was now part of a different zoning structure and no longer valid. When Jake got home at 1:00, she was still digging.

“What are we looking for?” He asked over her shoulder.

“Hi,” she said, subdued. “I’m sorry about yesterday.”

“How are you feeling?” He asked. “I’ve never seen you get drunk before. I’ve never seen you have more than a drink, really. Even when we were searching for beer, you didn’t drink much.”

“I’m fine. Thank you for helping me,” she said, still quiet.

Jake rolled his eyes. “Fine, huh?”

Her lips tipped up at the corners, not quite a smile. “I really am OK. I think because you helped. You’re right, I don’t drink like that. It’s harder to navigate with the CP when I have more than a drink. I was on my sixth shot of whiskey by the time food had arrived.”

“Wow. It was that bad?” He asked, concerned.

“Not bad. Confusing. She said my dad wouldn’t let her see me when I was little, that he quit practicing law before I was born and bought the bar because he was a washout. Just

weird stuff like that. And I can't ask him, so I'm trying to find the property records for the bar," she explained.

"Ask Hennessy," Jake suggested.

"Why would Hennessy know about property records?" She asked.

"He's a security consultant and investigator. He does this kind of stuff for us all the time. For Adrian, mostly, when he's trying to figure out if someone's need is legitimate," Jake said.

"Jake, remember that night we were trying beers and you picked me up off my barstool?" She asked.

"The night I made a jackass of myself and then pretended to be drunk so you wouldn't laugh at me? Yep. I remember it."

"Huh. That statement offers a new perspective," Matilda said, distracted.

"I don't actually drink that much either, Matty. The only time I've been drunk in the last five years was at the conference after I realized you were actually in the garden. It was not one of my finest moments," Jake said.

"If I had wanted to go home with you that night, in the bar, would you have taken me to bed?" She asked.

"Yep," he said without hesitation.

"You were still with Bella," she said.

"I was, but that would have ended immediately," he said.

"You'd been with her for like a year. You'd just dump her like that?" Matilda asked.

"Holy God, yes. I wanted to be with you more than anything else on the planet, even then. And that was before I really truly knew you. Bella was a non-factor. I never loved her," Jake said.

"Did she know you didn't love her? Did you tell her you didn't love her?"



“I certainly never pretended to love her, if that’s what you mean. Why are we talking about this?” Jake asked.

“No reason, really. I just didn’t think you were the kind of person that would cheat on their significant other. My mom was talking about my sister yesterday and it got me wondering,” Matty said.

“I don’t think that’s fair, Matty. I would not have stayed with her, I wouldn’t have had a relationship with both of you at once, I would not have tried to hide anything,” Jake said.

Matilda nodded. *It’s still cheating, she thought. He was still lining up the next girlfriend before the current girlfriend was out of the picture. Months before she was out of the picture.*

“Why is my Spidey sense tingling, Matty? What’s wrong?” He asked.

“I’m fine, Jake. I’ll text Hennessy. Thanks for the suggestion,” she said in a tone of dismissal.

\*\*\*

MOM: Miranda and I were talking. Can you and your Jacob join us for dinner tomorrow night? Miranda and Lawrence, Max and his Shelly, Charles and me, your grandfather, and maybe Charles’s brother Roger and his Celeste. It’ll be a great big family dinner!

“What do you think?” Matilda asked.

“Do you want to go?” Jake asked.

She paused to consider it. “They’re my family, I guess. Yes, I do.”

“Then we’ll go. But Matty, your Mom is up to something. She seemed sober when I picked you up yesterday. She was watching me like a hawk,” Jake said.

“She might be up to something. I don’t know,” Matty admitted. “Lunch was confusing.”

“That’s the second time you’ve used the word ‘confusing’ regarding lunch. Are you sure you want to have dinner? We could decline the invite and have your mom and siblings to dinner at Hank and Darla’s. You’d be on your own turf,” Jake said.

“That’s your turf, Jake. I don’t have turf,” Matilda said quietly.

“Matty-”

“I’m going to tell her we’ll attend, OK?” Matilda said.

“Of course. Are we OK, Matty? You seem... conflicted,” Jake said.

“I’m fine.”

MATILDA: Dinner tomorrow sounds good. When and where?

MOM: Your grandfather wants to play host. I’ll send you the address. 7:00? Does that give your Jacob a chance to get home and then head out?

MATILDA: It’s fine.

## Chapter 25

Matilda's grandfather lived in a mansion on Astor Street in Chicago's Gold Coast neighborhood, not far from where her mom lived. While only about 3 miles from Jake's apartment, it would take almost a half-hour to get there.

Not sure what to expect from a formality perspective, Matilda opted for a long emerald green, empire waist dress with black flats. Her hair was back and up in the diamond and opal hair combs from Jake.

Jake wore a suit and tie. Outside of the conference, Matilda couldn't recall ever seeing him in a suit before. He was almost in a suit on the day of the pool table, but not quite. He wore a tux on the night of the fundraiser.

Jake smiled as she came out of the bathroom. "You look beautiful, love. Are there stockings involved in that dress? Sexy undergarments I should be pondering?"

Matilda gave a small smile but didn't respond.

"Nervous?" He asked.

She nodded.

"If they don't have the sense to love you as you are, they're fools. We can leave whenever you want," he said.

Matilda nodded again.

"Can I help?" Jake asked.

Matilda smiled a bit more. "No, I'm fine. Are you ready?"

"I am."

"Is the dress OK?" Matilda asked.

"You're beautiful," Jake confirmed.

Jake hired a chauffeured car for the evening. He didn't want to worry about parking and didn't want to have to wait on an Uber or Lyft if they left in a hurry.

Matilda was shaking with anxiety in the seat next to him.

“Have you met any of these people besides your mom, Matty?” He asked.

“No,” she whispered.

He squeezed her fingers. “It’s going to be fine.”

*And if it’s not fine, Sam’s going to leave a giant crater where these people used to be,* Jake thought as a sense of foreboding settled over him.

Matty wasn’t sure if her mom was up to something, but Jake was damn sure there was strangeness afoot. It’d be nice to call bullshit on Megan, but so far, he had nothing. Hennessy was trying to find a purchase date for the bar, but the rezoning made it difficult to navigate. When Jake left the office at five, Hennessy was still digging at the county office.

The town car stopped at the correct address at three minutes to seven. They were right on time.

“Ready?” Jake asked.

Matilda looked at him with big, sad true-green eyes.

“We don’t have to do this, love. Do you want to go home?” Jake asked.

“No, let’s go,” she said quietly.

They walked up the stairs to the door, hand in hand. There was no railing for Matty.

As Jake reached for the bell, the door flew open.

“There’s our girl!” The man was in his late fifties, hair more grey than brown with blue eyes and a boater’s tan. He was wearing khaki pants, a dress shirt, and a tie. He couldn’t have been taller than five-nine or so.

Matilda looked startled.

“Matilda, I’m Charles. I’m your step-dad, honey,” he introduced himself.

“H-Hi Charles. It’s nice to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you,” Matilda said, visibly anxious and uncomfortable.

*She looked more comfortable half frozen after being tossed into a city shit puddle.*

When she extended her hand to shake, Charles pulled her in for a hug and off her feet. “Sweetheart! I’m so glad you’re here. I’m so glad we’re finally meeting you!” Charles put her down awkwardly. If Jake’s hand wasn’t at her arm, she would have fallen.

*If you’re so glad to meet her, where the fuck have you been for all of her life? She lived in a fucking bar. Visiting rights or no, you could have gone to have a fucking beer at any point.*

Jake recognized that he was being unkind and judgmental, but he couldn’t help thinking these people were using Matty. He wasn’t out to make friends with anyone here tonight. Polite was the best he’d manage.

“And who’s the fellow here with you, Matilda?” Charles asked, fake sternness in his voice.

Matty still looked overwhelmed. She actually looked like she was going to be sick.

“Hello, Charles. My name is Jacob Trellis. Thank you for inviting us to dinner,” Jake said, absolutely no warmth in his voice. They shook hands.

“Thanks for coming, Jacob. May I call you Jake? I do go by Charles. My grandfather was Charlie and my dad was Chuck. I was third in line and got stuck with the formal name,” Charles said with a chuckle.

“Jake is fine.”

Charles clapped his hands. “All right, kids! Come meet everyone.”

They stepped down the hallway into a parlor room that was about a third of the size of Hank and Darla’s big room. It

was outfitted with uncomfortable looking antique furniture and overstuffed with people.

In the back-right corner of the room, one of Jake's old girlfriends sat talking with Matilda's mom. *What the fuck?*

Megan hopped up. "Kids! Come in. Please come in. Daddy, they're here!" She called over her shoulder.

A fast round of introductions began. Megan came over first and did the non-hug air-kiss thing to Matilda and shook Jake's hand.

*She really kinda does look like an anteater. Why do her shoulders sit like that? It can't be comfortable.*

Megan had light brown hair with eyes as green as Matilda's. She wore a black dress and seemed to approve of their attire.

*Fuck you, lady. I didn't dress up for you. I wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire.*

Miranda was next. As visibly nervous as Matilda, Miranda had her mom's brown hair and her dad's blue eyes. She was thin - too thin - in a black dress and shoes. She looked like she was going to a funeral, her cheeks sunken and face laden with a ton of makeup.

Still, she was shaking and nervous and held Matty's hand as she babbled "I'm so glad to meet you. So glad. I wish we had met before now, I wish it was before now. I'm sorry it wasn't before now. I just, I'm so glad to meet you." And then she grabbed Matilda and hugged her.

Matilda was startled and trying not to get pulled off her feet by her sister's vigorous hug.

*This is tiny people wrestling. We should do a pay-per-view event for it. Miranda's got five or six inches on Matilda, but they both weigh less than a hundred pounds. No body mass, but a lot of hair on their little heads.*

Jake had to swallow the laughter that went with the thought.

“Jake. Jacob, sorry. I’m so glad to meet you, too. Thank you for coming. Thank you for being here. Thank you for bringing her. I’m so glad you’re here. I’m so glad you’re both here. I’m just so glad.”

In the shape of the damp eyes and the nervous smile, the high cheekbones, and the blush, he could see the relationship with Matilda. He didn’t intend to like her, but he did. She was just too sweet to dislike. “Jake is absolutely fine, Miranda. It’s nice to meet you,” he said with a smile. And then Miranda was hugging him, too.

Lawrence was next. The cheating newlywed was *exactly* what Jake had expected - Maybe five-ten, balding blonde hair, thick neck, and a belly paunch. “Jake! Jake! Good to meet ya, man! Looking forward to talking later,” he bellowed out, overly loud, in the biggest I’m-an-asshole voice Jake had ever heard.

“Thanks for being here, Larry,” Jake said coolly, with no smile.

“Oh, man. It’s actually Lawrence. People don’t call me Larry.”

“Oh. Well, that’s awkward. My name’s Jacob. My friends call me Jake, but you’re not one of them,” Jake said with a glare.

*Fuck you, you lying, cheating asshole.*

“Oh hahaha! That’s a good one, man!” Larry smacked Jake on the shoulder.

Matilda’s brother, Max was next. Dirty blonde hair, hazel eyes, and a smarmy look that reminded Jake of Matilda’s ex-boyfriend, Peter.

Max barely acknowledged Matilda but stepped over to chat Jake up like they were old friends. Jake just stared at him until he went away. He got the message faster than Jake expected.

Max’s wife, Shelly, had a permanent sneer and a bad nose job. She didn’t say a word after presenting her hand to each of them for a limp wristed shake.

Jake did a mental headshake. *The fuck is with these people?*

“Hi Jake,” Celeste said with a smile. “You look good. I admit I invited myself to dinner after Megan told me you were going to be here.”

“Hi Celeste, it’s nice to see you. Matty, Celeste is an old friend. We dated several years ago for a couple of months. How do you fit in here, Celeste?” Jake asked as the ladies tried to not be awkward together.

Celeste was a great person. But, they had absolutely no chemistry as a couple. They dated for a few months right as Sam started to hit the point of Rich - with the capital R. Better friends than lovers, they split amicably. Jake was surprised to see her here, part of whatever game they were playing.

“Jake, this is my husband and Charles’s brother, Roger,” Celeste was introducing him to a man that was at least thirty years older than her. Roger looked like Charles’s older brother. Celeste was a few years younger than Jake.

*Huh. OK. Whatever. I didn’t think Celeste was into the money angle. Maybe Roger’s OK?*

He shook Roger’s hand, said something polite, and then watched him walk right by without acknowledging Matilda.

*OK. Maybe Roger’s an asshole. Or, maybe Roger doesn’t like that I slept with his now-wife several years ago. Don’t worry about it, man. The sex wasn’t good.*

The final handshake was Matilda’s grandfather. Benjamin was a stodgy looking old man that seemed to disapprove of everything and everyone. Especially Matilda. He didn’t shake her hand or hug her. Instead, he looked her up and down, said she looked too much like her father, and then introduced himself to Jake.

*Fuck you too, old man. Lots of fuck you’s to go around in this room. I’m gonna call you Benji if I get the chance.*



They sat down to dinner not long after introductions were done. Jake ended up sitting between Matilda and Miranda.

*Aww. Maybe I should offer to switch so the ladies can talk.*

Matilda had been very quiet thus far. Jake couldn't decide if she was freaking out inside or just not into the company.

\*\*\*

Matilda was freaking out inside. Most of these people were terrible. Her brother made her skin crawl. Lawrence was worse still. She was sitting next to Jake's old girlfriend who was married to an old man. Her sister was sitting next to Jake, making goo-goo eyes at him.

*He's taken, bitch. No sharing of dicks. You keep Larry all to yourself.*

"How long have you and Jake been dating?" Celeste asked quietly.

"Three months," Matilda said.

*This woman has had sex with Jake. She knows what his dick looks like and probably what the tongue thing is, too. This is horrible.*

"Lucky girl, he clearly dotes on you. I would have given everything for him to look at me like that. Such a great guy. Just like Prince Charming. We dated for a couple of months, but I was way more into him than he was into me. I recognize that now, but I didn't see it then. I was blindsided when he ended things, I thought we were doing so well. I was a princess being swept away by her oh-so-handsome prince. No arguing or ugliness or anything. Then it was over.

"Are Hank and Darla well? They were always so sweet to me. All the family was. I still think about them," Celeste said with a sad smile.

Matilda cleared her throat. That hit just a little too close to home to be comfortable. Right down to the Prince Charming reference. Matty knew she had not mentioned that to her mom at any point. It was a coincidence. “They are very well. I’ll give them your regards.”

*I could be sitting next to Jake’s future girlfriend years from now talking about how much I loved him, too. Blindsided. Fuck. There’s a word. I’d miss Hank and Darla and the family. I could see myself saying every last one of those sentences.*

“Please do,” she said with a smile.

*This woman seems perfectly nice. Leggy and blonde, married to an old man, but nice enough.*

“It’s good to see him with a nice person again,” Celeste continued. “I ran into him right after we split and he was dating a horrible woman. And then I ran into him again maybe a year ago and he was dating this truly awful supermodel. Ugh,” Celeste pretended to shiver.

“I’ve met Bella,” Matilda said with a forced chuckle.

“Ugh, awful,” Celeste said again with a smile.

\*\*\*

Jake saw Matilda and Celeste talking. He wasn’t going to worry about it. They split amicably. Celeste was great. Nothing to worry about. If he had to pick an ex for Matilda to chat with, Celeste might not be at the top of the list, but she’d be close.

*I don’t need to worry about that. I’m not going to worry about it. At all. I just wish I could hear what they were saying.*

Lawrence was sitting on the other side of Miranda, trying to talk to Jake. Buddy buddy. As the food was passed, Jake took the platters from Celeste, held them for Matilda to take what she wanted, held it for Miranda to get what she wanted, helped himself, and then passed it to Larry.

On the third rotation of different food, Larry started picking on Miranda.

“You’re not going to eat all that. You better not,” he said.

“Remember, you can’t eat the bread,” he reminded her.

“Those green beans are in a sauce. I’m sure there are plain ones if you want them,” he pointed out.

And that was it for Jake.

“Miranda, probably you should guzzle that sauce and chase it with all the gravy on the planet. More food would be good,” he said with a smile so she’d know he was teasing.

She tried to smile back. “I used to have a weight problem,” she said quietly.

“Was the problem that you had no weight? Because that’s still a thing,” he said.

“No, I gained some weight with the wedding. Lawrence and I have discussed it. Now that I’ve lost it, he just doesn’t want me to gain it back,” her cheeks were pink again.

“Larry isn’t a svelte dude himself. Where does he get off criticizing?” Jake asked.

Lawrence brayed with fake laughter again. “Jake, you’re a riot. Not all the ladies wear the extra pounds as well as Matilda if you know what I mean. Wowzers,” Lawrence said. “I’d be pouring gravy down her throat if it turned into curves like that.”

“Larry, if you comment on my lady’s curves or pick on your wife’s eating habits again tonight, we’re going to have a problem,” Jake said, all humor gone.

“Lawrence, watch yourself. We don’t want to have problems with the Trellis family, *again*,” Benjamin said from the head of the table. “The last round of problems nearly put us under. Forty-five years of hard work and long hours at risk over someone getting their panties in a bunch.”

Jake picked up his wine glass and sneered at Benjamin, "I'll give my little brother your regards."

"Why would he do that to us? We have nothing to do with technology. We're outside his realm of contacts. Why would he decide to strangle us as he did?" Benjamin asked.

*How to answer? They have to know it was because of Matilda. I can't say that without making her feel terrible. A smart-ass, smug reply would be better.*

"He felt like it," Jake said.

Matilda dropped her fork. A quick glance showed her staring at Megan, who nodded at her daughter.

"He felt like it," Benjamin repeated. "That's just great."

"I'm certain you know why he did it," Jake said. "Why are we having this conversation?"

"Truthfully, I had no idea why he was doing it. But, he was so blatant and obvious about it. It was clearly personal. I had to hire an investigator. When he came back with a picture of the three of you at that fundraiser, I just about gagged. Our own flesh and blood sinking all that hard work. I was ashamed," the old man blathered on.

"I didn't know he was doing it. I've asked him to stop," Matilda said quietly.

"She didn't know. That's just great," Lawrence said, an echo of Benjamin's words.

"And then this one," Benjamin gestured to Megan, "all innocent. She'd seen the picture months ago but was too damn stupid to put it together."

"I didn't know the firm was struggling because of a Trellis, Daddy. No one mentioned the name, just that there were problems," Megan whined. "I didn't know she was seriously involved with anyone. We hadn't talked, remember?"

Jake shrugged. "You should be ashamed. Matty is your flesh and blood, and she's wonderful. You people

discarded her. That's on you, not me. Not her.

“Sam is mighty fond of her. When he gets it into his head to do some smiting, well, he gets it done. The fact that he didn't rip it all away shows how much he cares for her.

“When Megan texted last week to ‘reconnect’, she went to him and begged him to stop. So, before you get on your high horse about flesh and blood, keep in mind that you owe her that. She texted Megan back last week and said it was done. There was no need for lunch. There was no need for this meet and greet. Why are we here?” Jake asked.

“I figured she must want something from us, goes to all the trouble of having your brother do that to us. So, you tell us, Matilda, why are you here?” Benjamin asked her.

\*\*\*

Everyone was staring at Matilda. She didn't know what to say. Jake touched her arm. She looked at him.

*Why are we here?*

“I uh- I foolishly believed Mom when she said you wanted to know me,” Matilda said.

Miranda squeaked from the other side of Jake.

*Yeah, yuk it up, little sister. I'm that big of an idiot.*

“We are glad to meet you, Matilda. Glad to know you. And, with that ugliness behind us, glad to be at the table with you,” Charles said.

Matilda nodded. “Thank you.”

Jake leaned over and whispered, “Do you want to go?”

She shook her head and met his eyes with a fierce gaze.

*They brought us here, they can fucking deal with us through dinner. Fuck these people.*

\*\*\*

*There's my Matty. My fierce, fiery beauty. OK, love.*  
Jake smiled.

Dinner conversation picked up among the family that knew each other. Charles asked Matilda about her consultancy. Lawrence tried to make nice with Jake by being nice to Miranda. Miranda spent the rest of the dinner staring at her plate, not eating.

After the dishes were cleared, the men, other than Benjamin, stepped into the "library" to have a drink while the women went to the parlor.

*Who the fuck still does this shit?* Jake wondered.  
*These people do this shit. That's who.*

\*\*\*

The parlor full of ladies was silent and awkward for a few minutes.

Megan cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, Matty. I didn't know he intended to do that over dinner. I told you my father isn't a good man. He's always been like that - harsh and judgmental and cold. Your dad, and Charles too, weren't like that."

"But you knew who Jake and Sam were. You played dumb at lunch," Matilda said, voice cold.

"I did. It was so good to see you, to see you happy and looking well. I didn't want you to know I reached out because of the business nonsense. I meant what I said. I always wanted us to know each other as adults," Megan said.

"And now I know you, all of you. What would you think in my place?" Matty asked harshly.

Miranda squeaked again. As she met Matty's eyes, she opened and closed her mouth a few times, but no words came

out. “Excuse me,” Miranda said as she jumped up and headed out of the room.

Megan sighed. “I’m sure she’s going to be sick. I failed her, too. I failed both my girls.”

“I’m weeping inside for you, Mom,” Matilda said sarcastically.

“Matty, I meant what I said at lunch. This life, with these people, this can’t be good for you. Look at Miranda and how uncomfortable she is in her own skin. Do you want that? You heard him talk at dinner. That brother destroyed forty years of hard work ‘because he felt like it’, just flippantly, it seemed like a good idea,” Megan said.

“Mom, Sam went after the business because he felt you wronged me. Surely you understand that.”

“I do, but now you’ve been here. You’ve seen this lifestyle. Do *you* feel like I’ve wronged you? What’s going to happen when Sam decides you’ve wronged Jake?” Megan said.

“He wouldn’t,” Celeste said quietly. “Sam Trellis’s moral compass points due North, Megan. He just wouldn’t. I’m amazed that he went after the brokerage. I didn’t know that until dinner. You’ve never met them. You have no idea what you’re talking about when it comes to that family. They are *nothing* like this.”

Megan snorted. “Celeste, I can’t believe you’re defending them. I can’t believe it. This is the Jake that left you broken and miserable without warning? Really? We’ve talked about this. You’re suggesting that Matilda stay with him, knowing how he treated you?”

“He didn’t mistreat me, Megan. He never told me he loved me. He never talked about a future together. We were like friends that were occasionally lovers. I just didn’t see it like that at the time. It took years of therapy before I understood. We were companions and stayed together until he was ready to move on to someone else. I can’t fault him for

it,” Celeste said quietly but with dignity. She was speaking her truth. “He never once looked at me like he looks at her.”

*Years of therapy. Move on to someone else. She’s sitting here defending someone that dumped her and left her broken-hearted. Even knowing Jake, that’s disturbing. I could see myself doing the exact same thing in this situation,* Matilda thought.

Megan gave another sarcastic chuckle. “Yeah, the look. Whatever. That’s all well and good until he’s looking at the next woman.”

Turning back to Matilda, Megan continued, “Matty, you don’t need this in your life. This kind of pressure, the worry. You can’t possibly want this. I saw that picture in the paper. You were so tense, you looked ill. Beautiful, stunning, and sick with stress. Do you really want to live like this? Do you really want to watch other women hit on him and catch his eye? They’ll be sneering and laughing at you for the rest of time.

“And if you stand up for yourself and kick him to the curb, you’ll be ruined. They’ll take it all from you because ‘they felt like it’. That’s where Miranda’s at now. She can’t end things with Lawrence. She doesn’t work, has no money of her own, and Charles and Dad have said they won’t help her. There’s no one to turn to, nothing she can do but hope for the best with that man. It makes it worse that we all know what he’s doing. He’s not discreet about it. He doesn’t feel like he’s doing anything wrong.

“You’re not cut out for this, it’s not what you deserve. You’re not a princess to be rescued. You’re strong enough to stand on your own two feet. Go back to your life, Matty. Don’t do this.

“I’m a terrible mother, and I’m not claiming otherwise. I just don’t want to see you broken to pieces and unable to put your life back together. Plea-” Megan stopped talking at a sound in the hall. “They’re coming now.”

“When did Dad buy the bar, Mom?” Matilda asked.



“Huh?” Megan said, caught off guard.

“When did Dad buy the bar?”

“Um. I have to think about that. When did he actually buy it? He started tending bar when I was pregnant with you for extra money since Daddy wouldn’t help us. He said that he liked it more than law, that it was less stressful. My father hated it, said that I married beneath me to a washed-out loser. I didn’t mind so much until everything went wrong.”

The men were coming into the room.

*‘Until everything went wrong’ meant until I was born.  
Thanks for that, Mom.*

“He talked about it for a while before he actually did it. I’m not sure if he had bought it before we split or not.” She said as she stood to greet the men and ask if they wanted a drink.

\*\*\*

About halfway through the after-drink in the library, Max stepped out to take a call. Larry continued on trying to talk sports and horse racing with Jake. Eventually Charles and Lawrence stepped out for a word.

*Hopefully, Charles is coaching Larry on how to be less of a jackass. That guy’s an asshole, Jake thought.*

Left on his own, Jake was looking at the book collection when a quiet voice behind him said, “Jake?”

Miranda was standing there, looking nervous.

*Is she ever not nervous?*

Jake gave a little smile. “You OK?”

“I’m fine,” she said as she wrung her hands. It was so like Matty that he smiled for real. “I was coming out of the bathroom and saw Dad and Lawrence in the hall. I wondered if we could talk for a minute.

“Um, I don’t think Matilda and I got off on the right foot. I don’t think she likes me. But, I really did want to know her. I would still really like to know her. Would you tell her that?”

“Of course,” he said. “I don’t think she dislikes you, Miranda. This is just hard for her.”

Miranda was nodding vigorously. “I know. I understand. She came here, so brave to meet all of us. She’s so beautiful. So brave. I couldn’t do this if I was her.

“Family dinners are terrible, always. Have always been. I just, I didn’t know I had a sister until a week or so ago. And, I don’t have a lot of friends. Or, any friends, really. I have some ladies I talk with, but not friends like sisters can be. I would like to be friends. Do you think we could be friends?” Miranda asked her feet, unable to make eye contact.

*This is what Matilda would be if she grew up with Megan instead of Darren. Thank God for Darren. Thank God for Ellie and Eric and Charlie.*

Jake felt terrible for Miranda. She was so little and so soft-spoken, clearly surrounded by assholes. He couldn’t help it, he hugged her as he answered her question.

“Ah, Matty didn’t have much family growing up,” he said quietly. “Her dad, mostly. He was shot and killed, ripped out of her life without warning. She had a hard road, worked hard to make a life for herself. It hurt her deeply when your mom made and then cut ties with her after Darren died. She spent a lot of time alone, didn’t have much support. She doesn’t trust easily. Tonight hurt her. She is going to need time and patience to adjust to a new reality.”

\*\*\*

Jake didn’t come into the parlor with the other men. Matty asked after him, but Lawrence just glared at her.

*OK. I guess I'll just go find him. I really hope they didn't poison him. They seem to hate me more than him, though. He's probably fine.*

Matilda could hear her sister's voice coming from the "library." *How fucking pretentious.*

*What the fuck? Why the fuck is Jake hugging her? What is happening?*

Jake's back was to the door, so Matilda couldn't see much, but she could hear just fine.

"Ah, Matty didn't have much family growing up. Her dad, mostly. He was shot and killed, ripped out of her life without warning. She had a hard road, worked hard to make a life for herself. It hurt her deeply when your mom made and then cut ties with her after Darren died. She spent a lot of time alone, didn't have much support. She doesn't trust easily. Tonight hurt her. She is going to need time and patience to adjust to a new reality."

What 'new reality'? Why was Jake talking about her in soft, pitying tones, to her snobby sister no less? Miranda was making goo-goo eyes at dinner. Was Jake making goo-goo eyes back? *Surely not. They just met.*

"OK. I can be patient. I'll be patient, Jake. It'll be worth it," Miranda said. Reaching up his body, Matilda saw her sister pull Jake down and then heard the distinct sound of a small kiss. A peck. Not a long kiss, but a kiss.

*Oh my God. They're kissing? I can't believe this is happening. I can't believe this is happening. He wouldn't. He wouldn't. He wouldn't.*

*He's always said he fell for me immediately.*

Matty thought of Celeste, about being blindsided, about Jake ending it once he was ready to move on to the next woman.

*Does he do this often? 'Fall' for someone, get bored, and then dump her?*

*Miranda looks like me, but thinner, darker hair, and no disability. He can trade me in for a version that works right. Larry is a non-factor - fucking disgusting. Is Jake trying to be a good guy, giving me time to get over tonight before ending things? He feels sorry for me.*

*Blindsided. Blindsided. Yep, right word. Prince Charming. He does like to help damsels in distress. He told me as much.*

Jake turned around to see Matilda standing in the doorway. "Matty, everything OK?"

"I'm fine. Can we go?" She asked quietly.

"Yep, let's get the hell out of here!" Jake said with a smile.

*He doesn't even look guilty. I wonder if this is how Bella felt. She was a bitch of epic proportions, but maybe she was blindsided, too.*

*No Prince is coming to rescue me. It's time to head back to reality. I don't need the pity. I hate everything about being pitied.*

## Chapter 26

Matty was silent in the car on the way home and didn't take his hand while walking through the building.

"Well, at least your sister seemed nice," Jake said to break the heavy silence in the apartment.

Matilda flinched, then went into the bathroom and closed the door.

He waited.

And waited.

"Matty, are you ok?"

"I'm fine," she said as she opened the door. She had washed all the makeup off her face and brushed out her hair. Her eyes were red and puffy.

"Matilda!" Jake gasped. "What the fuck? What happened? What's wrong?"

"I'm fine. I just... I'm going to go home and get some sleep."

"Go home? Mat, please. What happened? Are you upset with me? Let's talk about it. Don't shut down on me, love. Please. Please?" Jake sounded panicked.

"I'm not upset with you. It's not your fault; it's my fault. I just want to go home."

"Ok. Ok, we'll go stay at your place tonight-"

"No. Just me. I need some space."

"Matilda, what happened? You seemed ok earlier. If your bitch mom said something to upset you in the parlor, I'm going to skin her alive," Jake said.

Matty was walking through the closet, throwing clothes in a bag. "Matty, please. Don't do this. Please, tell me what happened!"

"I just need to grab my laptop," she said.

Jacob watched in stunned disbelief as she picked up her bag and left without a backward glance.

\*\*\*

Jake rang her doorbell at 7 AM the following morning and was pleasantly surprised when she buzzed him in.

When she opened the apartment door, he all but tackled her in his rush to hug her. “What... why... how. How are you?” He asked, still holding her tight. She wasn’t hugging him back.

“I’m fine. We should talk,” she said in a monotone voice.

“Ok, yes! Let’s talk! Let’s talk about what-”

“I don’t want to see you anymore,” she blurted as she started crying.

“You don’t mean that.” Jake whispered.

“I do. I don’t belong in your world, Jake. I don’t want to go through life as an outsider that bitchy women sneer and laugh at, I don’t want to watch you get hit on and get bored with me. I don’t want this. I never wanted this. I don’t want to do this anymore. It’s time to stop living in the fairy tale - Prince Charming isn’t going to rescue me and there is no happily ever after.”

He stared at her for a full minute in shocked silence. “So that’s it? That’s the end, goodbye? No explanation, no discussion?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“What did I do wrong, Matilda? What should I have done differently?”

“It’s not your doing, Jake. It’s mine. I should not have let this happen.”

Jake snorted. “Let what happen?”

“This,” Matilda said, gesturing between them.

“Why? Why shouldn’t this have happened? I need more words, love.”

“Please stop saying that,” she begged.

“Stop saying I love you? Absolutely not. BECAUSE I FUCKING LOVE YOU,” he yelled. Jake took a deep breath and let it out slowly. They were at DefCon 5. He needed the right words. He needed the right questions. He needed to calm down.

“So, tell me why you should not have accepted my heart. Tell me why I should not have taken yours. Tell me.”

“I don’t belong in your world, Jake.”

“I DON’T KNOW WHAT THE FUCK THAT MEANS, MATILDA! It doesn’t make any fucking sense,” he bellowed.

“You need to be with someone better than me! I don’t deserve this. You deserve better than me. Go back to flirting with Miranda and mixing with models. Stop slumming. You can’t save me. You can’t fix me. And I sure as fuck don’t want your GODDAMN PITY!”

He stood before her, shock and rage clear upon his face.

“Pity. What fucking pity?” Jake asked slowly, careful to articulate every word precisely. Anger wouldn’t help. He needed to get a handle on the anger.

“I heard you and Miranda talking, Jake. About how I grew up and spent a lot of time alone. I don’t need her pity, and I sure as fuck don’t want yours.”

“Did you hear her original question? Did you hear what she said and what she asked?” He asked.

“Jake, it doesn’t matter.”

“Normally, I would agree. Normally. If I heard someone I loved talking about me like that, I’d be pissed off, too. But, she shared something and asked something specific,” he said.

“Oh God, I bet she did share. I bet she was willing to share a whole lot more, too.” Matilda felt nauseous.

“Matty, I wasn’t flirting with her.”

“Jake, that’s an outright lie,” Matilda said with a resigned tone. “I heard you talking with her at dinner. Holding the platters for her, telling Larry to fuck off. She was making big blue goo-goo eyes at you.”

“I was being nice. She’s your sister. I was not flirting,” he said quietly.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” she said.

“We are not ending things over this, Matilda. This is insane. You need to calm down and then we need to talk,” he said resolutely.

“I’m not interested in continuing on like this. If this is nuts, I guess I’m nuts and you should be glad to be done with me.”

“Matilda, we’re going to talk later today. Go do your Saturday with Ellie and Eric. I’ll bring dinner over tonight and we’ll talk,” Jake said.

“I’m not interested in dinner tonight, Jake. Just go. I don’t want you here. I’ll come by and get my stuff one day during the week. I don’t think you left anything here.”

He stared at her for another minute. “Ah... If you don’t want me here, I’ll go. But I’m going to call to check on you later. And I’ll be here as soon as you’re ready to talk.

“Matilda, this isn’t you. This isn’t us. Don’t do this. Don’t let your fucking mother do this to you. Please, calm down and think about this. Call Miranda and ask her about our conversation. I think she’ll be honest if you ask. Please? Do that for me? It’s not a lot to ask.” Jake swallowed hard, unsure what to do. “Do you really want me to go?”

“I really do, Jake. Goodbye,” she said.

\*\*\*



Matilda's phone rang at 9:45. And at 10, 10:10, 10:15, and every five minutes thereafter. She didn't hear it. She didn't care.

She'd done it. He was gone.

It was over. She felt her mind tearing itself apart.

She was a little girl; the other kids were mean.

She was a little older. A boy threw a rock at her head while walking home from school. She fell.

Surgery. One after another after another, again and again.

Pain. So much pain. Constant pain. Always a struggle, even for simple things like climbing stairs. It was hard, harder than it should be, harder than people realized. So much pain, all alone.

Her dad.

Her dad...

Her dad... dead. He died again and again. She watched the coffin close, over and over.

Cold. So cold. She was so cold. Her body hated the cold. Her muscles didn't want to move in the cold. Stiff, sore muscles. Stress and agony. So much pain.

The worst moments of her life, played on repeat, over and over. No happy memories allowed. Matilda was confident that Jake walking out the door would be added to this highlight reel in the years to come.

\*\*\*

And then, she couldn't breathe. Matilda jerked her mind away from her thoughts and focused on breathing and on her body.

She couldn't breathe. She couldn't make the muscles in her chest move. She couldn't breathe. There was no air. All the air was gone.

*Am I having a heart attack? Breathe! I need to breathe. Move it, chest! I can't breathe! Holy fuck! I can't breathe. I can't move my mouth. I need to yell for help. Where's my phone? I need to call for help. Where's my phone?! Somebody help me. Please, somebody. I need help. Help. Somebody, please help me! I can't breathe. I can't breathe.*

She couldn't move, couldn't breathe. She could feel her heart slowing.

*Can people die of a broken heart? What is happening? I can't breathe. I can't... muscles won't move.*

*Jake. Oh, God. Jake, I'm sorry. He's going to be a mess. He's going to need help. Sam, pl-*

\*\*\*

"I feel like you cut it a little close," Sam said.

"Huh?" Matilda gasped.

*What the fuck?*

"Where are we?" Sam asked.

"I don't know. I can't see anything," Matilda was panicking.

"It helps if you open your eyes."

"Oh. What the hell?"

"Where are we?" Sam asked again.

"We're in my childhood bedroom. I had to throw away that unicorn when I was seven because I puked on it," Matilda babbled.

"Are you sleeping in the bed? It looks lumpy."

"I had a brace that I had to sleep in as a kid. It went from under my arms to my feet. I had to lay in it on my stomach every night. The lumps are the straps. I was strapped

to the bed so I couldn't twist and hurt myself during the night," she said.

"What if you needed the bathroom?" Sam asked.

"I held it or I screamed until my dad heard me. Cell phones weren't a thing yet. He tended bar till 2 AM."

"What if there was a fire?" He asked.

Matilda shrugged. "There wasn't."

"There has to be a better way. We'll find a better solution." It sounded like a promise.

She shrugged again. "It worked. I don't think CP kids get the same thing today."

"Why are we here?" Sam asked.

"I dunno. I thought you knew. I don't know what's happening. I couldn't breathe, and then we were here. Are we dead?" Matilda asked, trying to sound calm as she continued to swallow her panic.

"Nope, it's a dream," Sam replied with complete confidence.

"A dream? Why are we here? Why are *you* here?"

"Do you see anything on fire? Anyone suffocating? Is there a violet-eyed woman screaming without sound? Nope. This is your dream, not mine. It's your show-and-tell, Matilda." Sam clarified.

Matilda paused in the middle of a thought, a look of mingled hope and pain on her face.

"What is it?" Sam asked.

"I'm wondering if we can see my dad. If I'm a little girl, maybe he's here, too."

\*\*\*

The scene shifted immediately. They were in the kitchen. Darren was sitting at the kitchen table with the phone

in front of him.

Matilda choked on a sob. She tried to step toward him but couldn't move.

“Dad!” She yelled. He didn't respond.

Darren picked up the cordless phone and dialed a number.

“Hi, Megan.” He said

“Megan is your mom?” Sam asked.

Matilda nodded, tears streaming down her face. “Look at him, Sam. He's right there. He's whole and healthy, just like I remember. Not like the coffin closing. Not like that day. He's OK.”

“Well, I'm sorry to bother you. I know you're busy. It's about Matilda,” Darren was saying.

There was a pause.

“No, no new problems. She's doing well. Smart as can be. She's a little firecracker.”

Matilda let another sob out. “I forgot that. He called me his firecracker when I was small.”

Darren was talking again. “She made a Christmas list. No, thank you, I don't need you to shop for her. The thing is, she asked Santa if she could see you for Christmas. She asked for you to come back, or for Santa to ‘fix her’ so we could be happy again.”

“Oh, God. Dad. I'm so sorry. I remember this Christmas. I'm so sorry, Dad. I didn't understand, I thought Santa was magic, I thought he'd help, I know you tried,” Matilda rambled.

Darren was talking again.

“No. No. Megan, I'm not- Megan, this isn't about you. It's about her! She just wants to see you, to know you! Megan, that's not - no, I'm not trying to make you feel bad. I'm asking you to...”

There was a longer pause.

“I understand you have another family and kids that expect you to be there. I understand that.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Megan, your family gets you year-round. Can she have you for a half-day? Just one half-day!”

Darren’s face creased in anger. “If your younger kids deserve their mother on Christmas, what does your FIRST child deserve?”

“Oh, Dad. I’m so sorry,” Matty mumbled. “I’m so sorry this hurt you. You didn’t deserve this.”

“I see. Yes, Megan. She’ll ‘make do with what she has.’ She always has. I guess she always will,” he muttered.

There was another pause.

“I’ll never understand why you feel like she deserves the road she’s traveled. It’s not her fault, Megan. None of it is her fault.”

“Happy holidays to you and yours.”

The sound of Megan’s yelling was still apparent as he hung up the phone.

Darren tipped his head back and looked at the ceiling as he wiped tears from his eyes. “Ah, baby girl, what’re we gonna do?”

He turned to look directly at Matilda, “If we all get what we deserve, she’ll be wealthy and miserable, I’ll get an early bedtime, and one day Prince Charming will come along to sweep you off your feet - vibrant little princess that you are.”

\*\*\*

Matilda jolted awake, gasping for air on her kitchen floor. Eric was bending over her. Ellie was yelling into a cell phone.

All Matilda heard was her cell phone ringing in the bedroom. She jumped up and ran for it, still gasping and gagging on air. Her body felt strange, lethargic and unresponsive.

*How long was I laying on the floor? Is my head bleeding?*

When she made it to the bedroom, Matilda dumped her bag upside down and grabbed her phone from the pile of clutter.

“SAM!”

“Vibrant little princess!”

“Holy fuck!” she gasped, still trying to catch her breath.

Ellie was screaming at her in the other room.

“Why do other people get to decide what you deserve, Matilda?” Sam asked. Then, “Is Ellie crying?”

“Ellie?” As she turned to look at Ellie, Matilda passed out again.

\*\*\*

Matilda came to for a few seconds in the ambulance. Ellie was holding her hand, tears streaming down her face.

“MATILDA! STAY WITH-” She shouted, and then Matty was out again.

\*\*\*

“Matilda, can you hear me?” The voice was slurred.

“Matty?” That voice was different. Jake. That voice was Jake.

“MATILDA, open your twitchy fucking eyes. You’re scaring the living epic shit out of me!” OK, that was Ellie.

“Ellie, breathe,” Eric said. “We have to breathe. She’s alive.”

“She’s coming out of it, give the drugs a few minutes,” the first voice said.

*Who is that? I know that voice.*

Someone was holding her hand, stroking a thumb across her palm. She tried to open her eyes again, but her face felt... strange.

Matilda tried to move her hand to her face, but she couldn’t move her arm. *Am I tied down?* She tugged harder to move her arm; she hated being restrained.

“Matilda, we can’t unbind your arms and legs, yet. Can you hear me?” *Adrian. That voice is Adrian.*

“Wha...?” She couldn’t move her mouth properly. Her tongue felt strange. But, she got an eye open; everything was blurry. The other eye was still closed, but she could see Jake and Ellie and Eric. She had to shift her head to see Adrian.

Jake exhaled hard and kissed her fingers. “Holy fuck, Matty. I’ve never been so scared in my life. I shouldn’t hav-”

“OK, shut the fuck up Jake I need to look at her are you ok oh my God you better be ok and I thought you were dead you weren’t breathing when I got into your apartment you were on the kitchen floor and your lips were blue I thought you were dead and I called 911 and Eric was going to-”

“ELLIE!” Adrian yelled. “You need to breathe. I want you to take that sedative. Please, Ellie. You’re going to have another panic attack. She’s coming out of it. She’ll be just fine. Take the pill now. Where is Charlie? He should be here by now.”

“You stop yelling at me! My Matty almost died. We almost lost her! It was almost too late. Eric and I were almost too late. So, you shut the fuck up!” Ellie yelled at Adrian.

Eric let out a little sob. He was weeping.

“Eleanor, I’m OK,” Matilda slurred out. Something was wrong with her tongue.

Then Ellie was sobbing, big heaving sobs, tears running down her face.

“Ellie, sit here, OK?” Adrian said. “I’m going to go see if Charlie is in the waiting room.” Ellie flopped in the chair Adrian pushed up behind her and continued to sob, bent over the bed, leaning on Matilda’s legs.

“What does Charlie look like?” Adrian asked Jake. After a brief description, Adrian walked out of the room.

Matilda tried to reach for Ellie’s hand, but it was too far from where Matty’s arm was tied. Eric was sitting at the foot of the bed, crying.

“Where are we?” Matty slurred at Jake.

“We’re at Northwestern Memorial, honey. We think you had a series of seizures. You told me you had seizures as a kid. Were they epileptic seizures?” Jake asked.

They were in a hospital. That made sense. That’s what the beeping noises were about. Her other eye still wouldn’t open.

“Yeah. My face and mouth feel strange,” she continued to slur.

“Sometime after you ran into the bedroom, you bit your tongue. It’s swollen, that’s all. We think you fell on the tile in the kitchen and might have slammed your face on the floor. There’s some bruising coming up. The doctor said they’d do some x-rays when you were back with us.”

Matilda could hear Adrian talking to Charlie as they came down the hall. “-has to take the sedative, man. She’s putting too much strain on her body. Eric’s sorta keeping it together, but Ellie is around the bend.”

“Holy cow, Matty,” Charlie exhaled as he saw her. “Ellie, I’m here, babe. I’ve been texting and calling. I’ve been in the waiting room. They wouldn’t let me back because I’m not family.”



Matilda snorted - sort of.

Adrian smiled.

‘Come on, Ells. Take that medication. Everything’s going to be ok,’ Charlie said in a calm, quiet voice.

‘I thought she was dead, Charlie. I thought she was dead. When we got into the apartment, she was lying on the kitchen floor in a pool of blood. Her lips were blue and she wasn’t breathing. I thought she was dead. Eric said she was dead. I don’t even know CPR. I need to learn CPR. WE ALL NEED TO KNOW CPR. Eric was going to try to do CPR. Adrian, will you teach me CPR?’ Ellie begged.

‘Ellie, here. Water. Take that,’ Adrian held a cup with a straw for her as she swallowed a pill. ‘In about fifteen minutes, you’ll be feeling better, OK? Calmer. She’s going to be fine. She needs to heal. If she jumped up and ran into the other room to answer Sam’s call, there was probably no permanent damage done.’

‘Untie me?’ Matilda asked. It sounded like ‘Un-eye meh?’

‘Not yet. A few more minutes, Matilda. We just need to make sure the heavy seizures are done. You were seizing so badly in the ambulance, with your limbs around your torso, they couldn’t get to you to help you. They can’t risk that if you stop breathing. With the IVs going now, they should untie you pretty quickly. Your doctor will come in and talk to you soon.’

‘Oh,’ she said. She was a little hurt that Adrian wasn’t her doctor.

He must have understood. ‘This isn’t my hospital, Matty. Even if it was, I wouldn’t treat you. You’re tiny, not a child. Not my specialty.’ Adrian smiled a bit.

‘Sam?’ She croaked. It sounded like ‘Am’.

‘He’s wandering the halls. He hates hospitals, and we can’t have too many people here at once. What do you remember?’ Jake asked.

*I'm not supposed to see you. I broke up with you. I remember that. But I love you.*

“I made you go,” she said.

Jake nodded. “I shouldn’t have left. I should have stayed. You didn’t look good. I should have stayed.”

“I made you go,” she said again. There was a tear in her eye. She blinked fast to make it go away so she could see again. It fell down her cheek instead.

There was a long pause.

“I was thinking. Sitting in the kitchen, thinking. Not happy thoughts. Memories. Bad ones. I heard my phone ringing in the other room, but I ignored it. And then I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t make my lungs work. It felt like I was on fire.

“And then I was dreaming. Sam was dreaming with me,” she stumbled through the words, slurring as she went. But it was getting easier to speak. She was getting used to the feeling of her swollen tongue.

“You were dreaming about Sam?” Charlie asked, confused. He had taken Ellie’s chair and pulled her into his lap.

Adrian and Jake shared a look. Neither of them looked surprised.

“It happens,” Sam’s mellow, teasing voice said from the doorway.

“How’d you get back here?” Charlie asked. “I sat in the damn waiting room forever because ‘family only’ rules.”

Sam shrugged. “I didn’t ask permission. I went up and looked at the new babies, too.” He grinned. “New babies are the best part of hospitals.”

“How’d you do that?” Adrian asked. “You have to have a scanner card to get in. You have to be visiting someone specific on that floor.”

“I asked a new dad if he’d walk with me. He didn’t recognize me. We had a nice talk. I got his family’s name,” he explained. “His daughter is beautiful.”

“I was calling and calling,” Ellie said, drawing everyone’s attention back to what had happened. Her words came very slowly now, she was calmer. That pill worked fast. “Matty was late for best friend shopping. Then she was really late. I was pissed and texted the group thread. Jake called, said she wanted to end things. Was worried. So, we went to her apartment. I was going to tell her off and pick a big fight. I was so pissed off.” She sighed.

“Then I thought she was dead. I called 911. Eric was trying to get her to breathe. In the middle of it, she sat bolt upright and took a deep breath, like she had been asleep instead of dead. Then her phone rang and she jumped up and ran for it. I’ve never seen her move that fast.

“And then she was down again, dropped like a rock. I think she slammed her face on the nightstand, not the floor, Jake. She kept coming out of it for a second or two and then going back under. She came all the way up in the ambulance, but I couldn’t keep her with us. I tried. But, she blacked out again. Kept breathing, though. So, that’s good.

“I called Jake. He was already on his way. They tried to send us away. I told them if they tried to take you away from Eric and me, I’d start scratching eyes out.

“Then Sam and Adrian were here. We called Charlie. They gave you drugs, said you were having seizures and did you have a medical condition that would cause them. Jake told them you had seizures as a kid. I didn’t know that.

“So that’s it. That’s what you missed,” Ellie said slowly. “I thought you were dead. No more silly Matilda and Gay Boy mornings. No one to tease and make uncomfortable. I can’t make Eric blush. I don’t know what we would have done.”

Eric was crying harder. Sam frowned and patted his shoulder. “It’s going to be OK. Maybe Luke can come. We can call Luke, maybe?”

“Luke?” Jake asked.

Ellie gave another heaving sob.

“You just rest for now, ok? It’s been a bad day,” Charlie muttered, kissing her temple.

“Speaking of calling people, did anyone call Darla?” Jake asked.

Sam and Jake stared at Adrian. “Why do I have to do it? She’s gonna freak!”

“You can explain better and there’s not a chance in hell my ass is leaving this chair. Go call,” Jake directed.

Adrian swore as he walked out the door.

“Do you want us to call your mom, Matty?” The thought clearly made Jake uncomfortable.

“When I was five, I asked Santa to let me see my mom. She didn’t show and my dad had to tell me about Santa,” Matilda said.

Jake scrunched his face in confusion.

“That was a no, Jacob,” Sam said with uncharacteristic firmness.

A nurse bustled into the room, lugging a laptop cart with her. “There are way too many people here.”

“There are more coming,” Sam said.

“Well, you all need to get out. Hospital policy is no more than 2 visitors in the ER.”

Adrian chuckled as he walked back into the room. “Good luck with that.”

“She needs rest, observation, and tests. None of you need to be in here for that. Don’t make me call security.” The nurse left again with her laptop, not asking a single question about how Matilda was doing.

“Did she come in this room solely to bitch about the number of people?” Charlie asked.

“Excuse me,” Sam stepped out as he pulled his phone out of his pocket. He looked as calm as ever, but somehow, it was clear that he was pissed.

Ellie was dozing in and out.

Jake squeezed Matilda’s fingers. “How do you feel? Can I help?”

“Would you take the binding off my arms at least?” She asked. “I hate this.”

Jake started undoing the Velcro cuffs.

“Jake, they should...” Adrian stopped talking at a glare from Jake.

“If she seizes again, she can hurt herself, particularly with all the wires.”

Sam walked back into the room. “Here, I’ll do this side, Jake. Get her foot free.”

As Sam was removing the last of the straps, a tall, thin older gentleman in a suit came into the room and introduced himself as Mr. Fuller, the most senior hospital administrative person on site.

“Mrs. Trellis, I understand you have had quite the day. We’d like to keep you for observation and tests. We’ll get you into a private room shortly, so you and your family can be more comfortable.”

“I’m not-” Matilda started to say.

She saw Sam roll his eyes. “Just stop,” he muttered. “You’re killing him.”

At a quick glance, Matilda could see the pain on Jake’s face.

*OK. Maybe that’s not the best point to make right now.*

Eric smiled, muttering, “Mrs. Trellis” while taking a deep, teary breath. “Nope, smells like a hospital.”

Jake started laughing and couldn’t stop.

Before she could snark at him, the head of the neurology department magically appeared in the room, anyway.

*No need to wonder what Sam was doing, I guess... It took all of three minutes for the hospital to get a move on.*

\*\*\*

Fifteen minutes later, Matilda was in a room with a decent view. Charlie opted to take Ellie and Eric home, promising that they'd be back later. Adrian went to find coffee and didn't come back. Sam was walking around with the administrative guy. Jake sat quietly next to her.

"Sam was in my dream," she said.

"You called for him?" Jake asked.

"I thought I was dying-"

"You were," he whispered.

"I thought you'd be in a bad way if I died. I was thinking that Sam needed to help you. And then there we were in a dream. With my dad. I saw him. As he was. When I was young. It seemed like a memory, but it wasn't my memory. It was like we were watching television. And then my dad looked at me and talked to me. About you... sort of." Matilda swallowed tears around the lump in her throat.

"Does he hate me as much as your mom and grandfather hate me?"

"Jacob, my father would have loved you. No doubt about it."

Jake chuckled a sad chuckle.

"My mom lied. She lied to me. About trying to see me. She lied."

Jake's gaze snapped to her face. He nodded. "Hennessy called late last night. He couldn't find the property records, but he tracked down the person that bought the

building after the bar was closed and got the history. Your dad bought it when you were about two years old.”

\*\*\*

The left side of Matilda’s face was badly swollen and bruised, but Jake thought the worst part was the dried blood. She must have banged her head on the corner of the breakfast bar on her way to the floor. There was a deep gash with butterfly bandages on her scalp.

*I wonder if they’ll stitch that.*

Maybe they’d let him clean her up a bit now that they were out of the ER.

He didn’t know what words would help. So, he kissed her hand again and whispered, “I love you.”

Matilda’s open eye was tearing. “Love you.”

A nurse knocked on the door. “Well hello to my VIPs!” She grinned at them.

“Who the hell are you people? I don’t recognize ‘Benton’,” she said to Matilda, as she dragged her laptop cart into the room. “But they’re locking down this section of the floor to staff, family, and patients only. That usually only happens when we get a police escort or are worried about press interference. I’m Tonya, by the way.”

“Hi Tonya,” Jake said with a little smile. “My name is Jake Trellis. This is my girlfriend, Matty. My brother, Sam Trellis, is wandering around somewhere. And I apologize in advance. My mother is going to be here and freaking out soon.”

“Trellis? Ugh. That name, I know. Big, big money. That makes sense. You know what says ‘Sorry about my over-wrought mother’? Diamonds.”

Jake started chuckling.

“Or, college educations for my kids,” she continued. “Or, paying off my mortgage. Or all three, because why not?”

It's petty cash to you people."

They were all laughing now.

"How's the pain, Matilda? Matty?" Tonya asked, with a glance at Jake.

"I don't hurt. Everything is tight and stiff," Matty said.

"That's going to change. Let me know when it does. Have you been up yet? Feel like trying to get up?"

Tonya started disconnecting tubes and wires from machines. "We're going to leave this stuff attached to you for a bit, but you can try getting up if you want." She was moving the bed down and lowering the railing.

"Any chance she can take a shower or get cleaned up a bit?" Jake asked.

"I'll message neurology and ask about the heart monitor. If it can come off, and she moves ok, she can shower. One of the reconstructive-plastic surgery people is going to take a look at the gash and recommend either stitches or glue. It won't stay like that. But, we can cover it, for now, to keep it dry."

There was a small wave of vertigo as Matilda stood up. It passed quickly. "Is the gait issue normal?" Tonya asked.

Jake nodded as he watched her walk while trying to cover her ass. He was a little slow on the uptake, distracted by her modesty. She headed to a mirror before he could stop her.

"Holy fuck! I have to get cleaned up before Darla gets here." Her eye was swollen but also crusted with dried blood.

"Looks like you're pretty steady to me. The vertigo is part to do with the neurological wiring and part to do with the fact that the other eye can't open. No getting up when alone, yet. Need the bathroom while you're up?" Tonya asked.

After immediate needs were addressed, Tonya promised to return as soon as she heard back from the doctor about the shower.

Back in bed, Matilda was staring off into space.



“Ok?” Jake asked.

“Mmm,” she nodded. “Trying to think of the right words to explain. And apologize.”

He was holding her hand again. “How about, ‘I’m sorry’? It works great.” He kissed her fingers.

“I am sorry,” she said quietly.

He nodded. “I’m not going to pretend like I understand what happened, but we can sort it out later, love.”

His head was resting on her hand. She ran her fingers through his hair. “You look terrible,” she said with half a smile. “Not as bad as me, but terrible.”

“I know, right? Thanks for noticing.” He grinned.

*That grin*, she thought.

It faded too quickly.

“Ellie wasn’t exaggerating. I got here about ninety seconds after you. You looked two steps from death. I shouldn’t have left this morning. I knew you were struggling and hurting. I should have stayed. I don’t know what I would have done if that was our last conversation. If I lost you.”

“I was just pathetic and drama queen-ish enough in the moment to wonder if I was dying of a broken heart.” Matilda tried to laugh.

## Chapter 27

Adrian “got lost” looking for coffee. Pretty soon, that hospital administrator would realize he had the wrong brother and come looking for him. Maybe he could stay lost long enough for that guy to give up.

*Yeah, right.*

Jake and Matty needed some time alone, anyway. He wasn't sure what happened there, but something happened.

*I wonder if Jake will get smacked with potatoes again...* He chuckled to himself.

Eventually, Adrian found the not-Starbucks coffee shop and got two large coffees. One coffee per hand, he was off again.

A stop at the information desk got him Matty's room number and a security badge. That had to be Sam's doing; Matty would never ask for security.

Adrian wandered past the elevators that would take him to Matty and Jake. He really didn't want to watch the love-birds be love-birds. She was doing better. She'd get on a medication regimen and be fine. He wasn't needed up there right now.

The coffee was scorching hot, anyway. Jake had a habit of ignoring the temperature of food and drinks and then burning his mouth.

*The three-minute-man has impulse control issues. Go figure.* Adrian was laughing to himself again. People were going to think he was nuts. But, there weren't many people around.

As he turned another corner, he saw a little boy, sitting on a bench alone.

*What the hell? He's too little to be alone. Someone's probably looking for him.*

Adrian started walking toward the kiddo. There was no one else in the hallway. He put the coffee down on the floor and sat down next to the boy.

“Hey, buddy. Whatcha doing here all alone?” Adrian asked. Kids were so much easier to talk with. So uncomplicated.

The little boy looked up at him with big, periwinkle blue eyes but didn’t respond.

“Can’t talk to strangers, huh?”

The little boy shook his head.

“Are you lost?”

Another head shake.

“Need help?”

The eyes got bigger with the head nod.

“OK. How about I tell you my name? Then you can tell me yours. And then we won’t be strangers anymore. Then I can help. Sound good?”

Enthusiastic head nod.

*Cool. This kid’s reasonable.*

Sometimes kids were sticklers for rules and refused to be friends.

“My name is Adrian. What’s yours?”

“My name is Henry.” He held his little hand out to shake. Adrian smiled as he shook hands.

*So serious.*

“Henry is my dad’s name! Do people call you Hank?”

“No, my aunt calls me Ree,” the little boy said with his squeaky little boy voice.

“Do you want to be called Henry or Ree?” Adrian asked.

The kid looked at him appraisingly. “I think Ree.”

“Whatcha doing here all by yourself, Ree?”

“I’m waiting.” He sighed the word out so it was elongated.

“What are you waiting for?” Adrian asked.

“My aunt. She’s yelling at the money people. That’s what I need help with.”

“You need help with the money people?”

*Does this kid recognize me? He’s no more than five.*

“Uh-huh! I have to go to the doctor, but the doctor costs a lot of money and it makes my aunt cry. Will you tell the money people to stop being mean?”

*Nope, he doesn’t recognize me. He’s just a kid asking an adult for help.*

“I sure will. Where’s your aunt?”

*So uncomplicated. There’d be a whole song and dance about this with adults. The kid just throws it out there. “Hey rich dude, I gotta go to the doctor. Will you pay?” Sure, kid. I got this. So much easier.*

Henry jumped off the bench and waited for Adrian to get up. Once Adrian was up, Henry held out his hand for Adrian to hold as they walked.

“Oh good. I was afraid I was going to get lost,” Adrian said as he shifted the second coffee cup to his left hand, balancing both cups carefully on his palm.

Henry was very solemn and serious when he nodded and took Adrian’s hand.

*Oh, come on, kid. That was a little bit funny, wasn’t it?*

“So serious, Henry?” Adrian asked.

“I don’t want my aunt to cry anymore,” he mumbled.

“It’ll be OK,” Adrian said confidently.

\*\*\*

Adrian and Ree walked hand-in-hand down the hallway. They were indeed headed to the billing office. And there were people arguing.

Adrian let go of Ree's hand as he reached to pull the office door open.

"-nothing more we can do! You need to go," the woman behind the counter was saying. Loudly.

Adrian frowned. *Yelling? Really?* People that came to the billing office for help were desperate to work something out. People that were working the system or trying to screw the hospital didn't come to the billing office.

"He's a little boy! You're going to let a little boy die over money! DO YOU UNDERSTAND THAT?" The other woman yelled back, louder.

"Aunt Lucy, I found help," Ree muttered while pulling on her hand.

"Ree, I told you to wait on the bench. What are you doing, honey? You're going to get too tired if you stand here with me," she bent down to adjust the kid's shoelace.

*I'm pretty sure that shoe was tied. I'm 80% sure I would have noticed otherwise,* Adrian thought.

"I'm OK! Really! He's going to help!" Ree exclaimed.

"What, baby? No. We don't know him," the woman muttered.

Adrian put the coffee down on the counter and tried to quickly glance at the paperwork in front of the woman. He reached to shift the papers.

The woman slapped his hand. "Don't touch my stuff."

"Gah," Adrian grunted when she slapped him. He frowned again as he glanced at her.

*What the heck, la-. Holy cow. Blue eyes are a thing with these people.*

“Why would you tell him that? Leave my kid alone. You have nothing to do with this.”

“No, really, Aunt Lucy. He said he’d talk to the money people,” Ree was still trying to explain.

Adrian nodded. “It’s true. I did.”

“Why would you say that to a little kid? What the hell’s wrong with you, man? He’s five. He doesn’t know you’re full of it and trying to hit on me. Get the —” she paused and glanced at Ree in the middle of her tirade. “Get the heck out of here.”

“Ah, I’m not- I wasn’t- I wouldn’t. Well, OK, I would, probably would... Maybe. Maybe not. But, not like this. I mean, maybe in other circumstances. I agree. Guys that would do that to a little kid - no good. Anyway, no. I really am going to help. If you want help. I can help.”

*And this is why talking to kids is easier.* Adrian gave himself a mental head slap.

She looked confused. *Me too, lady.*

“I don’t know who you are, just go. Please,” she said.

“You all need to go,” declared the woman behind the counter. Her name badge said her name was Nancy, and she’d be happy to help.

*Maybe Nancy forgot she was supposed to be happy.*

“Nancy, we’re not going to go-” Adrian started to say.

“You are going to go. You don’t have anything to do with this,” Ree’s aunt was telling him.

“I’m not going to go,” Adrian said. “Wait-”

“You’re all going to go or I’m going to call security.”

*Why did people at this hospital keep threatening to call security? That’s not helpful.*

“I’M NOT GOING ANYWHERE!” Auntie yelled. “We’re going to figure this out!”

“I’m calling security! There are other people waiting. You need to go. There’s nothing more I can do for you, lady! You need money or another type of insurance. Those are the two options. Medicaid won’t pay for this,” Nancy yelled as she picked up her phone.

“Holy hell. NANCY! Don’t call security, I don’t want you to get fired!” Adrian called.

“You’re a nutter!” Ree’s aunt yelled at him. “You have nothing to do with this! What the fuck, man!”

Henry gasped.

“Sorry, baby. Sorry, I didn’t mean to use the bad word. Sorry,” she apologized.

That made Adrian laugh. He got a glare from Lucy.

“I called security,” Nancy told Ree’s aunt.

“Henry, my man, we’ve made a mess of this,” Adrian said to the little boy.

Henry nodded at him.

“Don’t you talk to him! You leave us be!” Aunt Lucy was yelling again.

“I run a foun-” he started to say.

“I don’t care! GET OUT OF HERE!” She yelled.

Adrian sighed. Henry was watching him. Adrian shrugged. “We’ll straighten it out.”

“Folks, it’s time for you to go!” the security guard called as he entered the room.

“I’m not going-” Aunt Lucy yelled.

“This woman needs to-” Nancy yelled.

“Time to-” the security guard tried to yell over them.

*Oh well,* Adrian thought.

“TRELLIS!” He bellowed.

Everyone in the room stopped and stared at him, including Ree.

“My name is Adrian Trellis. I run the Beloved Foundation for Children. I’d like to help get this sorted out.”

Everyone in the room was still staring at him. Aunt Lucy looked bewildered.

“Well, it’s for children. And other stuff. It’s a big foundation. But, part of it is for children. That’s the part we care about here.”

*Stop talking. Stop talking. Stop talking.*

“Yay kids!”

*OK. Way to go, self.*

Ree was laughing at him.

*Hey! The kid laughs!*

\*\*\*

“Oh. There he is. AAADDDDRRRRIAAAANNNN!”  
Sam did his best *Rocky* impersonation as he jogged down the hall toward his brother.

“Oh boy,” Adrian muttered.

*Please don’t be weird, Sam. Please don’t be weird.  
Please don’t be weird.*

Sam came to a full stop a few yards away. “Oh, there you are, Lucy. Hi.”

*OH, COME ON.*

“I don’t think I know you,” Lucy said.

“You don’t. Hi, I’m Sam.” They shook hands.

*Don’t be weird, man. Come on.* Adrian thought the thought really hard at Sam.

“I’m not going to be weird. Hey, this guy wants to kiss your ass,” Sam gestured to the administrative guy.

Sam took the coffee intended for Jake and took a sip. “It’s cold and tastes like teenage angst. He won’t drink this.”



Sam handed the offending coffee to the hospital guy. Who took it from him, because that's what people looking for donations do. They take shit from wealthy people. Adrian sighed.

*Filler? Fuller? Fuller.*

"Mr. Fuller, nice to see you again. I'll take that back," Adrian said as he took the coffee back.

"Have you seen the 'rents?" Sam asked.

"No, they're probably with Jake and Matty," Adrian said.

Sam looked puzzled. "No, I don't think so."

"What is it that you needed, Mr. Fuller?" Adrian asked.

"I was hoping to give you a tour of -"

"BOYS! WHERE IS SHE?" Darla yelled from down the hall.

*Ah, shit.*

He turned to Lucy and Ree. "I apologize in advance. We're having a bit of a family crisis."

Hank and Darla joined the fray outside the billing office. "Where is she?" Darla asked.

"921. We can use the elevators at the end of the hallway. Let's go check on Matty." Adrian started pointing and walking in that direction. Maybe Darla was distracted enough not to notice Lucy and Ree.

"How is she?" Darla asked.

"Better. Much better," Adrian said. "We can go see her. Let's go see her now."

Darla was distracted by the Fuller guy. "Who are you? I don't know you. Are you someone looking for money? Go away. We'll do the money thing later."

Fuller was making a gaping fish face as he tried to find words.

"Go away," she said again.

Darla turned a warm smile on Lucy and Ree. “Why, hello there. Who might you two be?”

Darla instinctively hugged Henry, who didn’t seem to mind.

*Well, fine Darla. He wouldn’t even talk to me. You get a hug.*

“Someone looking for money,” Lucy grated out.

“Well, you found it!” Darla grinned.

*Yeah, time to wrap this up.*

Adrian handed the coffee cups to his dad, then pulled a card out of his wallet and a pen from his pocket. He scribbled a name and phone number on the back of the card.

“Lucy, here’s my card. On the back, I wrote a phone number for Martha Washington - and yes, it’s her real name. She’s my assistant. Tell her I said Lurie Children’s Hospital, OK? They’re probably the best at what he needs in the area. We’ll figure it out. She’ll be expecting your call and will get everything rolling,” Adrian said.

“Put your phone number, too,” Darla instructed.

Adrian gave his mother a look. “My number is already on the card, Mom.”

“Your cell number is not on that card. Put your cell number down,” Darla coached.

Adrian rolled his eyes.

“Don’t you roll your eyes at me!”

“I wasn’t rolling them at you. I was rolling them at me. My cell number is on the card front. It’s just easier than arguing with her,” he said as he handed Lucy the card.

Sam was trying not to laugh.

“Uh, great. Thanks, I think. I’ll call Martha on Monday,” Lucy said as she put the card in her pocket.

“He’s a doctor,” Darla said. “Pediatrician. Great with kids. Saves lives.”

Sam and Hank both burst out laughing. Adrian glared at them while he took the coffee cups back.

“Alright Mom, let’s go see Matty. Bye Lucy, bye Henry,” Adrian waved a coffee cup at them as they walked away.

The Trellis family made their way to the elevators. Adrian hit the button for the elevator with one of the cups. “Mom, Matty looks bad. Very bad. Don’t freak out, OK? They’re going to keep her for at least one night to make sure she’s leveled out, then she’ll go on meds and be fine. She just looks temporarily bad.”

“Lucy is gorgeous. What, five-ten or so? The long blonde hair and blue blue eyes are very becoming on her,” Darla said. “You should ask her out. Bring her to Sunday dinner.”

“Darla, focus!” Adrian snapped.

Hank slapped him upside the head. “Don’t talk to your mother like that. She was trying to be your wing-man.”

Sam and Hank burst out in another round of giggles.

As the elevator door opened, Adrian was surprised to see Mr. Fuller still with them. He decided not to draw attention to the fact that Darla was ignored.

*Whatever, man. You’re playing with fire.*

\*\*\*

Matilda looked somewhat better after the shower. She was able to open both eyes now with the dried blood gone. The surgical consult came and put 8 stitches in her scalp. But more bruising was surfacing. She needed x-rays and brain scans.

Jake and Matty could hear Adrian and Darla coming because they were bickering. When she turned the corner into the room, Darla gasped.

Hank flinched and then sighed. “Oh, Matilda. What happened, sweetheart?”

“I had a mishap.”

Hank and Jake both snorted.

“Apparently, I had a series of seizures. I had epilepsy as a kid, but haven’t had a seizure in at least fifteen years. They thought I outgrew them.”

Her words were less slurred.

“Are you in pain?” Adrian asked.

“No, not really,” she said.

“Matty, it is imperative that you take the pain meds when you start to hurt. I can tell your nerves are coming back online from the way you’re talking and moving. That’s fantastic. It’s going to start hurting soon, though. Your body took a severe beating today. The anti-seizure drugs will dull the pain, but we need to treat the breakthrough pain so you can rest,” Adrian lectured.

“What was happening that you were at your apartment?” Darla asked. “I didn’t think you were there often these days.”

Jake was shaking his head. “Let’s talk about that later, OK?”

“I broke up with Jake early this morning,” Matilda said, head hanging as she looked at her hands in her lap.

“What-” Darla started to ask.

“Not really,” Jake cut in quickly. “She’s confused. We had dinner with her family last night. It wasn’t good. Let’s leave that be for now.”

“Fuller, it’s time for you to go. Family time. We’ll figure out a donation later,” Adrian said decisively.

Darla’s eyes went straight to the rage-glare. All the Trellis men looked decidedly uncomfortable. “I told you to go away,” she growled at him.

Fuller high-tailed it out of the room without another word, closing the door behind himself.

Jake turned to Sam. “Quickly, before anyone else shows up, what happened?”

“I heard her call and went to help. I told her. I told you, too. She can call me,” Sam said.

“How did that come to be? Did you do something?” Jake asked.

“No,” Sam replied. “I just knew she could.”

“Wait. What do you mean Matilda called Sam?” Hank asked with wide eyes.

“She called Sam to her,” Jake said.

“Umm,” said Hank, clearly wanting more information but unsure how to ask.

“She knows about the dreams. I told her months ago. I knew she was going to call me to her at some point. I felt it when I first touched her hand. You don’t have to speak in code, aside from the fact that we’re in a public place.”

The room was silent and still. “Matilda, have you ever done anything like that before?” Hank asked.

She shook her head.

“Well. Wow,” Hank said.

“Jake and Ethan can call me sometimes. Not often. And not that clearly. It’s a break from the dreams,” Sam confirmed for Matilda. “I was awake when you called. I’ve never done that when awake before.”

“Have you ever called them to you?” She asked.

“I never tried.”

After a long pause, Darla asked: “Are we done with this topic?”

At general nods from the group, Darla made angry slits with her eyes again. “What. Do. You. Mean. You. Broke. Up?” She was biting every word off as she spoke.

Matilda sighed and tried to explain about her mom and misunderstanding Jake's conversation with Miranda and talking to Celeste and stupid cheating Lawrence and Sam smiting people.

Sam's eyes were sad as he looked at Matilda. "You think I would hurt you?"

At that moment, Matilda realized exactly how foolish she had been. "Not really, Sam. I know better. Things got confused. Jumbled. In my head. My mom... does that to me. I'm sorry. I don't really think Jake would cheat, either."

Sam nodded, the hurt still evident.

Matilda started to tear up again. "I'm so sorry," she said, to the room at large.

Samuel met her eyes. "Stop that. All will be well." The words felt heavy and seemed to resonate in the room.

After a pause, Jake sighed.

"You got the tail end of the conversation with Miranda. I understand now why you thought what you did, but you missed the salient points. I think your sister is actually pretty decent," Jake clarified.

"Your mom seems to be a very unhappy person, and seems to spread that unhappiness. Maybe some space would be good there," Adrian suggested.

"You think?" Jake's voice was heavy with sarcasm.

"To summarize: Jake is Prince Charming, I'm the ghost of Christmas past, Matilda's nervous system literally shuts down when they're separated, and Mom is a terrible wing-man. Do I have everything?" Sam asked.

"When was Mom a wing-man? I'm sorry I missed that!" Jake chuckled.

"*He's a doctor!*" Hank laughed.

## Chapter 28

“I hate this. I can’t wait to go home,” Matilda said.

“I know, but you’re doing much better. They’ll let you out tomorrow,” Jake said, as he walked back to the hospital bed with her.

There were three more major seizures over the previous two days. During the second seizure, she had stopped breathing again.

“That’s what you told me yesterday. And Sunday,” she whined.

Whining aside, Matty knew she needed to wait for the meds to balance out. If they’d just stop waking her up to take vitals, she’d be better.

At least her ass wasn’t hanging out anymore. Jake went home to shower and shave on Sunday, and brought her pajamas when he came back.

“You know, you really don’t have to stay here with me, Jake. Go home tonight and get some sleep.”

“What do you want for dinner?” He asked.

“Don’t change the subject. You need to sleep, too. You should go home tonight.”

“I’m fine, Matty.”

“Jake, I’m fine. I promise,” she said. “They’re watching me closely. Obnoxiously so. I’m more worried about you than me at this point.” Aside from the one trip back to his apartment, he had been at the hospital for three straight days. He wasn’t sleeping or eating much, and it was starting to show.

“I’m not leaving,” Jacob said quietly. Firmly.

“Jake-”

“Matilda, my home is with you. I accepted that truth months ago, after the conference but before the pool table. Unless you force me to go, I’m going to stay.”

She was silent as she sat back on the bed.

“I know that scares you and I’m sorry to add to your stress. Friday night after you left was the longest night of my life. I can’t imagine leaving you here.” He shuddered. “So, what are you thinking for dinner?”

She didn’t answer. Didn’t respond at all. “Matty, you ok? You with me?” He ran a hand over her cheek.

“Yeah, I’m here. I’m not going under again,” she mumbled.

“Are you sure?” He asked. The neurologist said the seizures sometimes appear as bouts of staring off into space.

“I’m sorry about Friday, Jake,” Matilda said.

“I know, Matty. We’ve talked about this. It’s over and done, no lasting harm done.”

“Jake, why do you love me?” Matilda asked.

“What do you mean?” Jake asked, concerned that she was questioning his love after the last few days of chaotic panic.

“I mean, how did that come to happen? Why did it happen? Why me and not Celeste or Bella?” She asked. “OK, maybe not Bella, but I’m sure there were other decent women before me. Why haven’t you written me off as a pain in the ass, not worth the trouble? My hesitation has caused you a lot of pain. I know you’re all in on this, I just don’t know why.”

“Oh,” Jake said.

“Please don’t be mad-”

“I’m not mad at all. It’s a fair question that deserves a better answer than ‘because I love you’, though that’s the short version,” he said with a small smile. “Remember, I suck at words. Give me a minute to search for good ones.”



A small smile on her face answered his. “You don’t suck at words. I suck at understanding and believing.”

“No, Matty. Not every struggle between us is your fault. Let’s not assume that by default, OK? There are two of us here. Hank once jokingly told me that a kid has two parents so that there’s one to get it right when the other one gets it wrong. It’s that way between us, too. When one of us gets it wrong, the other one gets it right, OK? Agree?”

She nodded.

He was quiet for most of a minute. “Let’s start with ‘How’. It might be easier to explain with words than ‘why’.”

She nodded again.

Jake sighed. “I’ve been dealt a pretty amazing hand at life. Even if you put the money aside. I’ve always known what it’s like to be a part of a family and have a place to belong. That’s a pretty sweet gig. I bitched when I was younger about having so many siblings. I bitched about Sunday dinner with the family. I bitched about younger brothers. Ethan was gay and never really tried to pretend otherwise, so high school was hard for him. Maybe a little hard for me, too. I got into a lot of fights defending him.

“Sam has always been Sam - Just a touch out of step with reality. Not enough to give him real grief. But he really, truly has never given a flying fuck about what anyone outside of our ‘circle of trust’ thinks. He is never malicious, but as I’ve said, he could be savage when given reason, even then. With words and actions.

“All of us kids finished high school and went to college. Except for Will. He enlisted with the intent to become a Navy SEAL without telling anyone and then was gone. He left a note.”

“Holy shit!” Matty said.

“Yep. He was gone for a while. When he resurfaced, things were... tense. Those are the biggest hardships in my life: Too many damn siblings, eldest brother that dropped off

the face of the earth, gay brother, weird brother. That's the hand I was dealt.

“We all went to college. Senior year in high school, Sam told Hank and Darla he didn't want to go to school anymore. ‘It is too noisy,’ were his exact words. They had a discussion. Sam eventually agreed to go, but they also agreed to fund ‘an idea’ when he was out. He overpacked his college schedule, took summer classes every year, and graduated almost two years early. He had just turned twenty when he finished. He moved back home and borrowed fifty thousand dollars from Hank's retirement fund to start his company. Three years later, Trellis Industries was probably worth a hundred million.

“On the day he turned 25, Trellis was worth a billion dollars and we all worked for him. Us older kids, at least. Beth was just starting college around then, maybe in her freshman year. Sam will turn 30 next month. When last we estimated, his individual wealth made him the sixth richest person in the world - and he hates it. He thinks it's disgusting. He has personally funded everything from advanced refugee housing to streamlined dental care for the poor. And I mean everything. If you can think of a worthy cause, Sam has contributed to it.

“But, it's that Midas touch thing with him. The money keeps coming back to him and multiplying. He can't give it away fast enough. He keeps trying to find the right ways to help the world and people that really need it, but that takes time.

He buys property and land everywhere. All types. It's almost OCD for him. He bought a regional chain of failing hotels. They're now a global cash cow. He invested in improved growing techniques to make more food to be able to feed everyone on the planet and now Trellis supplies an absurd amount of the world's grains. He bought into livestock so he could ensure animals were ‘treated with dignity’- his words- and the entire lifecycle of our food could be well-managed. Then organic and grass fed all of a sudden became a huge thing in developed nations.

“Anyway, I’m three years older than Sam. I graduated from college a year before him and was working as a marketing campaign manager at a food services company. I hated it. I was the first to jump ship and join him, then Ethan, Hank, Gary, a couple of other family friends.

“I was 24 when I started working for him, and we were busy. He didn’t start and finish a project. He would start fifteen projects and run them all down while starting more. He still does that sometimes. He’ll go too long without sleep, then shut down for a full day, and wake up with a shit ton of new things to investigate. There are more people to spread the work to now, but at the start, not so much. We worked hard.

Then, all of a sudden, we were crazy rich, I was in my late-twenties, and had no life. It was about then that we moved into the Chicago Loop and the pool table made it into my office. We, collectively, as a family, slowed down. Something happens when you cross that billion-dollar mark

“I met and dated Celeste around that time. Noah called her Milquetoast. Remind me to tell him we ran into her. He’ll love that she’s married to an old man. She was perfectly nice, polite, lovely, kind... and extremely boring. She didn’t mind my jeans and t-shirts but preferred business casual for herself. She didn’t mind watching me play pool but didn’t want to learn anything about it. She was OK with my whiskey and beer but preferred sparkling water. When I would ask what she wanted to do on a date, the answer would be pretty close to ‘whatever you want to do.’ It made me batty.

“So, I ended it, and I knew that it hurt her. I felt - and feel - a lot of guilt about that. She’s a lovely person, just not for me. Not in that way. I was single, the money was getting big, and it felt like I was being hunted for sport. There wasn’t anyone I was interested in, so I found the most obnoxious person I could and dated her until I couldn’t stand it anymore.”

Jake shrugged. “Sam kind of told you this. I kept a girlfriend, often in name only, so I wouldn’t have to deal with women being idiots. It kinda worked - maybe? Sort of? I focused on people that were obnoxious because I didn’t want to hurt anyone like I hurt Celeste or Alex, the girlfriend before

her. I figured I'd keep doing that, much to Darla's dismay, until I found someone I actually liked. I eventually ended up with Bella, who repulsed me but was also manipulative and high drama. For a little while, I wondered if I was going to end up stuck with her for the rest of my life because she was so hard to dump.

"And then I looked up from my pool table one day to find a tiny, dirty, wet, trampled ginger in my doorway that was clearly *having a day*," he said with a laugh.

"There was a mishap," Matilda said with a smile.

"Oh man, you looked so tragic. Your hair had fallen out of its knot. I think there was gum stuck in it," he laughed.

"It was a gummy bear. An old, disgusting, disintegrating gummy bear. The rain was coming down so hard and so fast while the snow banks were melting, the sewers were actually overflowing. My bag was destroyed, all my electronics were toast. I honestly think I was in shock," Matilda said with a smile.

"You were so fucking focused on having that meeting and I was so entirely focused on not having a tiny, dirty, wet, trampled, *crying* ginger in my office. I tried to tease you to keep you distracted, you snarked about the hole in my shirt and questioned my pool table. Hank showed up. You finally went into the bathroom to get cleaned up and I couldn't stop laughing. Hank was laughing at me laughing. 'She's tiny but fierce,' I told him. Prim, proper, polite Hank looked at me and said 'No shit, Sherlock!'"

"What were you thinking about my walking at that point? I know you both noticed it," Matty said.

"As you walked into the bathroom, I think I asked Hank if he knew what it was about. He said no," Jake shrugged.

"That's it?" Matilda asked.

"What were you expecting?" Jake was confused.

"I don't know. Scorn or pity or uneasiness or something."

“No, it was a ‘whatever’ kind of thing. It didn’t seem to stop you or make you uncomfortable. You didn’t seem to need anything, other than a hand on stairs or a large step when there was no railing. There were enough of us around to make that happen without any thought. Staying in step with you didn’t even take thought. Darla’s short, too. It wasn’t really a consideration, Matty,” Jake said with another shrug.

“Huh,” she said.

“Anyway, while you were in the bathroom, I sent Jen to find you some electronics and dug out my fleece so you wouldn’t look so cold. I had every intention of telling you not to worry about the meeting and then offering you a ride home. You came out of the bathroom all business-like in that tank top thing with your hair pulled back tight and steel in your spine, still talking about the meeting.

“I picked up my phone and texted Sam something like ‘This liquor woman is magnificent.’ Then you were talking about leaving and wishing us well and I meant to say, ‘No, we’ll work out the contract. I’ll take you home’ and when I got the word ‘No’ out, your face fell and your shoulders drooped and I felt terrible. So, then I tried to tease you a little bit so you wouldn’t start crying. Then I was thoroughly entertained that you *whooped my ass* in pool, smack-talking the entire time. Not even flirting, just playing pool.

“You left pretty quick, I was distracted and didn’t offer you a ride home, and completely forgot to mention the contract. I looked at Hank and said ‘Fuck, I forgot to tell her I’d send the contract.’ He said, ‘No son, that one works for me.’ I didn’t argue.

“Then you met Darla and she and fucking Noah baited me into choking on beer at Sunday dinner and I accidentally spit it on Bella. She screeched and cried and carried on, and I remember thinking about you falling into the shit puddle and then playing pool for an hour because I taunted you into it.

“Then you talked with Spooky Sam and didn’t seem to mind him, joked about the tennis balls, gave everyone shit, did

your fucking job like a boss bitch, kicked my ass at 8-ball again.

“At the end of our first meeting, I thought something like ‘She’s tiny and fierce and adorable - I’d like to see her naked and playing pool.’ At the end of our second meeting, I wanted more than fun time with you but hadn’t really admitted it to myself. Noah called dibs and spent like two weeks needling me, talking about charming you out of your panties and shit.”

“He did not!” Matilda said, laughing.

“He did. I’m still pissed about it,” Jake said.

“I have never been attracted to Noah,” Matty said, still laughing.

“Were there feelings for Sam at some point?” Jake asked.

“No, not how you mean,” she said.

“How do I mean it? I won’t be upset. You can be honest. I’ve wondered if there were feelings on either side more than once,” Jake admitted.

“I have never once considered sexy time with any Trellis but you. Sam... Feels like Sam. Like we care about each other and would do anything to help each other and I’m glad he’s there and on my side. He’s calming and I trust him and I want him to be happy and I know he wants me to be happy. I don’t have to hide anything from him. Like that,” she said.

“He feels like a brother?” Jake asked.

“You’ve met my brother,” Matilda said. “They don’t feel the same.”

“Oh. True! Fair point, you don’t have a representative sample of what having siblings is like. OK,” Jake said with a chuckle.

“When Sam brought you to Sunday dinner that first time and I went to wash my hands after seeing you, I actually felt sick. I didn’t want you to meet Bella. I felt strongly that

you belonged next to me at that table, not next to Sam, and I didn't want Bella to tear you down. I actually thought about leaving. I didn't know how I was going to make it through the meal. I spent most of that meal reconsidering my life choices."

Matilda started laughing.

"It's funny to say it that way," Jake admitted. "But it was accurate. By the time you left with Sam, I admitted to myself that I was in love with you. And I'm pretty sure everyone around that table knew it, including Bella, except for you. Bella made herself scarce for months. She knew I wouldn't dump her over the phone after being together for so long.

"Your birthday rolled around. Will and I got into a big fight. I had bought you a set of diamond earrings. He said that I couldn't give you diamonds until after the shrew was gone. It wasn't fair to you. Darla thought I could give you whatever I wanted because it would help you understand how I felt and that the Bella thing would resolve itself once that understanding was clear. Hank agreed with Will. We all argued. In the end, Luke and Sam said no to the diamonds.

"Midas is never wrong. Luke is empathic in different ways. They often have very different perspectives that lead to the same place. The fact that they both agreed was scary enough for me to go along with the charm bracelet," Jake said.

"Hmm. Where are these diamonds now? I've never seen them," Matty asked teasingly.

Jake picked up her hand and kissed it. "I've decided the first jewelry I give you that is primarily diamonds will go here."

Matilda chuckled.

Jake continued. "The conference rolled around. If this Friday night was the longest night of my life, and Saturday was the worst day of my life, the Monday of that conference wasn't far behind. You asked if I loved Bella and that fishing guy butted in and you were upset. I didn't understand why

you were upset. When I did understand why I wanted to crawl into a hole and never get out again.

“I dumped Bella literally the minute the plane touched down in Chicago and spent a couple of months trying to work up the stones to talk to you and failing miserably. I floated starting a whiskey brand to Sam so we’d have a reason to meet with you again. He said no, that I needed to grow a pair and talk to you outside of work.

“By the time the advertising meeting happened, I had been hopelessly in love with you for most of the year, and I knew it. I hadn’t seen you in months. I was so nervous I couldn’t breathe. I was afraid that I’d embarrass myself if I hugged you. I was convinced you weren’t interested and that I would need to work to convince you to have dinner with me. I had this whole plan worked out in my head on how I’d make that happen. Then that guy was touching you and I lost my fucking mind.

“You and I talked. Then the pool table. You were upset and I didn’t understand why. Again. When I did understand why, I was lost. If you had told me to get off you that day on the floor, I honestly don’t know what I would have done. I want to believe I would have acted right, but I was fucking panicked. I saw us growing old together, rocking on the front porch swing and you were talking about arm candy.

“We were joking about the tub, then you were crying and confused and I couldn’t help. I called Ellie four times before she answered and then I was babbling so fast she couldn’t understand me. Ellie and Eric and Charlie helped when they didn’t have to. I won’t ever forget that.”

Jake and Matilda were quiet for a bit.

“There was no going back for me, Matty. Darla said it best - the problem was never a lack of love or compatibility. It’s always been fear. And we can work through that,” Jake said. “The hand I was dealt is pretty sweet. Working through some shit wasn’t a deterrent, especially because the hand dealt to you was very different.”



They sat in silence together for a few minutes while she processed things.

“If you had let me, I would have destroyed the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I would have destroyed us over someone’s rotten opinion and a boatload of fear. How fucking fickle,” Matilda whispered.

“Well, I mean. It was your mom. It’s not like some random person’s opinion. I get that there’s a lot to that,” he said.

“And I’m absolutely fucking delighted that you’re describing us as the best thing that’s ever happened to you. Major fucking victory there!” Jake kissed the top of her head.

“When I made you leave my apartment on Saturday, all I could see, all I could think about was the horrible stuff in my past. Over and over. I knew then that I had forced away my chance at happiness. My subconscious knew it, too.

“I’m not scared anymore. I’m on the bandwagon with you. If we crash and burn, so be it. We’ll crash and burn together,” she said with a grin.

His eyebrows climbed his forehead. “Really? Resigned yourself to Prince Charming, have you?”

“Yup. I make a pretty rotten damsel in distress, though. I’m so ungracious about it.”

He grinned. “Is there a little piece of your brain screaming that I’m going to walk away now that you’ve admitted it out loud?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Nope,” she said with another grin as he climbed onto the bed with her.

Jake wiggled and scooted until Matilda was on her side and he was cuddling behind her.

“Sigh,” Matty said.

“Did you just say the word ‘sigh’?”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“Cuddling is nice. I’m so cold without you. But, I miss sexy time,” she whispered.

“Matilda, I love you more than life itself, but there is no fucking way we’re having nookie in this hospital bed. The pool table was just about as adventurous as I get and I’m never fucking living that down.”

She was laughing. “The garden was way worse than the pool table. Also, ‘nookie’?”

Jake was chuckling. “I’ve mentally blocked the garden. What’s wrong with nookie?”

Matilda couldn’t stop laughing. “Every third word out of your mouth is ‘fuck’! But, hey, nookie. OK.”

Jake was laughing, too. “Fuck sounds too ugly in that context. ‘Making love’ is probably the most accurate but sounds way too dramatic. What would you prefer?”

“Umm. Sex, frolicking naked, making the beast with two backs, doing the humpty dance, balling, banging, adult naptime, aggressive cuddling, a bit of the bam-bam-”

Jake was laughing hard enough for the entire bed to be shaking with him. “Aggressive cuddling?! What the fuck?”

“I grew up in a bar, I can do this all fucking day -

“Amorous congress, assault with a friendly weapon, beating guts, attacking the pink fortress-”

“Oh my God I love you so much,” Jake gasped between laughs.

“Belly bumping, boning, batter dipping the corndog, dinky-tickling, the wild thang, fornicating, crashing the custard truck - are you ok?!”

Jake fell out of the bed, still laughing hysterically. “CRASHING THE CUSTARD TRUCK?! Did you just make that up?” He gasped out.

They were both still laughing like fools when there was a knock on the door.

\*\*\*

Miranda could hear people laughing through the door. Maybe she shouldn't interrupt. She could just leave the plant with the nurses.

Through the door, she heard a loud thump.

*Oh, maybe something's wrong!*

She knocked before she lost her nerve.

"Come in, Tonya!" Matilda called.

*Oh. They were expecting someone else. I should go.*

Miranda stood there for a few more seconds, undecided on what to do. The door flew open.

"We're fine! Just... Oh. Hi! We thought you were the nurse coming to check on us. Come in!" Jake said with a smile. He backed away from the door for her to enter the room.

"I don't want to interrupt or bother you. I just thought... well, I thought I'd come check on her," Miranda said, still standing in the hall.

"Great. Come in," Jake said.

When she didn't move, he grabbed her arm and ushered her into the room. "Matty, your sister's here."

"Oh! Uh. Hi. Hi, Miranda. Sorry, just really surprised to see you," Matilda said.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to intrude. I'll just leave this and go. I'm sorry." Miranda said as she was backing toward the door.

"No! You don't have to go. Stay! I'm sorry. Just surprised! Not bad surprised," Matilda said.

*She's so vibrant, even battered and bruised. No wonder she's so confident and capable.*

“What happened?” Miranda asked. “Grandfather called Jacob at work to discuss things but got Mr. Trellis instead. He said you were here and that’s it.”

“I’ve been having seizures. I haven’t had them since I was a kid, but they seem to be back now,” Matilda explained.

“Oh. I’m sorry. I have seizures, too. Epilepsy. So did mom’s mom.”

“I didn’t know that,” Matilda said.

“Miranda, do you want to put that down?” Jake asked.

She was holding a large wrapped plant. “That’d be good,” she nodded at Jake.

“It, um, it’s for you, if you want it. I like growing things. When mom mentioned you were here, I thought maybe this one would make you smile. It flowers twice a year and does a good job cleaning the air. It won’t like being wrapped, so maybe we could take it out?” Miranda asked.

“Thank you! That was very nice of you,” Matilda said as she climbed out of bed to unwrap the plant.

Matty was in a shorts pajama set that did nothing to hide scars. Miranda noticed and focused on them.

“Take a picture. It’ll last longer,” Matty spat out, feeling foolish for thinking kind thoughts.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to stare,” Miranda said with a sigh. “I just can’t imagine going through that and being so strong and confident. Lawrence gets angry when I don’t wear enough makeup to cover my freckles. I get up in the morning before him just to put on makeup because I don’t want to upset him. They’re freckles. Not hurting anything. But I still do it. And then here you are freckles and bruises and scars and not apologizing for any of it, lovelier for all the parts of you. I can’t do that.”

Miranda wrung her hands. “Ok, I’ll get out of your way. I hope you feel better.”

“Ok, I’m just going to say it. Larry’s a dickhead,”  
Matilda said.

Jake nodded. “Fucking idiot.”

“You can do so much better, little sister,” Matilda  
confided. “Maybe we could have lunch when I’m out of  
here?”

“Really?” Miranda beamed. “I’d like that, like to know  
you.”

“I think me, too,” Matilda said.

## Chapter 29

“Matilda,” Jake said quietly.

“Huh?”

“Matty, wake up,” Jake said. He was cuddled behind her on the little hospital bed again.

He had set an alarm on his armband. But he didn’t need it. He was wide awake, waiting.

“Time for vitals again?” She murmured.

“Not yet, but wake up.” He was excited about something.

“Can we talk after vitals?” She mumbled.

“Matilda, wake up!” Jacob said louder.

“What, Jake? What? What time is it?” Now she was awake.

“3:13 AM.”

“Fuck, Jake. Is this the time you wake up with weird fucking thoughts and decide you need to wake me up, too?” Matilda grumped.

“Nope.” He slid out of bed onto bended knee. “This is the time I ask you to marry me.”

“WHAT?!” She sat bolt upright in bed and looked down at him. “Holy fuck!”

“Matty, I love you. You are my everything. My home, heart, and happiness are yours. Be my wife? Marry me?” He talked fast to cover his nerves. He was holding a collection of jewelry boxes.

She slid out of bed onto his knee, and then into his lap as they toppled over together.

Matilda threw her arms around Jacob. “I love you!” She was shaking.

“I love you,” he kissed the tip of her nose. “An answer would be good...”

“What was the question again?” She said with a grin.

“Really? You’re going to play it that way?” He grinned back.

“Uh-huh!” She nodded.

“Matilda May Benton, will you be my wife?”

There were tears on her cheeks when she quietly said “Yes.”

“After I got the potato smackdown, I decided I had to up my offering, so I went ring shopping. It turns out that it’s really hard to pick out a ring for someone else to wear for the rest of their life, without their input.

“I was going to ask Ellie or Eric, but that seemed risky, especially because I was shopping a couple months ago, when you were decidedly not in the frame of mind, yet.

“So, I picked out my three favorite rings. If you don’t like them, we’ll pick out something different,” Jake explained.

He opened the first box. “This is probably my favorite.” It was a large princess cut solitaire. The second box had a three stone round diamond setting. The third box had an oval diamond in a band crusted with smaller diamonds.

She touched the first box. He pulled the ring out with shaking hands and slipped it on her finger. It fit a bit loosely and took up the entire first joint of her finger.

“Want to try the others? Shop around?” Jake asked.

Matilda shook her head as she kissed him.

\*\*\*

“Have you been wandering around with diamonds in your pocket, just waiting for the right moment?” Matilda asked later, as they lay together.

“No, they were at the apartment in my sock drawer. I got them when I went home for clothes on Sunday. I intended to open a discussion at some point that led to putting a ring on that finger.”

“And you decided to start that conversation at 3:13 AM because?”

He chuckled. “Well, *you* started that conversation earlier, before Miranda was here. Your fear and stress factors seem significantly lower now.”

“Mmm. They are. It’s amazing what a near-death experience does to one’s priorities,” she admitted.

“Can we please never call it that again?” Jake asked solemnly. “Saturday was the worst day of my life.”

\*\*\*

“What are you going to do with the other rings?” Matilda asked as the sun started to rise.

“Sam wants to give one to the guy he met when visiting the new babies. The couple has been married for a few years, but the guy always regretted that he couldn’t afford an engagement ring.

“The third one? I dunno. I believe we had a nurse suggest that diamonds make up for a lot of grief.”

Matilda was still laughing when the night nurse came in for vitals.

\*\*\*

Matilda was released Thursday morning. She and Jake spent two full days in bed, resting, laughing, and playing.

On Saturday, Ellie and Eric came to the apartment instead of shopping. They had great fun cutting up wedding magazines and daydreaming about the perfect wedding.



Sunday, Matilda and Jake were the first to arrive for dinner, and toasted their engagement with Hank and Darla.

While Darla was glowing with happiness and overjoyed with the news, Hank was subdued.

“Dad, you feeling OK?” Jake asked.

“Yes, I’m fine, Jacob. Just a hard couple weeks all around. Your news was a bright spark of joy we needed!”

“I could not imagine a better partner through life for you. May there be many, many joyous years ahead,” Hank said with tears in his eyes.

A proud man hug followed, just in time for Will to show up and pick them both up together in a bear hug.

Dinner was full of laughter and teasing, joy and family. There was a flourless chocolate cake and champagne with strawberries for dessert, as everyone toasted the engagement.

\*\*\*

At the far end of the table, Sam leaned closer to his youngest brother. “Are you avoiding me?”

Luke smiled a bit. “Yes.”

“Why?” Sam asked, startled. Luke had been hard to track down for the last several weeks, but he didn’t actually think Luke was avoiding him.

“Because you want to talk about things you don’t understand,” Luke said without looking at Sam.

“You’re right,” Sam said. “I do.”

“I can’t help,” Luke said.

“Why?” Sam asked again.

“Have you looked?” Luke said, nodding at their parents.

“Yes,” Sam said.

“Why are they dimmer?” Luke asked. “Do you know?”

“I do.”

“Why are they dimmer?” Luke asked again.

“Why can’t we talk about what I want to talk about, Luke?” Sam asked.

“I don’t know anything that will help with the girl, Sam.”

They sat quietly for a minute, drinking beer.

“I don’t know how to find her, Luke. I’ve searched every way I can think of. I have had investigators going into every bar in the country.”

Luke shook his head. “That won’t work.”

Sam snorted. “I know. I don’t know what to do.”

After another moment of quiet, “You calm people?” Sam asked.

Luke’s lips tipped up. “I give peace.”

“Can you bring it into my dreams? Can I pull you with me? Can you calm her so she can talk?” Sam asked.

Luke shook his head, “No, I can’t Walk. I’m not strong enough.”

“How do you know about the girl?” Sam asked.

“I heard you talking to Jake about her when I was in high school,” Luke said.

“Why do you know more about this than me? I’ve been researching for years,” Sam said.

“I asked the right person,” Luke said.

“Can I ask that person?” Sam asked.

Luke shook his head again. “I don’t think that would be good.”

“Why?”

“Because you can’t control it. Right?” Luke asked.

“Other-Sam? No, I can’t control him. Can you control Other-Luke?”

Luke looked startled. He met Sam’s eyes. “Other-Sam”?

“Yes, Luke. Other-Sam. Don’t you have an Other-Luke? I thought Other-Sam talked to Other-Luke in the car. On the way to the fundraiser. You’ve been avoiding me since then.”

“I don’t have an Other-Luke. In the car that night, you pulled a lot of power and then ripped my control away. Once you were done, you put me back in control and left me with a fuckton more power than I could handle. I spent four days puking. You pulsed large waves of power into every living thing within a three-mile radius for well over an hour. That wasn’t intentional? What the fuck is Other-Sam?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said with a furrowed brow. “I thought you knew.”

“I don’t know. Mine doesn’t work like that,” Luke said.

“How does yours work?” Sam asked. This was fascinating for Sam.

“I can push it out from me. Calm. Peace. I can see a person’s light when I look for it,” Luke said. “That’s how this works. I thought you couldn’t push it out yet.”

“What would I push out?” Sam asked.

“I don’t know. Whatever it is that you can do. Whichever emotion,” Luke said.

“I don’t think I have an emotion,” Sam said, puzzled.

“An element?” Luke asked. “The strongest of us have elements.”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you know why their light is different? Dimmer? I can see the light but not why it changed,” Luke nodded toward

their parents again. “Can you see it?”

“Mom is sick,” Sam said. “Dad is grieving.”

“She’s dying?” Luke asked through a lump in his throat.

“She’s sick. I don’t know if it’s going to kill her. I can’t see it yet. Dad is grieving out of fear. He doesn’t want to live without her. You can’t taste it?”

“Taste what?” Luke asked.

“Dad’s fear and grief. Jake’s happiness. Matty’s will. The cow’s life with your steak.”

“No,” Luke said.

They sat quietly again for a few minutes, watching their family.

“Sam?”

“Hmm?”

“Don’t tell anyone. Don’t tell anyone else until you find the girl. And, don’t tell me anymore.”

# The Trellis Siblings

*Because, sometimes, even I need a list.*

William

Adrian

Jacob

Ethan

Samuel

Noah

Matthew

Lucas

Bethany

(And Hennessy)

Thanks for reading!

Your Amazon Review would be much appreciated.

Book 2 of Building the Circle will be available in early Spring  
2020.

[To receive an email when a new book is available sign  
up at: shorturl.at/uLQU1.](https://shorturl.at/uLQU1)