

Tis
THE
Season
FOR *Revenge*

Morgan Elizabeth

TIS THE SEASON FOR REVENGE

A HOLIDAY ROM COM

MORGAN ELIZABETH

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*To all the girls who knew Elle was always too good for
Warner.*

*And for all the girls who were told they were “too much.” Let
him go find less.*

PLAYLIST

Serious - Legally Blonde the Musical

Blonde - Maisie Pete

Better than Revenge - Taylor Swift

She Can Have You - Tamar Braxton

Miss Me More - Kelsea Ballerina

Last Christmas - WHAM!

Butterflies - Kacey Musgrave

Better Luck Next Time - Kelsea Ballerina

Tolerate It - Taylor Swift

Detour - Maren Morris

I Bet You Think About Me - Taylor Swift

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A NOTE FROM MORGAN

Hey Reader!

Thank you so much for signing up to get a sneak peek of *Tis the Season for Revenge*! Christmas is my favorite time of year, and I thrive off of fun, feel-good Christmas movies and books! I'm so excited to have one of my own!

Tis the Season for Revenge contains mentions of cheating, verbal, physical, and financial abuse. Please always put yourself first when reading—it's meant to be our happy place.

I love you all with my whole being.

-Morgan Elizabeth.

ONE

October 31

-Abbie-

The costume is *utter perfection*.

My best friend Kat helped make it, finding pieces in thrift shops and boutiques around the city. The light-pink corseted bodysuit cost the most, but it's what inspired the entire ensemble. When it arrived in the store a few weeks ago, the vision shimmered in my mind, and I couldn't shake it. A thrifted white circle skirt keeps it cute and slightly more modest. Kat made the bunny ears on my head, the tail pinned to my ass was made by me, and I found these killer nude, sparkly pantyhose online.

The sky-high light-pink stilettos are from my closet, a pair I had pushed to the back years ago when I met Richard's college friends. It was around that time when I decided it was time to retire my pink and sparkle college girl days.

"What do you think?" I ask my phone as I spin in a circle, the skirt, which hits my knees, twirling a bit. My dark hair is pulled into a sleek, pristine ponytail. It's been nearly a year since I dyed it. Richard insisted it would be more *becoming for my age*, and I'm still not quite used to it.

"Hot!" Cami says.

"Let me see, let me see!" Kat says, then the screen goes wonky for a few moments before Kat's face comes into view. "Gorgeous! Oh my god, he's going to want to put a ring on you *tonight!* Screw Christmas!" I smile wide, spinning again

to give her the full view before sitting back at my vanity, sitting just right so I don't crush the fluffy tail. I take the long ponytail and comb my fingers through it before grabbing a pink lipstick and applying another coat.

"I miss the blonde," Cami says, glaring at me. "I can't believe you dyed it."

"It's been a year, Cam. And I was born a brunette, after all," I say, rolling my eyes. I don't dare tell her that I also kind of miss the blonde. With my hair dark, I look so much more like my sister, Hannah. Sometimes I still catch a glimpse in the mirror or my reflection in a window as I walk past and confuse myself.

"But you were born *to be* a blonde, babe," she says, a thick eyebrow perfectly penciled on dark skin rising as she looks at me with indignation.

"Do you think I should do dots on my cheeks?" I ask, moving my face side to side and trying to change the subject. "Like whiskers?"

"Too much," Kat says with a shake of her head. "The ears and the nose are enough." The very tip of my nose has extra pink blush, giving the impression of a bunny nose.

"I wish you guys were coming," I say, looking towards the tiny screen on my vanity. "We haven't been apart for Halloween since we were in college!" Our freshman year, Cami, Kat, and I were Charlie's Angels, and we never looked back. We've had group costumes ever since, and seeing Cam and Kat get ready to hit the bars as fire and ice without me feels ... *sacrilegious*.

"But you're going to meet his coworkers!" Kat says, hearts in her eyes at the mere thought of such a step. "This is huge, Abbie!"

She's right; it *so* is. In the four years Richard and I have been dating, I've never gone to one of his super fancy work parties—not the summer boat cocktail party, not the Halloween party, and *definitely* not the Christmas party.

I've been *absolutely dying to*.

“Next stop, the Rainbow Room!” she says, joy and excitement ringing in her voice. “And a *rock!*”

This December will be the sixth holiday party Richard has attended as a lawyer with Schmidt and Martinez, the firm his mother’s father started. It’s also where Richard is expecting to be named as partner.

The party atop Rockefeller Center at the Rainbow Room is what *legends* are made of. It’s extravagance one can only dream about, the top lawyers in the country—much less New York City—gathering to celebrate another exceptional year. It’s where big moments happen—promotions are announced, and partnership is offered.

This will be the year I get invited to join, *finally*. I’ve waited four years for him to be sure enough about us to bring me to the event. And once he gets the good news, Richard will get down on one knee and ask me to marry him. To become the perfect wife I’ve been showing him I can be. Dutiful and loyal, able to pick up the slack and help him succeed.

Okay, that sounds absolutely insane, even to me—just randomly expecting a grand gesture. But I just *know* it’s coming. Two months ago, when I was at his place cleaning up and putting away his laundry, I found his grandmother’s ring in a box in his sock drawer, and ever since, I’ve been dropping hints. I’m *pretty confident* he’s been picking them up, mentioning how vital the Christmas party will be for his future and how it will change everything.

And this Halloween party is my first chance to meet the work-family I’ll be around until I’m old and gray. I can imagine one day taking the kids Richard so badly wants to that party, telling them this is where daddy made us a family. I could nearly squeal with the mental image.

Of course, I crafted this costume with that first meeting in mind, working to find a balance between classy and approachable and hot future wife, making all of his coworkers think he found his perfect match.

Not to toot my horn, but I think I nailed it.

Before I can say anything else to my friends, my phone vibrates from my vanity, a text blinking at the top.

Richard<3: I'm here.

That means he's outside my apartment building. Unfortunately, once I graduated with a degree in beauty and fragrance marketing, I quickly realized living in the city proper wasn't feasible. So I moved to Long Island, got an apartment, and started working in the makeup department of Rollard's in Green Acres Mall.

"Alright, babes, I gotta go. Richard is texting me—he's downstairs," I say to my friends, reaching for the bag I left on the bed. Since Richard lives in Manhattan, I usually take Ubers or the train to the city proper and make my way to his condo. With the cold and my costume, I was happy I could convince him to pick me up tonight.

With my words, though, there's a glaring silence from my phone before Cami speaks.

"What?" she asks, and I know there is a good chance this will morph into a bigger issue. *Shit.*

"Richard's downstairs. I have to go meet him down there."

"Meet him down there?" Cami asks. "He's not coming up?" Kat's eyes are wide and pointed at Cami. I can't tell if they are her *shut the fuck up* eyes or her *are you hearing this shit?* eyes.

"You know parking's a pain here," I say, explaining what isn't necessarily *true*. So long as you're on the list as a guest, the parking garage is simple. And Richard is, in fact, on the list, despite him never once parking in the garage.

There's silence on the other end of the line.

"Brunch? Tomorrow? I'll probably be in the city, staying at Richard's," I say, trying to end this conversation. Cami is staying at Kat's place in Manhattan tonight.

Silence, and then Cami speaks in her calm, easy voice, hiding her frustration. It's like someone talking to a toddler

who painted all over their bedroom but is still holding the brush, able to do more damage.

“Honey, don’t you think—”

“Cam, not right now. I gotta get downstairs.”

“I just—”

“Cam, let it go. We can chat tomorrow over mimosas. I can’t wait to hear all about your night, babe,” Kat says, but she’s not looking at me through the phone. Instead, her words are through gritted teeth, and her face is directed at Cami.

I’ve been friends with them long enough to understand what they’re saying as they argue without words.

Neither of them is Richard’s biggest fan, though Kat is better at hiding it than Cami. But because they are good friends—the *best* friends—I know they trust me with my relationships, and if I tell them I’m happy, then they’re happy.

And I am.

I *am* happy.

Richard<3: Are you coming down?

“He just sent me another text.” Cami sighs an intentionally loud sigh.

“God forbid you keep him waiting,” she says under her breath, and although I ignore the barb, I don’t miss her body jolting with an elbow from Kat.

Good. At least one of them is on my side.

“Love you. Talk to you soon, yeah?” I ask, walking out my door and letting the lock catch behind me.

“Yeah. Love you, Abs.”

“Love you too,” I say and then end the call, skipping toward the elevator.

Richard's cherry red Porche Cayenne, that he's unreasonably in love with (I think it's a hideous and unnecessarily expensive version of a minivan, but I love him so I love it), is idling in the fire lane right outside of my apartment, and I smile at the car and wave, speeding up with my excitement of seeing him here. He's so sweet, making it so I don't have to walk through the parking garage in the cold.

When I approach the door and peek in the tinted windows, he's on the phone, the Bluetooth coming through the doors. Richard raises a finger giving me a "one second" look. I smile, watching my breath form clouds in the late October air. From where we are, I can see across the river at the lights of New York City and wonder, once Richard proposes, if he'll ask me to end my lease early and move to his high-rise on the Upper West Side. Maybe we'll be more traditional and not move in together until after the wedding.

Either way, I can't wait for our next step.

The locks click, interrupting my daydream, and Richard leans over the passenger seat, pushing the door open enough for me to catch. I've never had a man open my car door for me until Richard, and it still makes me smile when he does. I duck my head, making sure not to catch my ears, and lean over to kiss my future husband.

Mrs. Richard Benson.

I feel giddy at the thought of the words alone.

Richard doesn't lean in to kiss me, though.

Instead, he does the opposite, leaning back and taking in my outfit. I mirror his action, leaning back to show off my outfit better in the close confines of the car and smiling at him.

I replayed this moment in my mind over and over for weeks, anticipating the look of adoration and lust taking over his face. Would he kiss me? Would he force me upstairs and have his way with me before we head to the party? Would he think about leaving the party all night, wanting to get me alone?

Instead, a strange look I did not plan for crosses his face, his eyebrows coming together.

Clearly, he needs a better look because his hand reaches up, turning on the interior lights. His eyes roam my body, burning a path across my skin.

I feel good.

I feel sexy.

I feel ... confused.

Richard is in a white button-down and a pair of slacks, a more casual version of his everyday work uniform.

“What are you wearing?”

“A ... costume?” My voice is slightly confused. “I’m a bunny,” I say, pointing to the ears on my head and smiling.

“Jesus ... Abbie.” He runs his hand through his hair. No one but me knows, but it’s thinning. He goes to bi-monthly appointments to get treatments, but his father and his grandfather are both bald. I don’t see the point in trying—I think he’s handsome no matter what—but I support whatever it takes to make him feel better about himself. I even went so far as to research and drive to Pennsylvania with Kat to get him a regimen of holistic vitamins and oils that have seemed to help.

I move to brush the hair that’s fallen out of his perfectly done style away, but he bats at me, stopping me in my tracks.

My hand hangs in the space between us like an omen.

My gut drops.

Something is not right.

“Goddammit, Abbie,” he says, muttering under his breath, shaking his head. He looks at his watch and then out the windshield.

A coolness prickles over my skin, and it’s not because I decided against wearing a coat for fear of ruining my outfit.

“Richard, honey—”

“Fuck. This isn’t working for me anymore,” he says, cutting me off and looking at me again. In his eyes isn’t softness or kindness or love. It’s ... hard. Frustrated.

“What?” I ask, my voice a mere breath.

“This. It’s not working. Us. It’s not ... *working* for me.” He’s back to staring straight ahead, not looking at anything in the black of night. The look isn’t like he’s hurting or lost or even questioning his words.

No, he’s staring off like he has something better to do, someone more interesting to talk to. Which, I mean, of course. He has a big company party to attend, fully catered in downtown Manhattan with the *crème de la crème* of New York law in attendance.

He’s staring off like I’m in the way of him going to have a good time. Like I’m a minor blip in his evening that’s a mere minor inconvenience.

But me?

I’m having a fully blown mental crisis.

Instead of tonight being a significant next step for us as a couple, I think Richard might be *breaking up with me*.

No, no, no. This is impossible. This does *not* fit into my magical life plan.

My breath stops in my lungs, frozen and weighing me down into the leather seats.

His breaths, however, are coming out in an easy, inconvenienced sigh.

He’s *annoyed with me*, sighing like he has better things to do, and my understanding of my life and future is crumbling around me.

Richard is annoyed with *me* for not making him *dumping me* easy?

Where is the justice in that?

It feels like an eternity of me staring at him, trying to make words work in my mouth.

“I don’t ... I don’t understand. We’re supposed to go to your company costume party tonight—the Halloween party. I’m supposed ... I’m supposed to meet everyone tonight.” But, maybe ... Maybe there’s something else. Something more. Something I don’t understand.

That’s it. This is all a silly misunderstanding. Something that, in an hour, I’ll be laughing at with Damien Martinez, the partner Richard secretly can’t stand but he kisses his ass, anyway.

“Exactly. And this is what you chose to wear?” Then, finally, his head turns from the road back to me and in his eyes is ... disdain. Disgust, even.

“I ... I wanted to look good for you. It’s a costume party.”

“We’re not children, Abbie. This is a party for *lawyers*. This is a gathering for people who I am trying to convince I am good enough to become *partner*.” His eyes graze over my body but not hungrily, as I had expected. “Do you think *this* —” He waves his hand up and down in the space between us, indicating me and everything I am. “—is going to do that? Do you think if I show up with *you*, that will make everyone think I’m to be taken seriously?”

Tears prick at my eyes, and I blink, trying to ignore them.

My sister taught me many things, but the most important was one she showed me rather than told me: never to let the assholes see you fall apart.

“Are you ... Are you breaking up with me?” I ask, knowing the answer but not believing it. Needing confirmation.

“I’ve been meaning to do this for a while.” The way he says it is like he’s exhausted by this. Like he’s exhausted by the fact our four-year relationship is taking longer than five minutes to dismantle, and he’s wondering when the hell I’ll get out of his car and let him go.

“A while,” I say under my breath.

“Didn’t you ever wonder why we never moved in together?” he asks like I’m an idiot. Like he assumes I never

questioned it because I'm too stupid to know.

Of course, I questioned it. What woman wouldn't?

I just never wanted to push it.

You'll get nowhere with a powerful man by being a pushy woman. I remember reading that in a women's magazine once. I assumed there was a master plan and let him take the wheel.

I was *letting him be a powerful man!*

"Didn't you ever wonder why I avoided taking you to work events?" He knows I did—I've been asking for years. A slow, sickening smile spreads on his lips. "Haven't you ever wondered why I never proposed?" My stomach churns, and it's then I see it—a sick joy he's getting out of this, out of making me feel this way.

He's having *fun*.

"So you choose tonight!?" I ask, my voice rising. There's disbelief, but somewhere deep beneath that is rage. It's bubbling, and I hope it's masking the sound of utter hurt he's dishing me.

He doesn't deserve that.

"Do you think I planned this, Abbie? Why the fuck would I willingly drive all the way to fucking *Long Island* if I wasn't planning to at least get laid tonight?"

My stomach drops to the floor, splattering alongside my heart and sense of self.

His words are *ugly*.

I can't tell if it's on purpose, staged to cause pain and hit hard, or if that's just who he is and I'm just now taking off those rose-colored glasses. How long has he been full of ugly words and shitty intentions, and how was I so lost in love and the *idea* of him to see it before?

"What?" I ask, and my words are light. Quiet. Barely there.

Maybe it's a mistake. Perhaps he didn't mean it. Maybe—

“Come on, Abbie. You’re dumb, but you’re not that dumb.” A brick is returned to the wall I didn’t realize he had knocked down. Sitting before the wall is a pile of rubble, the remains of dozens of bricks. Each one was a piece of me I had let him take a sledgehammer to.

“I’m not du—”

“You do makeup at Rollard’s.”

“I change lives. I help wom—”

“Jesus, this shit again.” He huffs and throws a hand out. “Look. It was cute initially, you having this hobby while looking for a real job. But you stopped *looking*. You started going on about how you were helping people and changing lives. I had that contact at the country club, and you blew him off.” I remember that day. I dressed in my most boring, conservative outfit and was forced to sit in the stupid golf cart for the whole afternoon, handing out nine irons and dropping pins. And when that “makeup industry executive” talked to me, his eyes never left my boobs. Any career help he pretended to offer started with, “We should, you know, go to dinner and then ...”

No, thank you.

“He hit on me, Richard. He made me uncomforta—”

“*That’s life, Abigail.* That’s how you play the *fucking game*. It’s why you’ll never get anywhere in life, doing fucking shitty makeup like some high school dropout.” He turns to me now fully, rage and anger in his eyes.

I have never been afraid of a man.

Right now, I think there’s a chance I could be.

“Ridiculous. You do fucking makeup, Abbie. Me? *I* change lives. I take men facing twenty to life, losing their *fortunes*, and I save them.” His finger juts into his chest, making a point. “I make a difference. You? You play fucking dressup for minimum wage in Long fucking Island.”

A tear falls from my lashes, dropping onto the corset and creating a dark spot which spreads into the silken fabric.

“I can’t do this, Abbie. I need to be more serious about my future. You were fun, but I can’t settle for fun.”

Settle.

That word should be harmless, but the malicious intent turns it into something that cuts through skin, muscle, and bone—straight to my heart.

That word changes something in me.

It snaps the last tether holding the dreams I had built up of being the perfect wife to this man.

And because he’s a man, apparently a shit one at that, he can’t see my world crumbling around me. He can’t see my self-worth and future dreams turning to dust.

“I’m being named partner at the end of the year. You know that’s what I’ve been working toward. I need to let Martinez and my grandfather see how serious I am about it. This?” His eyes roam over me. “Doesn’t fit that image.”

And although the logical side of me knows what’s happening, the side that is just my emotions does not.

“But ... we’ve been together for four years,” I say. He sighs, and it’s the sigh you give a five-year-old when they ask for ice cream at seven in the morning.

“It’s been fun. You didn’t think this was it, did you? God, Abbie. Grow up. It was never going to be you.” His face has that mean smile to it again, and it makes me shiver. “*It was never going to be you.*”

It’s then the second tear drops. And now I’m staring at Richard, eyes watering to where nearly everything has a blurry underwater look to it and wondering when he’s going to crack a smile and tell me he’s joking.

When he’ll say this was some kind of prank—a cruel one, but a prank nonetheless.

He was never very good at being funny. I let him think he was, of course. All those years of laughing at his shitty jokes to make him feel better about himself ...

But he continues to stare, looking at me with a strange mix of pity and irritation. Irritation, as if my being upset and blindsided by him breaking up with me after four years and zero warning is *inconvenient* to him.

Then there's a knock at my window. I turn my head to look and see a police officer standing there, hunched over. I didn't even notice the red and blue lights bouncing off the dash as he parked behind us. Richard sighs, rolling down my window, and the cold air snaps into my lungs like an electrical shock.

"You two alright in here?" he asks, a flashlight dipping into the car. His face softens when he sees what I'm sure is a pale face, watery eyes, and a few tear tracks.

"All good, officer," Richard says with his good ol' boys smile in place. "She was just getting out."

She was just getting out.

She was just getting out.

She was just getting out.

It takes a few seconds for me to understand what Richard is saying.

He wants me to get *out of his car*.

Because he just broke up with me.

And he has a company party to go to, after all.

We've been together for four years, and the man couldn't even do me the decency of breaking up with me with time to talk things through, to give me closure. So instead, he does it like this—on the side of the road while I'm wearing a fucking bunny costume.

This is *humiliating*.

"You're parked in a fire lane," the officer says, and I think he's also giving Richard an annoyed and possibly disgusted look.

"Sorry about that, sir. I didn't intend to be here that long." His head moves to me, the easy-going smile dropping instantly and moving into one of frustration. "Abbie, go."

His words no longer hold any patience, kindness, or caring.

His words are full of frustration and irritation.

He's done with me.

Fuck this.

I grab my little bag Kat and I found at a thrift shop on Main Street in the shape of a carrot and contemplate slapping him for good measure. I'm sure it would feel good, but there's also a police officer standing outside this car watching our every move, and I'm ninety-nine percent sure Richard would press charges.

He's the type.

He's kind of a Chad. You know, a male Karen?

Shit. I've been dating a fucking *Chad* for four years.

And I was planning to *marry this asshole?!*

Instead of hitting him, I reach for the door and tug. *But, of fucking course*, it's locked. Richard sighs a, "God, this woman couldn't help herself out of a paper bag," sigh I'm just now realizing he does a lot before hitting the unlock button.

I step out.

I close the door.

And then I'm standing outside my apartment watching the flashy red car drive off without hesitation through watery eyes.

The officer turns to me.

"Ma'am, are you okay? Did he ... do anything to you?"

I don't even look back at him when I answer.

"He broke my heart."

The officer just stares at me, blinking awkwardly.

Like many people who talk to me, I can tell he regrets asking questions.

"I'm fine. He didn't hurt me. Sorry we were parked in the fire zone," I say, my voice deadened. I give the man a tight

smile and then walk back into my apartment building, high heels clicking on concrete as I go.

I didn't feel the cold on my nearly bare legs when I left the building before, filled with hope and excitement. Now it's biting, cutting through the sheer nylon.

In the lobby, I tap the screen of my phone a few times, feeling like I'm in some kind of fugue state and unable to process the world around me. Swiping, I find Cami's number and hit the FaceTime button, holding the phone in front of me as I plop my ass onto the bench in the lobby.

The elevator sounds like too much work right now.

My apartment sounds like too much work.

If I go up there, I'll see the mess of makeup and clothes and remember the hopeful joy I had when getting ready just minutes ago.

The screen goes dark as the ringing stops, and then a party with laughter and cheers and kitschy Halloween music fills the line.

"Hey, Abs, what's up?" Cami shouts, the screen still not showing her face as she juggles the phone in a crowd.

But when it does, her smile drops.

I look at the small version in the corner to see my own face—I don't know when I started to really cry, but black tear tracks are running down my cheeks.

Great.

And because I have the best friends in the universe, without skipping a beat, she says, "Fuck. We'll be there in twenty with tequila."

TWO

October 31

-Damien-

I hate these parties.

Not because I hate parties—which, sure, I kind of do—but because I specifically hate these parties.

Work parties.

I have to spend at least ten hours a day, Monday through Friday, around these people. Being forced to do so to build up “employee morale” after hours is cruel torture.

Especially on Halloween, when everyone dresses up and over drinks, and, honestly, shit usually gets weird. Right now, I’m watching one paralegal, dressed unlike any angel I’ve ever seen in a biblical painting, grinding on a newish lawyer at the firm dressed like Stewie from *Family Guy*.

I’m not judging anyone’s good time, but I think sometimes they forget they’ll have to see these people again tomorrow morning.

The women who work here and the dates of the men are all dressed in different variations of the same slinky costume: a mouse, a vampire, an angel.

Even the men have dressed up, some going all out, some keeping it simple, but they’re all in costume, drinking too much, and subconsciously comparing whose dick is bigger.

I went with the easy classic of Maverick from *Top Gun*—jeans, a white tee, a leather jacket, and aviators. Boom. Costume.

Bonus, I get to people-watch with no one knowing if the firm's partner is watching them.

Spoiler: I'm always fucking watching.

A good lawyer knows how to play the game, and to be honest, people-watching is the most important part of it. You can learn a ton about your coworkers when you watch them in a casual setting, when they let their guards down and think you're not looking.

Part of me knows I should walk around the room greeting people, making sure they're having a good time and engaging with the people I work with. As a founding partner at Schmidt and Martinez, it's expected of me.

And mostly, I love my employees, consider them a family of sorts. An incredibly dysfunctional family, but family nonetheless. Although I fear we're tipping into dangerous, unethical territory with our clients of choice, I love this firm and the people who work here.

Instead, I'm standing in the corner, intentionally avoiding everyone and swiping on a dating app I downloaded this morning.

The only explanation for the decision I can give is lately, life has been ... blah.

Boring and expected. Too serious. A life of high expectations, all of which I've met, led to being 42, single, incredibly successful as a founder of one of the most exclusive and sought-after law firms in NYC, but also ... bored.

Unfulfilled.

Watching couples in matching costumes laugh over orange punch, knowing the holiday season is coming and I'm going into it once again alone, I wonder if maybe that's what I need.

Someone.

Except, this dating app hasn't worked much for me, either. Swiping left and right on what is essentially a perfectly crafted resume of the best parts of a person feels ... disingenuous. Like another perfectly curated puzzle piece to the perfect life I've been living.

Growing up, my parents created standards for me. Things I needed to chase, things I felt I needed to attain in order to make my parents proud.

Graduate high school as valedictorian?

Done.

Go to school to practice pre-law and then get a full ride to Yale?

Done.

Graduate top of my class and get a job working for high-profile clients, creating airtight prenups and then finding ways to break them when the inevitable divorce came?

Did that.

Build a successful firm, partnering with one of the best family law lawyers in the city, and building a list of wealthy clients before age 35?

Yeah, did that too.

All of it went according to plan, the perfectly laid out timeline for my life. As a result, my family is proud, I'm well-respected in my field, and the world is essentially my oyster.

In theory, I have it all. I could smile if I wanted a woman, and she'd be mine.

But that *boredom*.

That boredom of a perfectly well-laid plan being well-executed is getting to me. I think I'm tired of predictable. Tired of easy. Tired of everything feeling surface-level and insignificant.

And these dating apps, where you just see all the good in a person and are forced to make a good impression in the first ten seconds, feel like more of the same.

Unfortunately, right now, the only real choice I have is a dating app, so here I am, downloading to fill the void.

Maybe someone is what I need. Not something serious, just someone to help with the quiet that creeps in during my few non-working hours.

As I'm standing in the corner, hiding from coworkers and employees, there is a presence next to me.

I don't want to look over.

I can already tell by the way he slides next to me, not saying anything and waiting for me to start a conversation, who it is. And I really don't want to deal with this man's bullshit today. So eventually, I let it span a few long, awkward minutes, where I continue to stare at my phone, before I finally look over.

Richard Benson is leaning on the wall next to me, hand in black dress pants, a gray button-down tucked into them, and incredibly expensive shoes on his crossed ankles.

To be quite frank, I don't like the man.

He's a weasel.

Ambitious, but not in a good way. It's the way that tells you he expects things to be given to him, that he doesn't have to work as hard as everyone else because he is who he is and that should be a good enough reason for everyone to fall at his feet. He chooses clients carefully, refusing to represent anyone who he feels the payout isn't worth his time, and often siding with clients despite accusations of abuse or neglect against them.

He's greedy, both for money and power, and thinks my firm is the way to get more of both.

What he also is, is the grandson of my co-founding partner at the firm.

Years ago, Simon Schmidt reached out after I won a highly televised case of a CEO who embezzled from the company he was head of. He wanted a partnership, and he would not stop until I agreed. Within the year, Simon and I were starting

Schmidt and Martinez. While it's a newer practice, we've been able to secure retainers with some of business's biggest names and continue to boast an impressive track record.

Originally, when the firm started, Simon told me he wanted to set up a legacy for his grandson, who was entering the field of law. He had mentioned when he retired, he hoped his oldest grandson would take his seat at the table.

I'm pretty sure his grandson is pushing for it to happen this year, the last year he would be within range to become the youngest partner to date.

I currently hold that ranking, having started the firm seven years ago at 35, but Little Dickie would fucking love the chance to rub it in everyone he meets' face. For that to be another shiny jewel to put in his crown.

I look him up and down silently, using my eyes to portray my deep dislike for the man, something I've been trying to do for years.

Unfortunately, he's like a puppy who never gets the fucking hint. Instead of giving me a simple hello and walking away, he's staring at me with an expectant smile.

Trying to talk, to schmooze, to get on my good side.

I'll pass at the mere thought of being good with him.

"What are you supposed to be?" I ask, using my phone to gesture at him.

"What?" His face looks confused, like he doesn't understand the question.

"It's a Halloween party. What are you supposed to be?" I raise an eyebrow at him. The additional question of *are you stupid?* implied.

"I ... uh ... a lawyer, I guess?" he asks, scratching his head. I hear the hair is fake, not that it's any of my business. "Not gonna lie. I didn't expect people to actually dress up for this thing. I thought we were all a little too ... old for this." He looks at me and my basic costume, and right before he can hide it, I see it: the judgment.

And that right there is why he will never be a partner.

Not on my watch, at least.

He's a shitty liar.

He can't hide his judgments, of which he has many.

As a lawyer, it's our job to convince people of things—innocence or guilt, worth and cost, and what justice is. It's the job of the judge or jury to make the final judgment—if we played the game right, we've steered them to the right decision.

But it's never our place to judge.

That's where most lawyers—most people—get it wrong. They think at any place or time, they have the right to judge those around them. To make assumptions based on momentary glimpses into someone's life. To decide if they are worthy or not, if they should be treated with kindness or malice.

Growing up, I was taught never to judge, and I've pulled that mindset with me into my career.

It's served me well.

“The invite said to come in costume,” I say, tipping my chin to where his own grandfather is wearing a black suit and a bowler hat, his mustache groomed to be a surprisingly good caricature of the Monopoly man. “Not to mention, you were here last year, no?”

“Yeah, well ... whatever.” He looks around, taking in the party. I lift my phone to go back to my swiping and back to ignoring this asshole. “So, how's it going?” he asks, and once again, I slowly lower my phone and stare at him. I let a few uncomfortable seconds pass, and he squirms a bit.

Okay, so that part is fun.

Watching this douche try to schmooze me and letting it fall flat? Watching a man who probably has never been outright denied a thing in his life struggle to get my approval?

Worth it.

Richard tips his chin to my phone, where the dating app is still on the screen.

“You looking for some ass to tap?” he asks, and with his question, I continue to stare at him, my eyes going wider in genuine shock that those words came out of his mouth.

I may be in my forties, but I’m pretty sure there’s no way men still say shit like that. It has to be just dumb shit men with podcasts and in old 2000s movies say. Right? When I once again continue to stare at him, he keeps talking, digging a hole. “I know some chicks in the East Village. I could call them up, set us up for a private meeting.” I blink a few times, trying to decide if he’s being for real or not.

When he continues to stare back at me, I realize he is 100% serious.

“Dick, you know prostitution is illegal, don’t you?” I say, and glory in his face going red.

God, it really is a fucked up kind of fun to make this asshole uncomfortable.

“Nah, not prostitutes. God, no. I don’t pay for sex, I swear.” His hands are lifted like he’s afraid I’m going to come for him. The level of protest and the speed at which it comes out of his mouth are questionable, though. “Just some chicks I know. They’re always up for a good time.” I give him a look I know he interprets as “sure, right,” because he keeps talking, defending himself. “I swear, man. They’re cool. Just ... if you’re looking for some fun.”

Yes, because the kind of fun I want to have includes my partner’s grandson and women he’s already fucked before. Sounds like a blast.

“Don’t you have a girlfriend or something?” I ask, remembering Simon telling me he was dating some cute young thing. He’s never brought her to any events, so part of me thinks she may have been made up to make Richard look better.

“Nah, that’s old news. She was just filler.”

“Filler?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, you know. Someone you see on the side, reliable piece of ass,” he says. *God, he really is a piece of shit.*

He’ll be a partner in this firm, holding my name over my dead fucking body.

“Got it,” I say with a tight smile, lifting my phone again. I watch from the corner of my eye as he opens his mouth to keep talking.

Another reason he’s a shit lawyer: he doesn’t know when to stop, and he can’t read body language for shit.

Thankfully, Misty, the blonde paralegal who clearly got into the field with a purpose, walks over and loops her arm around Richard’s.

I would guess the girlfriend—or ex-girlfriend, for that matter—had no idea of the clingy paralegal who works late nights with Richard, sometimes long after everyone else in the office has left.

Another reason I don’t like the man—he’s stupid as fuck. There are fucking cameras in the office, meaning everyone who has access to the CCTV footage can see what they’re doing.

Not that I wanted to see what I saw two weeks ago, I think, fighting the gag at the memory.

“Hey, baby, so glad you made it,” she says with a purr, and he smiles at her in a way I never want to be forced to see again. Like he wants to eat her whole and then brag about it.

I audibly gag at the look.

Richard swings his face to me, intending to tell me off like he would any other person, I’m sure, but then he remembers who I am and what I mean for his future.

I raise an eyebrow in challenge, but he, unfortunately, backs down, giving me a tight smile and a wave before walking off.

Leaving me to my mindless swiping in peace.

THREE

October 31

-Abbie-

They say good friends are hard to find, but I picked up these two in college when we tried to rush a sorority and didn't make it past the first round.

And when I say they're good, I mean they came with wine, tequila, Five Guys, and a giant box of desserts from the killer all-night bakery I love in Soho. We are now sitting in my tiny apartment surrounded by a sea of Halloween costume components and used tissues.

"First thing tomorrow, I'm going back to blonde," I say, taking a handful of fries, dipping them in ketchup, and showing them in my mouth. "I already texted Julie, and she has an opening at 11." I sigh, sipping the margarita Kat made me. "Good thing I took off tomorrow, thinking I'd still be in the city in the morning." My chin wobbles a bit, but I fight off the seventeenth round of waterworks.

Barely.

"I still can't believe you went brunette for a man whose nickname is *Dick*," Cami says, unwrapping a devil's food cupcake and swiping her finger through the frosting. "You are *not* a brunette."

Last year, right before the Christmas party I *thought* I'd be invited to, I dyed what had become my signature long blonde locks a light, mousy brown.

All of Richard's exes were brunettes.

All of his friends' girlfriends and fiancées and wives are brunettes.

All the women at the country club who caught Richard's eye when he thought I wouldn't notice were brunettes.

So *I* became a brunette. I figured that brunette might be the way to go to prove I was it for him.

God, why was I so fucking *stupid*?

"She did a lot of dumb shit for a man whose nickname was Dick," Kat says, which is kind of a surprise. Cami, I fully expect to rip apart any man who wrongs one of her friends—it's essentially her brand: man-hating. But Kat? Sunshine and butterflies and a personality so sweet it could give you a toothache?

Unexpected.

"Remember when she stopped eating dairy because he told her it made her look bloated?" That was a miserable six months before I started sneaking it in when he wasn't around.

"Or how she bought that entire new wardrobe of boring clothes so she could fit in with those mean bitches at that golf club?" Cami says, nodding at Kat. I wonder if they ever sat around talking about this stuff when I *wasn't* around.

Probably.

Actually, they *definitely* did. Kat would have nodded in her concerned way, and Cami would have been waiting for this day, ready to pick up the pieces and help me move on.

"Or the time we came over and she was listening to one of those men's podcasts because he told her it might help her 'understand' him better?" Kat audibly gags like the memory makes her literally sick, and honestly, it does the same to me.

With the edges of my awareness blurring with booze, dulling the burn of my heartache, frustration creeps in.

Because they're right: I did a lot of dumb shit to try and fit what I thought would be his perfect woman.

I changed things I *loved* about myself because of a piece of shit man who thought I was *too much*.

Too much for him. Too much for the life he wanted. Too much for some boring fucking lawyers. Too much to spend his life with.

And you know what?

Fuck that.

Fuck that.

Fuck *him!*

Because the reality is, he wasn't enough.

And he's right: I am too much. I am too much for him because he always should have deserved less.

"And the fucking *golf lessons*," I say, throwing my head back in dismay, adding to the bullshit I did for a man who did not deserve me. "I can't believe I spent so much money to learn the most boring game on earth."

"Oh my god, the *golfing!*" Kat says in a laughed shriek, like she completely forgot the hilarity of my trying to learn how to play golf. I dragged her to a few of my lessons, and she basically spent all of them laughing at me.

I can't blame her.

"He deserves to rot in hell," Cam says, and I look at her. She's still shaking with anger on my behalf.

"Rot in hell is a bit extreme, babe," Kat, the level-headed one of us, says.

"At the very least, he deserves some kind of payback." Cami reaches over, stealing a French fry from the pile in front of me. "Hey, are you still in charge of all his appointments and shit?" she asks, and I nod.

"As far as I know. I mean, I won't be handling those, but yeah, I guess. I'm the primary contact for everything." Cami's face lights up.

"Oh my god, cancel everything."

“I can’t—”

“Give me your phone. The email with all of his shit you have.” My stomach drops because I forgot when I was drunk and annoyed with Richard, I once told her I had an email to help keep his appointments in line and schedule things for him.

“*Like a personal assistant?*” she had said with horror.

I’d told her no, not like a personal assistant, but instead, like a wife would do for her husband.

Now I’m second-guessing that thought process.

“I can’t give you that,” I say, holding my phone closer.

It’s not that I can’t give it to her because I’m afraid of what she’ll do with it.

It’s that I’m ashamed to show her just how far I had gone to keep this man happy with nothing in return.

Pathetic.

“Give it to me.”

“No!” I say, leaning back, but as Cami has a way of doing, she gets a hold of my phone, types in my password (it’s her birthday, after all), and scrolls to my emails.

“No fucking way,” she says, looking at me with wide eyes.

“Cam—”

“What?” Kat asks.

“No fucking way, Abbie.” Her voice sounds almost sad, disappointed.

“Cam, it’s not—”

“You signed your emails as his *personal assistant*?!” Kat’s eyes go wide with shock.

“It’s not what it—”

“Abigail Keller. You let this man fucking *use you*.”

“I didn’t—”

“You did! You did *everything for him*. Babied him when he had a big case load, made him meals, and cleaned up after him. Took his stuff to the cleaners and the tailor. Made his appointment and balanced his damn schedule for him.”

“Cam—” I start to argue with her.

“Honey,” Kat says, her voice low. I stop talking.

Because when Kat gets in and her voice is low and her eyes are soft, I know she’s about to dish out some reality I don’t want to hear.

“He was using you.”

The words ricochet in my mind like a bouncy ball.

Ping, ping, ping, hitting every corner of my consciousness.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “No, he was just super busy and—”

“No real man would let you call yourself his *personal assistant* like that, Abbie.”

“It wasn’t—”

“It was, babe.” Kat looks at Cami, and they nod, sharing some kind of telepathic conversation. “We’d been meaning to talk to you about it, but you seemed happy. We didn’t want to step out of line.”

“He treated you like shit, Abbie,” Cami says, with none of Kat’s finesse. “He treated you like a maid, a mother, and a servant all in one.”

I don’t answer.

Party because I know they’re right.

God, has there ever been a bigger idiot alive?

I think I had convinced myself doing all of this stuff—willingly, I should note, I was never forced—was my way of proving myself as wife material. The woman who could handle these details with a smile. That by doing it, I was proving my worth, that I was *worthy of him*.

But *fuck that shit*.

“I scheduled his doctor’s appointments,” I say under my breath, understanding crashing over me. Kat nods with a sad face. “I have a running order for his coffee every morning.” Cami gives me a similarly sad look, but hers is tinged in anger.

“You did everything for him, Abs.”

“I cleaned his apartment!” I say, standing. The world spins around me, but I don’t care. I ignore it. “I took his clothes to the cleaner every week!”

“He deserves to go to hell for treating you like shit,” Kat says, and again, it’s a shock coming from her.

“He said I wasn’t serious enough. I wasn’t good enough. Wait until he realizes everything I was doing!” I say, anger bubbling.

“You deserve *revenge*,” Cami says, a dark smile in her eyes.

I sit down.

“Revenge?” I ask, but the word rolls off my tongue like butter.

I love the way it feels.

“Hell yeah!” she says and stands. “We need to get back at him for this. We need to show him he can’t just treat people like shit and get away with it!”

“How?” I ask, but she’s already scrolling through my phone, through the emails and appointments I made. My stomach turns.

“This. This is the key,” Cami says, showing me the calendar. “We fuck with him. Change shit. Make his life hell.”

“I don’t know, guys, this seems—” Sweet Kat tries her best to put off the cause.

“Explain,” I say, ignoring the churn in my stomach that wants to agree with her.

My mom was weak.

A man left her, and it destroyed her life. But did she take it out on that man, my father? No. She took it out on Hannah and me and made our lives freaking miserable as children.

I am not weak.

I was, for a time, momentarily weak. I let a man define me, let that definition take over my self-worth.

But not anymore.

No fucking way.

“You did things for him. He has no idea how his life even *works*, Abbie.” She’s not wrong. “We fuck with it.”

“You know the best way to get over a man, Abbie,” Kat says, attempting to distract Cami. “To get under a new one.”

“Yes!” Cami says, reaching for my phone and nearly falling as she does so. She’s also just a hair past tipsy. “Right now.” Cami moves to sit next to Kat. The two of them are huddled over my phone. I have still not been given it back, and I understand in some part of my brain I should argue, but I can’t quite remember why.

They mumble while I continue to drink and stuff my face with French fries because while French fries might not fix a broken heart, they help add a layer of greasy and starch to the edges.

“No, not that one—the blonde one! She’s going to Julie tomorrow,” Kat says, pointing to something on my phone.

I lie down on the ground, staring at my ceiling.

“And you know, the craziest part is I really thought he was going to propose this December,” I say, talking to myself. “Honestly, I think it would have been good. A good marriage. We would have been great together. Maybe if I had been more excited about kids...”

“They would have been bald kids,” Kat says under her breath with a laugh.

“He’s very sensitive about that, Katrina,” I say back, defending him. “Maybe I should call him. Maybe it was a

mistake. A ... misunderstanding. He's right. I should have been more conservative in my outfit. I should have—”

“Abigail Keller, if you even *think* about winning that scum of the earth man back, I'm going to gut you,” Cami says, looking me dead in the eye with a face that tells me she's planning which knife to use if I do in fact try to go back to him.

“We dated for four years, Cami,” I say, my voice soft.

“Four years of hell, honey.” That's Kat.

Again, a surprise.

Kat is the one who's always on your side.

Cami is the one who wants to kill anyone who crosses one of us.

I'm a moderate in between. In college, I was the one planning revenge on the sorority girls who decided we weren't good enough for their little club or how to get the professor of our fashion merchandising class to apply a curve to the exam.

Small, subtle actions can make the most significant impact.

“You changed when you started dating him,” she says.

“No, I didn't,” I say, staring at her, confused.

“You totally did,” Cami says, agreeing with her. “You ... conformed.”

“*Conformed?*” I say, incredulous. “Me?”

“You didn't use to care what anyone thought of you, lived the way that made you happy. Pink and feathers and sequins no matter the occasion. Smiles and loud laughs. Blonde fucking hair.” She looks pointedly at the brown hair I've pulled into a bun. “You were ... Malibu Barbie. Now you're Barbara Bush.”

“Barbara Bush is an honorable woman. She did ... good stuff.”

“She was boring and dowdy. You are not that.”

“I just ... grew up, Cam,” I say, but the words aren’t confident. Instead, they’re quiet and meek and panicked, even to my own ears.

“Did you?” Kat says, her voice matching mine. “Or did you change to try to fit the mold you thought he wanted?”

Well shit.

She’s not wrong.

New hair.

A new wardrobe.

Shit, when he was around, I even changed how I talked, slowing down my words and working to lose any sign of my New Jersey roots.

“Fuck him. I need to get over him. Or ... get revenge.” I sit up, my head spinning. “We should go egg his stupid car!” I say, getting excited. “Or post pictures of his receding hairline everywhere. Or remember those shitty dick pics he sent me? We should—”

“He’s a lawyer, babe. I know you want your taste of revenge, but let’s not get you into jail, okay? I don’t have money to bail you out,” Kat says, patting me on the shoulder.

“Hunter could bail me out,” I say, thinking about my sister’s husband. “He’s like a bazillionaire.”

“While that’s true, let’s start small, okay? Why don’t we try getting you a new man and posting it all over social media instead, okay?” Kat says in an appeasing, motherly tone.

“And maybe think of a few other ways to make his life hell,” Cami adds.

I look at Kat, who is smiling at me, and my phone with a dating app loaded, a profile already made in her hand.

Abigail Keller

Lives in: Long Island

Age: 28

Hair: Blonde

Eyes: Blue

They made me a dating profile to get over Richard.

“You guys are amazing,” I say, snatching the phone and swiping.

FOUR

November 1

-Abbie-

An hour, another drink, and a *lot* of laughter later, we have a list of small, petty (but fully legal) things we can do to make Richard's life a pain in the ass. The empty notebook I found hidden under a pile of bills, receipts, and junk is slowly being filed with my pink, bubbly handwriting.

The first page reads: "Project: Payback Dickhead."

The list is three pages long, filled while we laughed and cackled and swiped through the dating app.

It's been a fun night, despite how it started.

And bonus, one of the items on our list is already enacted.

I've changed his morning coffee order since chances are, he has no fucking clue I'm the one who orders him his specialty low-calorie, low-carb, fancy coffee every morning.

And he definitely has no clue how to do it himself.

Instead of his diet-friendly version, he's getting a full fat, extra sugar one until his dumb ass figures it out. He was always worried about his appearance, sticking to a strictly reduced-calorie diet and rarely indulging. There were more than a few times during our years of dating he'd see what I was eating and chastised me, telling me I should think about going low carb.

Such a fucking asshole.

We're giggling over plan two—canceling the delivery of the hair oils he uses since there's no way he remembers where I bought them—when I stop everything.

My face goes slack.

The world goes quiet.

I can hear nothing but my heart beating, nothing but the blood rushing in my ears.

I think Kat and Cami stop talking, staring at me, but my eyes are locked in place.

“No fucking way,” I say in a quiet murmur, staring at the phone.

“What?” Cami asks, looking over at me.

“*No fucking way,*” I repeat, standing, wobbling in my drunken state.

“Wow, babe, cool it before you crash.”

“NO FUCKING WAY!” I shout, bringing my phone closer to my face and staring in disbelief.

There is no way my luck is this good.

No fucking way in hell this just fell into my lap.

“Abs, what is going on?”

I look at my friends, both looking at me like they fear I've reached the next level of my mental breakdown.

No, I've just secured the world's best revenge if I can make it happen.

“I'm gonna fuck his boss,” I say, the smile on my face the most genuine thing I've felt since the miserable day Richard Bartholomew Benson walked into my life.

FIVE

November 1

-Abbie-

What the fuck kind of name is Bartholomew, anyway? I think to myself, the plan unfolding in my mind.

My friends are silent as I sit back down and swipe right, praying this plan works.

I met Richard when I was twenty-four and instantly thought he was it for me.

But before I met him, I had a *petty streak*.

When someone wrongs me or the people I love, I get them back.

There was the time Jennie Sutton told Kelsey McCormick that my sister Hannah was a loser for dropping out of college.

I swapped the purple conditioner that she used as a mask to tone her pretty blonde with a purple color depositing version in the locker room after cheer practice.

It washed out, but not in time for her to lose the homecoming crown.

And then there was the time that frat guy tricked Cam and broke her heart, becoming the reason she refuses to trust men ever again. We snuck into his apartment and put cut lemons into all the vents where he wouldn't find them. A human won't notice the smell of a rotting lemon, but damn, do fruit flies love those things.

But when I met who I thought would be my life partner, I put that pettiness aside. It was time to be a grown-up, to be an adult. Adults don't slip fine glitter into the vents of her ex's car so when he turns on the heat, it blows out everywhere.

Petty, vengeful women?

We plan to do that kind of shit when we know his car will be at the shop next week, and we do it with a smile.

"I'm sorry, did you just say you're going to fuck his boss?" Kat asks, looking at me like I've jumped off the cliff of sanity.

Again, she's the level-headed of us three.

"Ooh, tell me more," Cami says, rubbing her hands together.

Cam is not level-headed. Cami never got rid of her petty streak, but she also remembers my own well, and she's spent four years trying to convince me to let it out.

"This—" I say, turning the phone to my Google search result of Damien Martinez, founding partner at Schmidt and Martinez and the ass Richard has been kissing for years. I can feel the smile stretching my face, and shit, it feels *good* after a night of crying. "—is Richard's boss. He's single. According to Richard, he likes young, blonde things." Cami smiles, knowing where this is going. Kat looks even more lost.

My phone dings, and I turn my phone back to me, already sobering up now that I have a rational plan. "And I just matched with him," I say, a devious smile spreading across my face.

"Shut the fuck up," Cami says, her own smile reflecting mine.

"I don't get it. You're going to fuck his boss?" Kat asks, confused. I shake my head, the plan forming in my mind with surety.

"No. Well, yeah, that would be a bonus. I'm going to date his boss. I'm going to make his boss fall for me, and I'm going to go to that stupid fucking Christmas party Richard never

wanted to take me to, and I'm going to show him what a mistake he made by playing Abigail Keller."

"So you're going to ... make Richard jealous? To get him back?"

"Fuck no," I say, tossing my phone onto my bed and walking to my closet. I'm motivated in a way I haven't been in years, invigorated with rage and a need for revenge.

I throw things to the floor, classy dresses and black slacks and high necklines that I bought intending to fit in better with Richard's Hamptons crowd, to fit the Stepford wife model I thought he was looking for before he would commit.

I was wrong, of course.

He was never going to fucking commit.

I see it now, clear as day. The number of times I'd mention the future only to be ignored. Never meeting his family—the biggest red flag of all. *God, what an idiot I've been.*

Always opting out of going with me to parties I was invited to because he wanted to focus on work. Never moving in together, letting me live alone in an entirely different town. Never being the one to make the plans, the dates. The ungodly amount of "boys' nights."

I need to get an STI test done, the tiny sober part of my brain thinks, and I hate that I agree.

I reach to the back of my tiny closet and pull out the pieces I love. The things I bought and felt great in, only for Richard to turn his nose up at. The things I saved for girls' nights, which were few and far between. Maybe I had subconsciously saved them for when I stopped caring about what Richard thought.

Well, that time is now.

"I need to go shopping," I say mostly to myself as I comb through the rejects and organize what I love. "I'm not going to make Richard jealous. I mean, he might feel that, but that's not my goal. I'm going to make Richard regret the day he decided I wasn't good enough." I grab a black blazer and toss it into

the donate pile. “Who the fuck decides if someone is good enough, anyway? Sure, there are people who just don’t fit with you, but you don’t drag it out for *four fucking years*. No, you’re right, Cam.” I spin to look at her, and even she has wide, almost scared eyes.

“I am?”

“Yeah. You were right that he knew what he was doing—he was *using* me. Convincing me to prove myself to him with the carrot of him one day committing.” I crinkle my nose and try to fight a sudden rush of tears. “He was never going to commit.”

“Abbie, I don’t understand what you’re doing. What’s with the pile? What is the plan with the boss?” Kat asks, walking over to where I’m tearing apart my closet, her hands held up like I’m a feral dog who might attack at any moment.

“Just think about it. Think about the look on Richard’s face when he’s sitting in the Rainbow Room at the party he’s gone to for six years straight—longer, since I think he went before, with his grandfather. At the party he always told me I wouldn’t *want* to go to because it was too boring. The party where he’s hoping they’ll finally announce him as partner this year.” I smile to myself because as the vision grows in my mind, I like it more and more. It’s brilliant, really. “And when his boss walks in, the woman he strung around for *years* is on his arm. The woman who he told she was *just fun*. The woman he said wasn’t serious enough to be around such *almighty important people*. And as his date, I won’t leave his side. When he wants to talk to Mr. Martinez, to kiss his ass like always, he’ll have to come over to me, look me in the eye, and know *he fucked up*. That I’m not just a good time, not just a space-filler—”

“I’m sorry, he called you *what*?”

I don’t have time to fill Cam in on the ugly words Richard shouted at me in the car. I’m on a roll.

“I’m exactly what he needs, and he could have had it. Instead, he threw me away. Us away. And you know what? Fuck that. Fuck him. I don’t want him and his small dick, anyway.” Kat gasps, her eyes wide, but I continue, “It’s true.

And he's going *bald*. No shade to Vin Diesel because Richard is *not Vin Diesel*. Some men can pull it off. *Not* him." Cam gives a solemn nod. "So that's it. I'm gonna fuck his boss." My phone dings again, a message from the man himself. "And he's asking when I'm free."

"We love a man who doesn't beat around the bush," Cam says. With my mind made up, she goes into work mode, grabbing my laptop and tapping in the password needed for access.

"Okay, full name?" she asks, putting on her blue light-blocking glasses she keeps in her bag that she wears because she secretly thinks it makes her look smart. They only come out when she needs to impress someone or if she's in super sleuthing mode.

"Damien Martinez," I respond, knowing how this works. Last month we determined that the man Kat was about to go on a date with was married with three kids, and it only took like, ten minutes for Cam to figure it out.

She's a savant.

"Okay, and place of employment?" Her long nails are clacking on the keyboard of my old, shitty, needs-to-be-replaced-about-five-years-ago laptop. It feels nostalgic, like we're sitting in our dorm and Cam is typing away, trying to find out the dirt on the boyfriend of some rude girl we met in Econ 101.

"Schmidt and Martinez," I say, repeating the name of the company that took away any chance of my becoming Mrs. Richard Benson.

That's not fair. The company didn't do that. It was never going to happen.

You were being used, Abbie, I solemnly remind myself.

Though, sitting here, a bottle of wine in, I can't help but think that the prospect of becoming *Mrs. Richard Bartholomew Benson* is ... bleak, at best.

A sad existence of parties I wasn't invited to and working too hard for not nearly enough respect.

Cam's head pops up at the name.

"His name's on the letterhead?" she asks, an eyebrow raised.

"I told you he was Richard's boss and that he's a partner."

"Jane is our boss. She sure as fuck doesn't own the building."

"Fair enough."

"Okay, let's try this ..." More clicking, a few 'hms, and then ...

Her face drops.

Her eyes move from the screen to me, then back to the screen, then back to me.

"What?" I ask. Her eyes move again, back and forth, to me, to the screen. "Cami, what?" Kat moves over to where she's sitting, looking over her shoulder, and follows the same path—computer screen to me and back.

"Holy shit," Kat says, and now I'm feeling anxious.

"What!?" I say, nearly shouting. "Oh, god, is he married? Fuck, that's all I need. To be dumped by my boyfriend because I'm not serious enough, and he wants *serious and boring*, only to jump right into a *married fucking man*." I tip my head to the ceiling. "Why? Why, God? Why do you hate me? I just want *one damn revenge plan to work*. Okay, so sure, revenge isn't really cool in your little book, but just this once. I think we can agree that Richard *deserves* it!" I'm shouting now, as if the ceiling or the all-knowing God above is actually to blame for this.

"He's not married, Abs," Cami says, and now she's smiling, the look growing with ... satisfaction?

"What is it then?" I ask because now I'm feeling anxious. That look means *trouble*.

"He has a type," Cam says with that same smile, devious and near alarming.

“A very clear one,” Kat agrees, but her smile is more of a laugh, a giggle. “And you fit it.” The computer is then turned toward me. The screen has a Google image search for “Damien Martinez lawyer date picture” and below are a handful of photos of Richard’s boss with women on his arm at events for the firm.

Two things hit me like a freight train.

One, Damien brought guests to these work events that I *know* Richard also went to and told me he wasn’t allowed to bring a date to.

The Christmas party.

The 4th of July dinner cruise.

I’m nauseous.

He’s even more of a scumbag than I could have thought.

The second thing is that Damien Martinez does, in fact, have a type.

That type is short, blonde, and curvy.

And fuck if I don’t fit that *goddamn type*.

It’s a sign from that God I was just begging to let my revenge plan work.

A slow smile creeps across my face as I enlarge the images, noting that over a five-year period, there has been little consistency with the dates—different for nearly every event.

But the type is there.

I look up at my friends and smile.

“Game on, ladies,” I say.

This is going to be easier than I thought.

We’re two bottles of wine in, and we’ve turned the page on our petty forms of payback and moved to the grand finale.

Our game plan.

The first page says “How to Win Over Damien Martinez” and is covered in pink hearts I doodled all over it, and each page after it is a specific thing that Richard at some point bitched about or mentioned about his boss over the last three years.

There are three things I remember him talking about when it came to Martinez.

1. Whiskey.

“Grab that bottle I told you my boss likes when you’re at the liquor store, yeah?” Richard had demanded about a bottle of brown liquid that cost nearly \$300. It was Damien’s birthday or something coming up, and he wanted a gift to kiss his boss’s ass with.

And right now, I’m realizing he never even paid me back for that.

What a dick.

2. Country music.

“What kind of man listens to this redneck shit?” Richard had bemoaned while listening to a “today’s country” station. “Can’t he listen to classical music like a normal, cultured person?”

Don’t even get me started on Richard’s strange obsession with forcing everyone within a one-mile radius to listen to classical music while he worked. He thought it made him better than others, like a person who reads non-fiction not because they enjoy it, but because they like to brag about it.

Personally, I love pop music. Boy bands and mega stars and anything with a good beat I can vibe to.

And while country isn’t my thing necessarily, I’ll be listening to it nonstop for the next month or two. I even order a cheap, oversized tee for one of the newer country music stars so that if and when he spends the night, he can catch me sleeping in.

What a fun little way to show him we’re similar.

And 3. Women.

“Martinez is always dating some young blonde bimbo. Would it hurt him to date someone respectable for once?”

That was the final catalyst to my box-dye mental breakdown a year ago when I turned my long blond locks this muddy brown.

There’s nothing wrong with brown hair by any means—Kat pulls it off like a damn goddess, and it looks fab on my sister, Hannah. But it has never fit me.

I can’t wait to change it back and feel like *me* again.

“What happens if he’s actually nice?” Kat, the sweet, kind, romantic of us asks as I’m researching the neighborhood where Damien grew up in the Bronx. He mentioned it in a law magazine interview two years ago that I found in my research.

Cami and I look at each other, unsure of how to answer.

“Richard says he’s an uptight asshole,” I say to the two versions of Kat that are sitting in front of me, occasionally meshing together before floating apart.

Shit, I’m *drunk*.

“But Richard also somehow convinces people he’s a good guy,” Kat counters.

Valid.

“That’s valid,” I say aloud, remembering that they can’t actually hear my thoughts, and then I burp, cringing at the taste. Tequila and French fries are okay going down, but the other way? Ugh. “I’m sure he’s not much different from Richard, driven in a way that makes him stop caring about those around him. All the high-profile friends of Richard were like that, assholes who were always measuring who was better.”

“We need to make sure you stick to the plan,” Cam says, her eyes stoney and cold. In the morning, I might wonder, without the haze of liquor, if she’s compensating, if she’s using my situation to act out her own dreams of revenge.

I shake my head.

“No, I’ll be fine.”

“You need a reminder. You’re too nice. You might end up liking him and wanting to bail on the plan,” Cami says, and again, her tone is hard, unmoving.

Maybe this is a bad plan.

Or, at least, a dangerous plan for Cami to be involved in.

“And if that happens, it will *be fine*, Cami,” Kat says, her tone motherly and stern. “Abbie can make decisions for herself.”

“I’m just saying, if we put this much effort into it, it should pan out.”

“Cami—”

“Let’s just make you a jar to help you stay on track.” She tears slips of paper into long strips. “We’ll write shit that Richard did that was shitty on them, so when you need it, you’ll have an extra oomph in your step.” We both stare at her while she keeps tearing. “But if you decide you like him or whatever, for some crazy reason, I won’t give you shit. This will just be ... a reminder.”

“I don’t know—”

“It will probably be cathartic,” I say, my voice low. “Writing it all down.” All night the thoughts have been swirling in my mind, each word and action of Richard’s having new meaning in the new light. Writing them down, putting them somewhere safe ... it might feel good.

“See? Abbie thinks it’s a good idea.”

“We all know that when Abbie gets drunk, she gets introspective and sad.”

“Perfect,” Cam says, handing me paper and a pen. “Start writing, babes.”

Although Kat looks on with watchful eyes, the task begins, and it doesn’t take long before I’m crying over slips of paper,

four years of my life making sense in a way I never thought it would.

And when I finally crawl into bed, face puffy and tears drained from my exhausted body, my two best friends crawl beside me, making sure that I never have to feel alone.

SIX

November 6

-Damien-

I'm closing the door of my corner office, briefcase in hand, and waving to my assistant when the voice hits me.

"Going somewhere, Martinez?" I stop walking, the shiny, expensive shoes I wear to fit the image squeaking on the glossy wood floors. I don't turn, though. The voice isn't worth that kind of effort, much less the air of actually caring what he says.

"Can I help you with anything, Benson?" My eyes are on the desk outside my office where my assistant Tanya rolls her lips into her mouth, biting on them and trying to fight a laugh. My eyes move to her, giving her a playful glare.

Slowly, I turn to face the entitled grandson of Simon Schmidt.

I respect the man who built this firm alongside me, but I do not respect his daughter's spawn.

He's staring at me with his arms crossed, a look on his face like he caught me embezzling instead of leaving my office at four in the afternoon. The man is not only a shitty lawyer and a pain in my ass, but he also can't seem to keep his story straight. One minute he's kissing my ass, and the next, he's trying to pin me in some kind of "gotcha" moment.

"Where are you going?" he asks, his tone full of vehemence and irritation.

I stare at him. He stares right back. We're collecting stares from nearby employees in cubicles and standing at water coolers, tipping their chairs and changing angles to get a glimpse of the showdown.

I fucking wish.

I fucking wish I could have a true showdown with this asshole. There have been more than a few conversations with Simon over the years, but each time he assures me he'll speak to his grandson, that things will settle down, that he's just getting used to the firm.

It's been six years, though, and I still can't hear the man's voice without wanting to wring his neck.

"What makes you think that is any of your business?" I ask.

"Well, some of us stay the full day. However, I think those of us who are working hard to earn money for this firm deserve an explanation as to why you're allowed to leave when you wish." His lips turn up in a challenge. He really thinks he's doing something right now. "Some of us even work *late*, Martinez. When was the last time you stayed past five?"

"Oh, trust me, we all know you stay late, Richard. And why." My eyes drift to Misty, the paralegal with whom he's been having an affair for months. "You do know there are cameras in the building we all have access to, yes?" I say, and a few snickers come from the room. I narrow my eyes on him, noticing the overhead lighting catching on the specks of his clothing.

"And why do you have ... Is that glitter?" I ask, stepping forward and realizing a few specks are different colors, some pink and some blue. "Was arts and crafts time too messy today? Maybe you should stick to the colored pencils." A few laughs erupt as Richard's face goes red. I don't like to call people out like this, to embarrass them in public this way, especially if they work for me. But as a lawyer, Richard should know that if you can't handle it, don't dish it out. "Huh?"

“I uh ...” He looks around the room, and you can almost feel the waves of unease pouring off him. *Embarrassment*. “An ex put glitter in my vents,” he says under his breath. I stare at him, noting a small amount of glitter all over him—his hair, a few fine pieces stuck to his face, and in the seams of his black suit. It’s even in the laces of his shoes.

I bet it will take *weeks* to live a life that’s glitter free if his ex really put it in the vents. Now that’s the CCTV footage I’d love to see—Richard getting into his ugly ass car and cranking the heat to cut the November chill, only to be doused in glitter.

Good for her.

“Huh. I bet you deserved it,” I say, dismissing him, turning around, and walking.

“So?” Richard’s voice continues, causing me to stop again.”Where are you going?” I turn.

“Look. I know you think you’re some kind of all-mighty power in this office, but remember *who* I am when speaking to me. Not only am I a partner, but I am a *founding partner*. Your fate? It’s in my hands, bud,” I say to the man nearly a decade younger than me.

“My grandfather—” His face is turning red either from frustration or embarrassment.

I don’t care. I have much better things to worry about.

“Knows my thoughts. Your grandfather—*my partner*—knows we will not be moving forward with anything regarding your future at this firm without my approval. So you better change your attitude, stop disrespecting people in this office, and start winning some fucking cases. Stop fucking your paralegal and worry about your clients instead.” I stare at him and can almost see him shrink before my eyes with embarrassment.

Good.

As he should.

“Now, if you don’t mind, I’ll be leaving now. Make sure you stay late to make up the time you wasted arguing with me

and eye fucking the interns.” I watch his face go redder, and from the corner of my eye, Misty’s entire body goes still.

But I don’t stay to watch the drama unfold.

I have a date to get to.

SEVEN

November 6

-Abbie-

The dress is skin-tight.

The shoes are sky high.

The hair is perfectly blonde, in waves down my back.

Am I cold wearing this tiny dress on November sixth in New York City?

Fuck yes.

Am I willing to ruin the ensemble with a coat?

Absolutely not.

So instead, I smile at the coat check man before walking to the hostess.

“Hi, I’m Abbie. I’m meeting a Damien Martinez tonight?” I say, fighting the urge to look over her shoulder, to check and see if he’s at a table nearby, watching the door for me.

All of my previous training is kicking in.

There was a time when you could say I was going to college to get my MRS rather than a bachelor’s—to find a husband. We’d spend nights at expensive, exclusive clubs, dancing and waiting on the CEOs and tech titans hanging in the VIP sections to invite us.

It always worked, by the way.

It's also how I met Richard one night at a downtown nightclub.

Over those years, I perfected the balance of disinterested and eager, of sex kitten and sweet innocence.

It only took a few days and some careful planning to brush off those old skills.

Now to put them to work.

"Ah, yes, he's already here. Let me take you to him," the pretty woman says with a smile.

I follow her through tables spaced far enough apart to imply privacy, diners sitting close in the dim lighting, sharing drinks and hushed, intimate conversation. It's the perfect romantic spot for a date, somewhere I'd begged Richard to take me to a million and seven times, and the place that Mr. Martinez suggested without my even mentioning it.

On a first date, nonetheless.

A major check in the "pro's column."

Not that I care. As much fun as dating this incredibly good-looking older man could be, I need to remember the purpose of my mission: payback.

Revenge.

The look on Richard's face when he realizes I've walked into that party on his boss's arm.

God, it's going to be magical.

Who needs a Christmas present or an engagement ring when I'll have that look forever cemented in my mind to keep me warm at night?

When we turn a corner, we enter a private room with just one table, a single red rose in the center, and a man sitting alone.

He's wearing a white dress shirt, no tie, the top few buttons undone in a way that nearly every woman in America and beyond finds appealing, and a fine black suit jacket that I bet cost more than my rent.

He was clean-shaven in his profile, with a bright smile in what I assumed was his headshot for work.

Here, he's got a scruff that, for a very brief, inappropriate moment, I wonder what it would feel like on my tongue.

Or between my legs.

Focus, Abigail!

His skin is tanned in a way that I know stays year-round, his hair neat on the sides and longer on the top, combed back. I can't tell if he's been touching it all day and the product has been disrupted, or if he just lets it dry that way, but as we approach, his hand runs through, pushing back a strand that had fallen to his forehead.

And like the gentleman I instinctively knew he'd be, he stands, moving to pull out my chair for me.

And then he smiles.

It's a *good* smile.

A panty-dropping smile.

Surprisingly, not a lawyer's smile.

Strange. Granted, everything I have heard about this man, that insight was relayed through a piece of shit human, has been negative. Everything has been about how this man is manipulative and greedy and a low life.

This smile says the opposite. It says ... genuine.

"Abigail?" he says, and again, I'm surprised.

It's not the well-greased, perfectly neutral voice of a lawyer.

It's not the voice of the man I watched in old YouTube videos giving commentary to the press when he got a well-known actor out of a tight prenup.

It's ... thick. Deeper. And with just the most attractive hint of his home neighborhood of the Bronx, where research informed Cami and me (Kat was sitting in the corner, shaking her head and telling us this was a bad idea during our

marathon research fest) he was born and raised in. I also get a chill down my spine at his use of my full name.

No one calls me Abigail.

Anytime someone does, I give them my stellar smile and correct them.

It's Abbie, please, I usually say. Abbie is a fun name. A sweet name. Abbie is sparkles and pink and sunshine.

But on his lips? I could let it pass. On his lips, it feels seductive and exotic.

Jesus, I think I could let a lot of things pass if a man like this was doing or saying it.

“Yes,” I say, my seducer’s smile in place, my siren eyes loaded with mascara and falsies. “Damien?” He nods before pushing in my chair after I sit before moving back to his.

He smiles at me again, and it hits me all over. He smiles like he’s happy to see me and glad I’m here.

“It’s nice to meet you finally,” he says, that smile still in place. Panic that he recognizes me makes my veins run cold.

Well, shit, that plan didn’t take long to fall apart.

But before I can open my mouth and explain, he’s continuing. “It’s been nice chatting with you through text, but meeting face-to-face is always ideal. Plus, you’re just as gorgeous as your profile picture,” he says, smile widening as his eyes roam what is above the table.

Oh.

Oh.

He doesn’t mean it’s nice to finally meet me because he’s heard of me from Richard. He means because we’ve been texting and messaging each other for the past week since the universe spoke and matched us.

Duh.

Shit, if this is going to work, I need to get out of my head and emotions. I need to focus on the endgame. The entirety of

today, nerves ate at me. If I'm being honest, they've been eating at me for almost a week since I woke up with a killer hangover and realized that the night before hadn't been a horrible nightmare. When I woke up bloated and nauseous, burping up French fries and wine and seeing a notebook filled with petty ideas and a plan for revenge.

And when I looked in the mirror that morning on my way to brush my teeth and attempt to start the day, I didn't recognize myself.

Dark hair, swollen eyes, boring but comfortable pajamas hanging from my body. A body that I'd overworked and underfed for years to fit some standard I thought would get me my dream future.

I leaned into the mirror, dramatically widening my eyes, trying to see who I once was, but she was gone. The girl I was before Richard—carefree, fun, able to win any man, and absolutely ignorant of how others perceived her—was gone.

In her place was this ... shell of a woman I barely recognized. She was removed from color and personality.

I read a study a few months ago where they were talking about how all the color was leaving our world—decor, design, and fashion were moving to neutrals and muted tones, and I remember thinking that was sad. I remember looking around my apartment—my pink girl paradise Richard never really entered—and thinking I was glad that wasn't me.

But I was lying to myself.

I had turned into that—muted and conforming and ... *boring*.

So damn *boring*.

There was a time when I was fun. I was *unapologetically me*. I was pink and sparkles and rainbows, not because I thought it was who I was supposed to be, but because it was *me*, and why on earth would I not want to wear *me* on my sleeve? To wave the flag and let the world know precisely who I am at first glance? Over time, I had built a wall between my

sense of self and the world, keeping their thoughts and judgements away from who I was.

Protecting me.

And then Richard crumbled that wall, poisoned how I saw myself, and molded me to become who he wanted me to be.

And she still wasn't enough.

Really, how sick is that? To spend so much time and energy changing someone, crafting them to be different, knowing all along she'd never be what you wanted?

I think that's the thought that has me standing my ground, the thought that had me rebuilding my wall that morning as I stared in the mirror.

And now that wall isn't just keeping the universe from telling me who I *should* be. It's also keeping out feelings, emotions, and morality from taking me off my plan of revenge.

Shaking my head and smiling my coy, sweet smile, I get my mind back into the restaurant, focusing on the man in front of me.

"You as well. I've been looking forward to it all week." He smiles at me, accepting my words at face value.

"I'm sorry I couldn't fit it in earlier. Work has been crazy, lots of cases trying to close out by the end of the year," Damien says.

"It's no worry, I—" I almost tell him I know, I understand. I almost explain just how familiar I am with his line of work, his firm even.

Thankfully, the waiter comes over, interrupting my near mess up.

"Can I start you off with something to drink?" the waiter says, a pad in his hands, ready for what we'd like.

Damien speaks first.

"A bottle of champagne for the table, two flutes," he says.

My inner diva smiles, clapping excitedly because she *loves* champagne. It's one of those things I feel truly makes a night feel special. Of course, Richard rarely ordered it, never feeling like a night out together was "worthy" of celebrating.

No matter how many times I told him I'd pay for it, that being alive and healthy and in love was *worthy* of celebration, he never agreed, and I'd sit there sipping water begrudgingly.

And as much as I'd love a glass of bubbly, much less an expensive, fancy bubbly that probably comes in gorgeous crystal flutes that celebrities like Reese Witherspoon and Luke Wilson have drunk from, my next move is the beginning of step one of the plan.

My hand, tipped in Barbie pink acrylics I had done on Wednesday (no more boring nudes and French manis for me), reaches out to touch his wrist gently. I bite my lip just barely in a well-rehearsed, nervous look. His eyes move as my teeth press into my lip, and I don't miss the quick, nearly undetectable glimmer of heat in his eyes at the move.

But what has my mind momentarily scrambled is the small zap of electricity the brush of my fingertips on his skin sends up my arm.

What in the fuck is that?

I ignore it and speak.

"Do you mind if I get a whiskey on the rocks? It's been such a long week, and I totally need to unwind," I say with a flirty shake of my head and roll of my eyes, the perfect balance of a ditzy blonde and self-assured woman.

There was once a time when I could use this move to get absolutely anything in the world. Men, drinks, an extension on a school project—anything.

It feels good to use her again, to shake off the dust and slip into me again.

He smiles and, fuck, *that smile*.

"Of course," he says, looking at the waiter. "Champagne, two glasses of McAllan, two glasses of water, and a bread

basket.” The waiter nods, smiles, and walks away.

“Water?” I ask, sitting back in my seat and draping the fine white napkin across my lap. I may have been raised by trash in a small town in Jersey that no one’s ever heard of, but I know how to act in an establishment like this.

“And bread. Have you eaten today?” he asks, tipping his chin to me in question. Ice moves slowly in my veins.

“That’s kind of ... personal,” I say, scrunching my eyebrows together. Damien’s eyes move to the spot my ex once begged me to get Botox in, taking it in. This was the kind of question Richard liked to ask me if he thought I wasn’t keeping up with my workouts or eating too much junk. I bite my lip, wondering if I maybe just chained myself to a revenge plan with more baggage than he’s worth, out of the frying pan and into the fryer.

But Damien just laughs, tipping his head back. He finds me ... funny.

I didn’t intend to be funny.

My body prickles uncomfortably, a feeling that is part embarrassment, part nerves, and part irritation overtaking me.

“Personal? I just want to make sure you don’t drink two fingers of whiskey on an empty stomach and need to be shoveled into a cab.”

Oh.

He’s asking to make sure I don’t get drunk.

Hmm.

I’m ... not sure how to feel about that.

This is new for me.

I go with my playful seductress.

“Isn’t that a perk for men? A woman who loses her inhibitions?” I ask, raising an eyebrow and smiling.

He laughs again, and, damn, he’s got an *excellent* laugh.

“Losing her inhibitions? Yeah, that’s a plus. But the women I date? They don’t need to drink for that to happen. It just ... does.” His smile is feline, sly.

Hungry.

I can see how that would *just happen*.

It reminds me of the conversation I had with Cami yesterday when she was at my place helping me choose my outfit. We settled on a tight pink dress with major nineties vibes and tiny spaghetti straps holding it up. The shoes are four inches, much too tall for walking around the city, but for a special occasion—or a special plan of destruction—I decided it was worth it.

“Fuck, babe, he’s going to want to peel you out of that!” Cami said as I turned in the mirror, my newly blond hair falling down my back in loose curls. The dress is brand new from Rollard’s, as are most of my outfits from “Pre-Richard Brainwashing,” as I’m calling it, fitting just a bit loose with the weight I lost while dating him.

I can’t wait to get my curves back, a part of me I used to love before he’d grab my hip while we were naked in bed together, saying something like, “Maybe in the morning you should go for a run.”

The worst part is *I did*. I went for a run that morning. And I did four times a week from then on.

I *hate* running.

I hate *cardio*. I hate sweating and having to wash my hair and how it makes everything stick to me and feel itchy.

I hate it with every bone in my body.

But like everything else, I did it for Richard, thinking maybe that was the key to making him happy.

“What happens if he does?” I asked Cami. “Want to peel it off me, I mean?”

It’s something I’d also wondered.

If we're together for a full six weeks, long enough for him to invite me to the company party, it definitely will be passing the expected three-date rule, and from what I've heard, Damien Martinez enjoys having a woman in his bed, not just on his arm.

But would sleeping with Damien make me a horrible human?"

"Then do it," she said. "A man like Damien Martinez isn't looking for *commitment*, Abbie. He's looking for a pretty young thing to bring home and fuck." She'd been scrolling her phone and turned it to show me. A photo of my date was on there. "And it would be an *absolute crime* not to find out if the promise of pure sexual conquest this man holds in his eyes is true."

She wasn't wrong.

Even looking at him now, he radiates sex.

"I guess ...," I said, still unsure of how I felt about that.

Thankfully, Kat, our voice of reason, was also there, organizing my shoe collection while Cami and I wondered about the morality of fucking my unwitting revenge partner.

"Look. Dating casually isn't a big deal, Abbie. But you should ask him. Ask what he's looking for, expecting." Her face was still in my closet, but she turned to me then. "This plan ... it's fine. There's no talking you out of it. And I think we can all agree that Richard deserves it. But ... if feelings join ..."

"That won't happen," I said, reassuring her, but also myself, because the thought had crossed my mind a few times. It's one thing to hurt Richard—he deserves it. But to trick another person into having feelings ... then it all being fake? That's cruel. "He's a dick and goes through women like water," I said.

"Says *Richard*," she reminded me.

Valid.

I sighed, knowing that she was right. “I’ll ask,” I decided then and there, trying to ignore Cami rolling her eyes at Kat and my moral compass. “If he’s looking for something ... real, we’ll cut it off. If he’s not ... no harm, no foul.”

And in that moment, I gave myself permission to date Damien Martinez and potentially really enjoy it while it lasted.

And with that hungry look running down my body, I’m glad I did.

“I bet it does,” I say, smiling at the man in front of me. Before I can elaborate, the waiter returns with our drinks and a bread basket.

The whiskey is set in front of me, and I stare at it like an enemy.

I do not like liquor.

The taste of it, the smell of it, the way it burns ... none of it brings me any kind of joy or satisfaction. If it were up to me, hard liquor would only be to drown out heartbreak. Otherwise, it would be liberally doused in sugar and juice until it’s just a gentle, complimentary flavor in the background that can get you nice and toasted without the actual *taste*.

But then Damien is grabbing his own cut crystal glass and tipping it toward my own in almost a challenge, waiting for me to lift my own.

I do, begrudgingly.

But on the outside, the sultry goddess mask is in place.

A sultry goddess who loves hard liquor. Especially whiskey.

You can do this, I think to myself, hyping myself up to love this.

“Cheers,” he says, just lightly clinking the edge of his glass to mine before bringing it to his lips.

I do the same, sipping the drink delicately and working to school my features when it burns. I’d much rather drink the champagne, some fruity rosé, an embarrassingly girly daiquiri

or, literally anything but this shit, but the *plan*. I must go with it.

As expected, it burns as it goes down.

Unfortunately, I might be great at being petty and doing makeup and picking out the perfect pink for literally any skin tone on the first try, but I'm not good at pretending I like whiskey.

I cough.

I cough embarrassingly loud once I swallow, scrambling to find the white linen cloth napkin to cover my face.

When my coughing fit is over, thankfully lasting only a few seconds, I put the napkin down and look to Damien's face, a mix of shock and worry.

And then he laughs.

Embarrassment blooms throughout me, burning my cheeks.

This is not going how I planned. I'm supposed to be chic, cultured, his perfect match.

I'm supposed to impress and win him.

Instead, he's *laughing at me*.

"You good?" he asks, handing me a glass of water. I grab it with a small embarrassed smile, taking a sip and nodding.

I have no idea what to say.

"A little harsh, yeah?" he asks, and it's a relief.

"Yes, very. Unexpected. I guess ... I guess last time I had whiskey, it was a ... different one." Damien lifts an eyebrow but doesn't argue.

"I like this, but my father—he makes amazing whiskey." I finish dotting my mouth, putting my napkin back on my lap. "Smooth, barely burns," he says, an eyebrow raised.

"That sounds absolutely lovely. He makes it himself?" Damien hands over the glass of champagne, and I happily take a big sip. He smiles, clearly fighting another laugh.

I'm sure he's figured me out.

“Yeah. He always wanted to when I was growing up. Once they retired, I bought them a place in Florida, and it had a small shed distillery. Now he makes his own whiskey moonshine.”

“He sounds like a fun time,” I say with a smile.

“He is.”

“And you're a wonderful son, buying them a home.”

“They raised me to be successful. It's the least I could do.” This I didn't know. This bit of information was nowhere to be found in interviews and bios and through the stories Richard spewed.

“Tell me about it—your parents, how they inspired you,” I say, picking up a menu to inspect what I should order.

And he does, following suit. He tells me about growing up in the Bronx, and I tell him about the tiny town of Springbrook Hills. I ask about his work after we order and then tell him all about working at Rollard's. A shy, nervous flutter sits in my belly when I tell him I do makeup for a living.

But unlike my ex, he doesn't scoff at the idea, instead telling me his mother loves makeup, that he finds the artistry and capabilities of modern makeup interesting.

And when we're eating our meals, I feel the distinct need to drag out our conversation, not just to end here and head home.

Strangely enough, I want to know more about this man, not just because it fits my end game. Maybe it's just that I haven't been on a date in an eternity, had a man's full attention on me. Perhaps it's just being able to hold a man's gaze for so long is intoxicating, especially knowing he's such a busy, important man.

There wasn't a single meal I had with Richard where he wasn't checking his phone, raising a single finger to keep me quiet while he took a call.

The memory shoots me with a cold realization for what feels like the millionth time in less than a week.

He was never interested in me the way I was in love with him.

He said the words occasionally, but he never meant them.

How did my ability to read people—what I once prided myself on so strongly—get so inaccurate? How did I fog my lens so terribly with love and adoration that I couldn't see the signs?

And how the *fuck* did I let that man play me for so long?

All the more reason to keep on with my plan.

“What do you do for fun?” I ask, smiling at him.

“I don't have time for fun,” he replies, a self-deprecating smile on his face. “Life of a lawyer means the fun gets pushed to the side.”

“No time for fun? What do you call this, then?” I say with a small smile, my Tyra Banks energy on full blast.

“This is a re-prioritization. A spur of the moment decision I'm really fucking happy I made,” he says, reaching over and grabbing my hand, his thumb grazing over my knuckles as he does.

As we finish eating, conversation slowing, we sit there for a few moments, waiting for the waiter, and Damien's demeanor changes. It's a subtle shift, but one that puts me on edge.

“I gotta be honest with you,” he says, and goddammit, my stomach drops, mind going to the absolute worst case.

“You're married,” I say, my voice light and disbelieving.

It's been a good night.

A great night, even.

But that? Being a homewrecker? It doesn't fit into my master plan of revenge. If he ends up being married or having some kind of woman at home, that's a line I'm not willing to

cross, ever. And it would so be my luck, wouldn't it? To date this man because my ex is a piece of shit only to realize he, too, is a cheating piece of shit?

I'm ready to leave.

Fuck the plan.

Cam and I can go through that entire list of petty paybacks, each one absolving a grain of the hurt and betrayal Richard made me feel.

There is always a way.

This just won't be it.

But Damien just laughs at my assumption.

"God, no," he says, and his smile stretches his tanned skin, laugh lines that show his age deepening handsomely. I just raise my eyebrow. "Seriously, I swear. You can call my assistant; she'll let you know you're the first date I've had in a long time. No way I could be married, much less dating someone and get it past Tanya." I stare at him, and he reaches into his pocket, pulling out his phone. "Seriously, you want me to call her?"

The apparent honesty is ... refreshing.

God, that's embarrassing.

Feeling refreshed by immediate honesty.

"No, I'm fine. I ... believe you." I take a deep, calming breath, centering myself and clearing the instant jump to the worst-case scenario. "So, what's your big confession?"

"I'm not ... looking for anything serious." He pauses, and I continue to stare. "I know. That's a huge red flag." I stay quiet, a small smile on my lips and an eyebrow raised. "Fuck, I am a red flag." He laughs, running a hand over his face. "Okay, let me try again. Right now, at this exact moment, I'm not looking for a serious commitment. I got on that app on a whim, scrolled around, and we matched. I'm glad, but I also want expectations to be clear from the beginning." His hand moves across the table, and he grabs my hand, his thumb running over the skin there, that zap of electricity running

through me again. “Exclusivity is important to me. I won’t be seeing anyone else if we move forward until we both agree otherwise, and I’d expect the same from you. But I don’t want you to have visions of a white wedding and two point five kids in your mind. That’s not for me. It probably won’t *ever* be for me,” he says, his eyes narrowing to push his point across. I roll my lips between my teeth.

The honesty is really freaking refreshing.

This is also the *best-fucking-case scenario*.

“That could change, of course. I’ve learned that I should never say no before I know everything, but at this moment, I want you to know that.”

I appreciate it, his honesty.

I wonder how he would feel about my own truth, knowing the intentions of my accepting this date.

My dinner churns gently in my stomach as I ignore that thought.

“Okay,” I say.

“Okay?”

“I’m good with that.” I smile at him. *I’m more than good with that*, I think. *It really, really works for me*.

He smiles back at me, and it’s full of perfectly straight white teeth.

“You good skipping dessert?” he asks, not moving his eyes from my face, thumb continuing to strum my knuckles.

My gut drops.

He wants to end the date early.

I failed.

I had one shot at this, and I utterly, magnificently failed at it.

“We can go for a walk, maybe hit a bakery?” he finishes, and I smile big.

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

And I mean it.

EIGHT

November 6

-Abbie-

Damien is adjusting his suit jacket as he stands after signing the check, and before I can even push my chair out, he's going full-on gentleman and pulling it out for me. Then he moves in front of me, gives me a hand, and helps me stand.

Standing, I can see how fucking *tall* he is.

No wonder Richard loved to hate this man. His two insecurities were always that stupid hairline and his 5'9" height. He'd wear heeled dress shoes to work, adding lifts and other random mechanisms to help him feel taller, but never let me wear any of my favorite shoes. Nothing over two inches.

Do you know how hard it is to find hot shoes with a two-inch heel?

Now, there's nothing wrong with a short man. Nothing *at all*. The issue becomes when the man puts so much thought into how tall he is that it starts to impact who he's with.

I would never have even put height into the equation with Damien. But right now, my 5'4" plus four-and-a-half-inch heels still leave this man towering over me.

"You're a little thing, aren't you," he says when he helps me stand but doesn't step back to give me space.

My chest is nearly touching his, and the small strip of air between us is warm, brushing against my exposed skin like a summer heatwave, even though we're nearing winter.

“I’m five-four,” I reply, staring up at him like an idiot, and I could kick myself for saying something so dumb when he handed me the perfect line to add a Marilyn Monroe seductress flair.

Instead, I keep acting like a *moron*. “I’m actually incredibly average. The average American woman is five foot four. So it’s not ... tiny.”

His smile gets wider, and I get lost in it.

“Yeah, well, I’m just about a foot taller than you. You’re tiny to me.”

“I have heels on,” I say. *Jesus, Abbie! Shut up!* “They add four more inches.”

He takes a step back, easing the space between us again, and my mind can instantly function again now that he’s out of my air space. His head tips down, looking at the high shoes with a big patent leather bow on the toe, hints of pink complimenting my dress.

“Yeah. I like those.” A burn washes down my spine at his words. *Holy fuck*. “Can you walk in them?” My eyebrows come together in confusion.

“What?”

“Can you walk in those? They’re tall.”

“I can work an eight-hour shift in these,” I say, because I can. *I have*.

I can carry gigantic boxes from the stockroom to the front, unpack new merchandise, and bring the cardboard back to the compactor in these shoes.

“So if we go for a walk, you’ll be good?” he asks, and I smile.

Oh, I’ll be good, I think as we walk toward the front door.

When we're at the coat check, Damien digs in his pocket for a ticket before turning to me, hand out.

"What?" I ask, staring at the hand.

"Coat check."

"I'm sorry?" He looks at me with a small smile, like he thinks my confusion is cute.

"Your coat check ticket. Give it to me, and I'll have the attendant get yours too."

"I don't have one."

"You don't have a coat check ticket? Did you lose it?" he asks, looking back over my shoulder toward where we came from, toward the table.

"No, I didn't wear a coat," I say, and although I won't admit it, when the front door opens and lets in a gust of the early November cold, I *almost* regret it as it hits my bare arms. But then I remember this dress is hot as hell and should not be hidden beneath a trench coat.

"You didn't wear a coat?"

"No."

"Why not?" He looks genuinely confused, and for a moment, I wonder if the blonde dye got to me and I'm missing something.

"Do you see this dress?" I say with an air of incredulity and "*are you dumb?*" in my voice.

"Yes." I don't respond but continue to stare at him. "It's a nice dress."

"You don't cover a dress like this with a coat, honey," I say and smile the winning smile I've been practicing in the mirror since I was ten. The smile that has gotten me jobs, tips, boys, and so much more.

And in that moment, I think it gets me Damien Martinez.

Because he smiles back at me, and it's a pleasant smile, one I haven't seen yet.

I wonder if he's been practicing his as long as I have mine.

"I can see that." Then, still keeping his eyes on me (notably, not on the curves or the cleavage, for which I have to commend him because both are very much on display), he hands the ticket to the kid working the coat check. We're both silent as he leaves and returns with a coat, and Damien hands him a tip.

And then Damien turns back to me and crooks a finger.

I don't think a single motion has ever been so sexy. There has never been a single motion that made my entire body go up in invisible flames.

This man—fourteen years my elder, boss of my ex, lawyer superstar—just crooked his finger at me and melted my damn panties off.

And even more impressive, I oblige, taking a step closer.

That finger moves, twirling just a tiny bit, telling me to turn around.

And fuck if I don't do it.

"Arms out, *rubia*," he says, low and in my ear, his body heat on my bare back now.

I do as I'm told, and cool material is dragged up my arms and placed gently—ever so gently—on my shoulders. His hand goes to my waist, gently turning me until I face him. My entire body is on fire with this interaction, with his movements, though most are barely even touching me.

It hits me then.

Armani Prive Bleu Lazuli.

That's what he's wearing. The cologne that's been slowly wafting over with each movement. Now that I'm this close, I can smell it.

Cologne can tell you a lot about a man, especially if you work in the makeup department and have a degree in *fragrance*.

Most men overdo it, use it to cover up, to fill some kind of void.

Some men choose the first thing they see, or something in a cool bottle, or promoted by some celebrity or athlete.

I know Damien took his time when choosing his cologne. He tried dozens before landing on this one that perfectly complements him in every way. Earthy, expensive, powerful. It's just ... him.

His hands—thick and tan and with a wide silver ring with a red gem on one finger—come up and grab the jacket's lapels on either side of my breasts and straighten them, pulling me just a hair closer as I look up at him.

“There. That'll do. Next time, you wear a jacket, yes?” he asks when our eyes meet.

Next time.

“Will there be a next time?” I ask, testing my luck. He smiles.

“Things go my way, baby, there will be.” And I smile back because I like how confidently he says it.

Like not a single part of him is in question that there will be a next time.

And I freaking like that.

An icy breeze freezes the air in my lungs as we walk through Bryant Park. The few remaining leaves on the trees hold on for dear life while others skitter across the sidewalks, collecting in orangey brown piles along buildings and in corners.

I love this time of year.

“Aren't you cold?” I ask, pulling his coat closer to my chest. He laughs like he finds me hilarious, but it's a joke we're both in on, not like he's laughing at me, and that feels good.

Rare, even.

“No, I’m good. I like the cold; it’s better than the hot,” he says, putting an arm around my shoulders and pulling me into him. Our steps are in sync despite his longer legs. I look up at him to see he’s not looking forward, but down at me. The streetlights cast gorgeous shadows on his high cheekbones and luminous smile.

“What about you?” he asks with genuine interest. “Hot or cold?”

“Both,” I say, and I watch his head tip up just a bit when he laughs.

“Why do I feel you rarely give a straight answer? Always knowing what you should be saying.” I smile a coy smile, but something about that doesn’t sit right. Too close to home for my carefully crafted persona of mystery and intrigue.

“I like the summer. The hotter, the better,” I say, giving him a bit about me. “Vacations? All of them need to be hot. If I come back without a tan, I’m filing a formal complaint.” He laughs again, and I look forward as we exit the park towards Midtown. “But I like the cold during specific times.”

“Specific times?” I look over at him again as we hit a crosswalk and wait for the little walking man to light up.

“After Halloween through January first. At those times, it’s allowed to be cold. Ideally, cold and autumnal for Thanksgiving—”

“Autumnal?”

“Autumnal. You know, the air should have that rotting leaves smell.”

“Rotting leaves smell, got it,” he says, and his body shakes with laughter against mine. I turn just a hair and punch him in the side. He groans a sound of fake pain but continues to laugh.

“You know what I mean! The ... autumn leaf smell!”

“You’ll have to sniff the air in a few weeks. Tell me when the smell is right.”

And fuck, I like that. I like that he's making plans for a few weeks from now when we haven't even finished our first date and doing it without embarrassment. Even if it's regarding decaying leaves.

"Will do," I say, looking forward and trying to hide the eager smile on my face. His arm squeezes my shoulder.

"Okay, so the rest of your cold weather demands?"

"They're not demands," I say with a smile. "Just ... preferred conditions."

"Ah, of course."

"But if you've got any connections with Mother Nature, please, fill out a comment card for me."

"Unfortunately, I haven't met her yet."

"Bummer. Anyway, so Thanksgiving—autumnal."

"Of course." A car honks at us as we cross the road, a taxi trying to make a right on red, but Damien just gives the man the finger and pushes me along, getting me out of traffic. When we turn left, he switches sides, making sure he's on the side of the street and I'm toward the buildings.

A perfect, gentlemanly touch.

"After Thanksgiving, snow is acceptable. Light dustings Cyber Monday through Christmas Eve. Then one big snow storm is acceptable on Christmas Eve, but just enough to have a white Christmas. Not so much that you can't drive to see family, you know? Ideally, Christmas is snow covered, but sunny and cold."

"Cyber Monday?"

"Yeah. You can sit at home and shop."

"And no snow Black Friday?"

"No, people have to drive to get to work. It's no fun to drive to work on the shittiest retail day of the year and also deal with snowy roads."

He slows his walk and looks at me.

“So you’re worried about the workers, not the shoppers?”
His smile is wide and shocked.

“Have you ever worked retail?” I ask, but I know the answer.

“No, can’t say I have.”

“If you had, you’d know how horrible it is to work retail on Black Friday. Absolute hell, that whole weekend. So no. No snow is acceptable the weekend after Thanksgiving.”

“Got it,” he says then stops in front of a stand.

“Hot chocolate?” he asks, and something about it is so fucking wholesome and unexpected. I smile and nod before he orders.

As he’s handing me the steaming cup, having asked for extra whipped cream on both and leaving a healthy tip for the worker, a tiny part of me panics.

Because it would be so damn easy to fall for this man.

Too damn easy.

NINE

November 6

-Damien-

“I love it here,” Abbie says, one tiny hand holding the warm cup of hot chocolate and the other pointing across the street to the big marquee for Rockefeller Center. It reads: “Coming Soon: the Christmas Spectacular starring the Rockettes!”

“Yeah?” I ask, putting an arm around her waist and pulling her back into a closed store’s entryway, watching flustered and rushed New Yorkers run back and forth, raising hands to catch a cab or arguing with someone in an invisible Bluetooth headphone. Normally, I’m one of them.

Too busy to take in the city, too busy to worry about what’s happening around me. I’ve lived in New York City my entire life—it’s part of my blood to rush to my next stop, to turn my shoulder, to slip past slow walkers, to flip off a taxi driver who’s turning into the crosswalk.

All a part of it.

But today, I feel like a tourist, wandering the city as it begins its holiday transformation, a gorgeous woman on my arm.

And fuck, is she gorgeous. All hourglass curves wrapped in a tight pink dress, sky-high heels, and loose blond curls down her back. The office all jokes that I have a type, and to be honest, I do.

And Abigail Keller is my fucking type.

Most people see having a type as a bad thing.

I never understood that.

I'm a busy man.

If I know what I like, what I want to see in a woman, what turns me on, and who I'd like to spend more time with, why would I try something new?

It's simple and efficient to have a type.

"When I was little, my sister and I had a VHS tape of the Rockettes. I wanted to be one," she says, her voice low, and when I look at her, her eyes are dreamy, locked to the building across the street.

"Why weren't you?" I ask. "I feel like if anyone can will something into existence, it would be you." She laughs, but it's just a hair uneasy, like I touched on something too close to the truth.

"I'm a terrible dancer, for one. And I hate cardio," she says, disconnecting her eyes from the Rockefeller Center and looking at me, a small smile on her full lips before she bites her lip like she's nervous that's the wrong answer.

"You hate cardio?" I ask, eyes purposefully running down her body.

I'm not sure if I mean she's in good shape for someone who hates cardio or if I mean I'd love to do some with her in a few hours, but either way, a visible shiver runs through her. I smile.

"I don't like sweat. It's ... inconvenient. And it's not good for my skin or my hair."

"Ahh. Of course. Wouldn't want to mess with this gorgeous hair of yours," I say then move my hand to run through it. Though my stiff fingers are nearing a point of cold numbness, I can feel just how freaking soft it is. My mind flashes to holding this hair in a different situation, golden tresses wrapped around my hand ... I change the subject.

"So, have you ever been? To see the Rockettes?" I ask, tucking the hair behind her ear. When I do, my knuckle runs

down her neck, stopping at my jacket that she's still bundled in. Her tongue comes out and licks her lips, pouty and pink, parting out to taste remnants of cocoa, and it takes everything in me not to adjust myself.

Not to grab her hand and drag her back to my apartment.

Play it cool, Martinez.

"No, not yet. One year," she says wistfully, smiling like she knows what I'm thinking.

This woman is dangerous.

The *good* kind of dangerous.

"Each year, my firm throws a party up there." I move her in front of me, dipping so my mouth is to her ear and backing her body up so it aligns with mine. My hand moves to point up above at the Rainbow Room. "It's a big thing, food, and drinks, announcements of promotions, retirements—the whole nine." It's a tradition to celebrate our firm—our *family*—and remind them how much they mean to us. If you treat your employees like they are family, they work hard and are more loyal. You can count on them more.

"Do you ... bring guests?" Abigail asks with a strange look on her pretty face, and I wonder if maybe she's nervous to ask, to imply too much too soon.

"Why, you trying to get an invite?" I say, turning toward her with a smile on my lips. Her eyes go wide with concern, anxious, maybe. My cold hand comes up, tucking the hair the wind is whipping around behind her ear, and I leave it on her neck. "I'd bring you, baby," I say, breathing in her scent, sweet and flowery. "If things go well here, I'll bring you. It would be an honor to have you on my arm, walking in to see a room of people I would rather not spend extra time with, have all their eyes go to you, and feel that jealousy build. Watch them want what's mine."

That look in her eyes changes to a strange mix of happy and forlorn, like she likes what I'm saying, but it means more to her than simple, obvious words should, and god, I want to know who put that look in her eyes.

What scumbag saw this perfect specimen of a woman and decided he didn't want that?

I want to ask.

Instead, I tip down, pressing my forehead to hers, and breathe her in.

“Is it okay if I kiss you, Abigail?” I ask, the words barely a whisper, and on a busy New York City block, you shouldn't be able to hear my words when they're spoken so quietly.

They should get lost in the hustle, the noise of the city

But she hears them.

I know because her lips part, and her eyes go heavy, and one small hand moves to my chest, and she nods.

And then I take life into my own hands, the way I've been doing for years, finding what I want and making it mine, and I kiss Abigail Keller right there in front of the Rockefeller Center, and the world slows.

She tastes like hot chocolate and tropical coconut lip gloss. Yet, it works on her, and I wonder if that's just her—a strange mix of opposites that somehow work together because they're *her*.

Her lips press to mine, and we stay like that for a few long beats, enjoying the simplicity of a first kiss before my hand on her chin moves her closer, and my tongue dips out to touch her lip.

She lets me in.

And then I take a step closer, backing her into the storefront glass, pressing my body to hers, marveling at how she's nearly a foot shorter than me but still somehow fits against me perfectly.

Her hand moves up, grabbing my hair, holding me close to her, and I groan into her mouth.

I want her.

I want *everything* with her, from her.

I want this woman more than I've wanted anything in some time.

"Get a room!" a random passerby screams, and although it breaks the moment, I don't break my hold on her, just lift a hand and a single finger to flip off the rude person who doesn't even deserve my eyes.

"We should," I say, a whisper against her lips. Her eyebrows come together, a small crease forming there, and I kiss there before clarifying. "Get a room." I press my lips to her once more, a gentle brush, her hand in my hair gripping tighter to keep me there, and I don't think it's done intentionally. An instinct. But I move back. "Come home with me," I say, unsure what she'll answer. "We don't have to do anything. It's cold, and I don't want to end this date." She smiles, and it's sweet, but under is devilish. Needy. "Though I'm more than happy to do whatever you want, Ms. Keller," I say, my voice gruffer.

"Okay," she says with a wicked smile, and I know she feels it too. And as I take her hand, stepping to the curb and raising the hand with my forgotten hot chocolate cup, a single snowflake falls to my sleeve.

This might be my first holiday in a while where I don't feel entirely alone.

TEN

November 6

-Damien-

“This is me,” I say, opening the door and letting Abigail walk past me. Her scent follows her, that sweet, unique scent, and I’ve never been intrigued by the perfume a woman wears, but this one?

It seems everything intrigues me about her.

Her heels click on the hardwood as she walks into my apartment, looking around.

“Fancy,” she says, taking in the dark woods and comfy leather couch, the paintings of the woods that I spent way too much on at a benefit a few months ago. Her eyes twinkle as they land back on me. “Exactly what I’d expect from an expensive ass lawyer.” Her smile widens, and I think this must be her style—refusing to be impressed, making pointed barbs, but doing it all in fun.

I like it, too.

“Do you have many lawyers to compare me to?” I ask, walking closer, and she doesn’t mean it, but a quick solar flare happens in her eyes before it is once again behind her siren’s shield. It happened too quick for me to do much more than register it—I can’t tell if it was surprise or panic or anger, but it happened.

“Nope. Just you,” she says, her hand moving up my chest as I walk closer. Her fingers tipped in bright, girly pink, and I

find it sweet, alluring even. This woman is all woman, leaning into the stereotype without shame. I wrap a hand around her waist, pulling her into me.

“Good,” I whisper against her lips. “I don’t share.” Our lips are so close as I bend to reach her in her high heels, and I can feel the quick intake of breath against my own. “Do you understand?” She doesn’t answer, eyes locked to mine like she’s mesmerized. I move my hand to the side of her bare neck, reveling in the feel of her pulse racing there against my skin.

“I don’t share, Abigail. We agreed that this might not be serious, that we’re both not looking for that right now, but I *don’t share*. I’m a very possessive man. What’s mine is mine.” Her tongue reaches out, tapping against her pink lips, and just barely, *the faintest brush* touches my lip.

Fuck, I want this woman.

I couldn’t tell you the last time I wanted a woman this badly.

“Answer me, Abigail. Say yes, and you’re mine. Say no, and I’ll walk you downstairs, drive you home, and thank you for a fantastic night.”

The silence almost kills me.

But I don’t press.

Sometimes the battle is won in the silence of a conversation.

And then her lips part again, and the words come out in a hot breath.

“Yes, Damien. I understand.”

“You’re mine for now?” I ask, looking to confirm.

“I’m yours, honey.” I groan at her words, using the hand on her waist to pull her fully into me and grinding myself into her belly. A small whimper leaves her lips, and then it’s cut off when I lock mine onto hers.

And then we're kissing, frantic and needy and everything you could want in a kiss, and *she's mine*. I move slowly, so lost in her already that I don't have a full understanding of my surroundings, until she bumps into the back of the leather couch.

Hands to her hips, I lift until she's perched there, and I think there's a part of me that could easily undo my pants, slide that dress up, and fuck her right here. Especially when her arms wrap around my neck and her legs around my hips.

Yeah, I could fuck her here.

I continue to kiss her, her lips never having left mine yet, and her hands move to bury themselves into the long hair at the back of my head that needs a cut. I leave one hand on her hip, the other traveling up, moving to wrap her neck, keep her in place as I kiss her, right where I want her.

Her pulse is going wild.

I step even closer until my hard cock hits her center, where that tight dress has been creeping up.

And then she *moans*.

The sound is deep, ripped from her chest and full of need and desire, and it's then I know I can't fuck her here.

I need her stripped bare; I need to taste her. I need to absolutely obliterate this woman.

In my bed.

Breaking away from her, I take a step back and offer her my hand, helping her down. She looks nearly confused, lost when I speak. "Come," I say, and I should have known that even now, here, she'd challenge me. Her pink lips tip up with a cat's smile.

"I plan to," she says, and I can't help but laugh. I take her hand, my other moving behind her neck to press her to my lips once more before I lead her to my bedroom.

Just like she did when she entered my apartment, she steps in, dropping my hand and looking around, still in my damn jacket that's way too big on her.

She goes to speak, to comment on my room, I'm sure, but I'm past niceties. I'm past getting to know you and small talk.

I'm ready to taste this woman.

"Stop," I say, and surprisingly, she does as I ask, stopping on the hardwood and facing me. Her back is to the foot of the bed, and she just stands there, beautiful and perfect and everything I could ever dream up.

Let's see if she fits the rest of my dreams.

"Jacket off," I say, slowly moving to unbutton my suit jacket.

My eyes lock to hers, pupils wide and excited, but I see her chest rising and falling in deep, controlled breaths.

And then her hands move to her shoulders, the tips of her fingers ever so gently pushing the oversized coat back until it drops to the floor.

I lick my lips, tasting coconut and cocoa and Abigail.

"The dress," I say, not sure what she'll do.

But fuck if she doesn't move her hands behind her, finding a zipper and moving it down, out of sight, until it stops. For a split second, I think about how next time, I'll do that. Unzip her, undress her. *Already so eager for a "next time," huh, Martinez?*

I stop listening to the voice when those pink nails move to her shoulders, moving the straps to the side. The dress falls to the ground, and my eyes track it, watching her feet delicately move to kick it away behind her.

Then my eyes move back up, catching my first true glimpse of her.

Dreams. They are made of this woman.

Lush, full curves that were covered in pink are now barely contained with thin lace in the lightest pink color that nearly matched her peachy pink skin. The bra, a strapless style, cups her breasts and lifts them, moving to a small waist and a soft

belly. A tiny scrap of that same pink lace hikes up high on pristine hips, moving down to those black heels.

She could be a centerfold.

I'd jack off every night to the images.

And then she does something I don't expect.

One delicate arm moves across herself, grabbing her hip and staying there.

At first, I think she's about to move her underwear down, or she has an itch or ... something.

But when it stays there, my eyebrows furrow, moving my eyes from her gorgeous body to her face.

Those little white teeth are sunk into her lip.

Nervous.

No, not nervous.

Self-conscious.

No fucking way.

Absolutely not.

"Move that hand, baby," I say, taking a single step forward, still a few feet between us. The hand drops, and I move to shrug off my suit jacket, tossing it in the corner before starting on my cufflinks. Those fall to the ground with a clink as my eyes stay on Abigail's.

"You don't do that here. Not with me. If I have my way, not ever. But not here," I say, starting on the buttons of my shirt.

"What?"

"Covering yourself. You agreed you're mine. That body is mine. I like that body a fuckuva lot. I won't deal with you hiding it from me." Her eyes go wide, and I like that look, too. The surprise, genuine and all-consuming.

"Damien, I just ... I have a belly."

“I do not care.” I enunciate each word, making it clear what I mean by them. “I do not care what you think, though I plan to change that mindset. I don’t care what you’ve been told or who said it. If I hear it come from you, I’ll be mad.” Her head tips to the side, those curls falling over her shoulder, and she gives me a “be serious” look.

“Damien, I’m not the girl you need to compliment to get me to fuck you.” Her hands have gone to her hips, that feisty attitude peeking out again, and shit, I like that part, too.

“I know that.” Confusion falls on her face. God, she’s so easy to read. Every thought and emotion plays across her face when her walls are down. “I’m not the man who hands out compliments to help your ego, Abigail. I thought you understood that.” My hands move, undoing my belt, then the button of my pants, then the fly. Her eyes watch me the entire time. “You are gorgeous. A dream. If you let me, I’d grab my phone, take pictures, jack off to them any night I couldn’t get inside you.” Her tongue peeks out, licking her lips.

Nerves, yes, but also intrigue.

I smile.

“Not today, *rubia*. But another night ...” I let my voice trail off, let the possibility hang between us. “Regardless, you do not hide from me.” The pants fall to the ground, and I kick off the shoes while I’m at it before closing the gap between us.

When I was only a foot away, when I can feel her nervous, anticipatory breaths on my skin, I put my hand on her belly. Her eyes widen, panic, and I touch the soft skin, but I just shake my head in a “no” gesture then move up slowly.

“Mine,” I say, moving up to her narrow waist, where I can feel every breath she’s taking, up between her breasts. That hand moves, the middle finger moving under the tops of the lace cups, pulling down until her breast is released. My hand cups it, a thumb caressing the hard nipple as she takes a quick intake of breath. “Mine,” I say then repeat the process with my other hand. “Mine,” I repeat. I stare into her wide, green eyes and smile before snaking a hand around her waist, pulling her into me.

“If we do this, this is mine. This body is mine. If you try to hide it from me, I will not be happy,” I say against her lips, skin brushing.

She doesn't respond, just keeps staring at me with wide eyes.

“Do you understand, Abigail?”

“Yes, Damien,” she says, words breathy, and I smile.

“Good girl,” I whisper, watching her pupils dilate with the words, and when I kiss her, there's a smile on my lips. The kiss isn't sweet. It isn't smile-filled. It's teeth and tongues and heavy breathing and those pink nails digging into my shoulders before I'm moving her back, pressing her to the foot of the bed, and pushing her down. She sits there, leaning back on her elbows, and *fuck* the way this woman looks so at home in my space. She smiles a seductive smile, like any ounce of self-consciousness has flown out the window, and I like that too.

Slowly, as I watch her, I take one, two steps back to take her in, and I don't miss how she uses the distance to let her eyes roam me, especially as I move my boxers down, pushing them until they fall to the floor. Then her little tongue comes out, licking her full lips as she watches intently.

She's sugar and spice, and I can't wait to find out if she tastes that way, too.

Kneeling before the foot of her bed, I move one finger down the center of the lace, feeling how the fabric is already damp, listening to the low whoosh of air that leaves her lungs at the movement.

“God, you look so pretty, all laid out for me like my own feast,” I say, running that finger up and down the line where I know she's already soaking. My finger moves to the line between the fabric and her skin, running its way down where her thigh meets her pussy, confirming she is soaked. “I can't wait a second longer to see what you taste like.”

“That's not ... Damien—”

“I’m going to eat this pussy, Abigail,” I say, my thumb hooking in the gusset of the panties and pulling it to the side until she is revealed to me.

Jesus Christ. Perfection. My cock bobs in agreement.

“I don’t think ...” I stop staring at her paradise and move my eyes up her body, tits still free from the cups of her bra, elbows to the bed, blonde hair cascading to the mattress.

“Has anyone ever licked you here?” I ask, a finger running down the center of her, grabbing wet as it does. When I reach the top, I circle her swollen clit softly, and her entire body quakes, a small whimper leaving her lips. “Answer me.”

She shakes her head.

“No one?” I ask, quirking an eyebrow.

“It’s ... Men don’t like that.” I stop everything, staring at her to decide if she’s being serious. Her lip is between her teeth again, that self-assured veil falling down and revealing that insecure side I saw before.

Gotta work on that.

“Boys might not, baby. But men? Men love to make a woman scream their name while their head is between her legs.” Again, a whole body shiver, and those teeth leave her lip as she breathes in a shaky breath. “Okay?”

As much as I want to, I won’t do this if she’s not comfortable with it.

Even if skipping it would kill me.

But then I see it—the tiniest, sweetest nod of her head, her chin dipping down just a bit, and that’s all the reassurance I need to dip my head down, flatten my tongue against her, and run it from her opening to her clit, sucking around the sensitive spot at the top.

Her arms give out as she moans loud and deep, her back falling to the bed. My tongue flicks over her clit in rapid succession, and her voice gets louder as her back lifts off the bed, arching in a way I wish I could watch.

“Jesus, fuck, Damien!” she shouts. My name on her lips has me reaching down, stroking my cock with my free hand. I continue to eat her, fucking her pussy with my tongue as my nose grinds on her clit then moving up to suck her clit again. She’s mumbling, moaning, trying to get me closer, to get *herself* closer. From the corner of my eye, her hand moves up then back to the bed, indecisive.

I know what she wants.

I move the hand from my cock, grabbing her wrist and moving it until it’s rested on my head. Instantly, her fingers wrap in the strands of my hair and press harder, demanding what she needs.

I moan against her clit, loving this, wanting to give her everything and more, and the vibrations have her moaning even louder. Releasing the grip on her wrist, I move two fingers to her entrance as I suck and nip at her clit, sliding in easily and coaxing out another deep moan of my name. As I fuck her, her hand presses harder on my head, and fuck, if I don’t smile against her cunt.

“Fuck, yes, Damien, shit! Right there, right there, I’m gonna—”

And then I stop.

I move my head up, continuing to fuck her with my fingers but staring at her. She mewls a disapproving noise, and I chuckle at her.

“Damien!” she says, her voice desperate. “I was close!”

“I know, baby. I’m going to take care of you, don’t worry.” Her hips are rocking, tiny moans and whimpers coming from her lips as I continue to work my fingers in her, pressing against her G-spot, each swipe there making her twitch.

“Damien, please!” She’s panting, gyrating, looking for anything to take her over the edge. “I need more!”

“You want my cock, baby?” I ask, moving to stand as I slip a third finger inside her, stretching her. Her mouth drops open with the feeling, her eyes fluttering closed. I stand between her

legs, one hand moving to tweak her nipple. “Do you, Abigail?”

“God, yes, please!” She’s begging now, and I really fucking like it.

“Are you on something?” I ask, moving my hand to the edge of her panties. When I take my fingers from her wet cunt, she mewes with disapproval. I smile. “Pill, IUD?”

“I have an IUD. I was tested this week, all clear,” she says, and I don’t even have time to think about her being tested recently.

“I’m clean,” I say, scooting her panties down and throwing the wet fabric aside.

“Fuck me, Damien,” she says, her voice moving to a low, throaty demand, and her eyes lock to mine. I hold my cock with the hand still wet with her, the other hand on her hip as I look at her.

“Are you sure? I can get a condom—”

“I want you in me now,” she says, and there’s a plea in her eyes, the look matched in her voice. “Please, Damien. Fuck me.”

And who am I not to give the pretty woman what she wants?

I rub the head of my cock down her wet center, groaning at the feel before lining myself up with her entrance. The bed is the perfect height to fuck her like this.

I stay there, one inch in, throbbing inside her warmth, and I lick my lips, staring at her.

“Eyes, baby,” I say. “I want your eyes when I fill you for the first time.” Her eyes move right to mine, *so fucking obedient*, and we lock our gaze as I slowly move, filling her, my grip on her hip tightening with restraint as I slip into her tight cunt.

Fuck, this woman is heaven. Absolutely perfect, made for me.

The words come in an incoherent stream of consciousness, pinging around in my mind. I find my brain completely unable to concentrate on a single, specific thought as I fill her.

And then I'm in, our hips pressing together as I stand, and she lies with her back to my bed. I move out an inch before pushing back in slowly. Looking down, I watch my cock repeat this process, sliding out an inch, sliding back in, and I don't think I've seen something sexier than my cock disappearing into this woman, feeling her clamp down on me each time.

"Oh, God, fuck, I'm so full." She moans, face to the ceiling, mouth open as she pants.

"You like me filling you, baby?" I ask, moving out farther now then slamming in.

"Fuck, yes!"

"Do you want me to fuck your pretty pussy, Abigail? Would you like that? Or should I keep going slow, torture you until you shatter?"

"Please, Damien, fuck. Fuck me!" I smile but concede, moving out, slamming in. Moving out, slamming in.

Each movement, I watch her tits bounce, moving with my thrusts, until her delicate hand moves up, grazing her belly then cupping her full breasts, pinching a nipple, and she moans louder.

"Harder, please!" she begs, head thrashing.

Fucking made for me.

"Fuck yeah, baby. You like that?" I ask, moving a hand back and slapping the side of her thigh.

"Please, god, please!" I continue to slam into her, fucking her harder, the headboard banging the wall with each thrust, but I don't care. There is only Abigail, moaning and writhing, my cock throbbing each time it sinks into her.

And then her hand is gliding down her body, down her belly, until it's between her legs. She moves to her free elbow, eyes shifting to watch me fuck her. The hand between her legs

splits until she's feeling where I disappear inside of her in the gap between her pointer and middle fingers.

"Oh, god, fuck. That's so hot," she murmurs as she watches where we're joined.

"Fucking beautiful," I say, eyes locked to the same place, loving the feel of her fingers brushing against me with each thrust. "Made for me. This cunt was made to take my cock," I say under my breath. I'm unsure where these words are coming from, so lost in the moment, I can't think straight as I try to hold off my orgasm until she comes around me.

She can't be far from the feel of her pussy clenching.

Her hand moves from where it's feeling our joining, moving up and over until her thumb caresses her clit, and she moans deep, spasming around me.

That's not what I want, though.

My hand moves, grabbing hers and placing it back on her tit. "Not today, *rubia*. Today you come with my cock," I say, leaning forward to press my lips to hers.

"Damien, I-I can't—" she starts, arguing with me.

"You will, Abigail," I say, locking my eyes to hers and watching her eyes go wide as I move, grazing her G-spot and releasing a low moan from her. The noise brings me closer to the edge, and I need to come in her. The primal urge to fill the woman is nearly unbearable. "You're going to come with just my cock fucking you. Next time, I'll rub your clit until you explode around me, but this time?" I thrust in again, and she moans. "This time I'm going to show you how a real man fucks his woman."

I continue to move my hand up, up until my hand is on her neck, my tan skin contrasting hers, and I'm lost in the look of it.

But what I love more, what takes me from close to nearly there, is when I press on either side of her neck gently, a test if you will. I think she might actually have been made for me when I feel the sound trying to escape her throat, watch her eyelids lower just a hair, and feel her tighten around me.

“Fuck yeah, my girl likes that,” I say low under my breath, and as I press harder, a gurgled moan slips through, her mouth pouting in pleasure and her face turning the most beautiful shade of pink.

“You’re going to come for me, Abigail. As soon as I move my hand, you’re going to come on my cock so damn hard,” I say, the words coming through gritted teeth. “Understand?” Her head tries to nod, another moan rolling through her chest, another clamp of her cunt on my cock.

That’s all the confirmation I need, and that squeeze breaks my last tether on sanity. I thrust into her, planting deeper than before, grinding into her and moving my hand from her throat as I do.

Normally, I’d collapse on top of her, let the orgasm take over my body, creep up my spine, and fall into the feeling.

But I need to see this.

So I keep my eyes on her face as I fill her, feeling her come around me, watching her take a deep breath as it crashes over her. She *screams* my name, her voice hoarse and her body bucking, forcing me deeper. I move my hand, grinding it onto her clit, and there is a renewed, tighter squeeze of her pussy on me as she comes a second time.

“That’s it, baby, let go for me.”

“God, fuck, shit!” she shouts, her head rolling from side to side, that hand still on her tit, brutalizing the flesh as she comes and comes, and I watch the beauty of this woman—this dream woman who fell into my world by chance—and think that I could watch this every day of my life happily.

ELEVEN

November 7

-Abbie-

Hours later, I'm lying in Damien's bed, a little sleepy but incredibly satisfied. It's like any tiny molecule of pleasure Damien could sense in my body was wrung out through sheer will alone.

But now we're in that awkward phase that I haven't had to live through since college. When the hookup is over, it's time to separate, but you have to do it without making things weird.

Men hate clingy women, after all.

Okay, time to head out, Abbie, I remember Richard saying after one of the first times we had sex. *You don't want to wear out your welcome.* He'd said it with a smile, and I remember being 24 and stupid and thinking it was cute. Funny, even. I smiled back, got dressed, and kissed him, leaving him in his bed while I walked out the door and into a cab.

I should have fucking run.

But still, the reality is even if Richard was more ... upfront about it, all men are the same. I'm sure Damien's no better when it comes to wanting alone time.

I can respect that, really.

"I guess I should get going," I say, trailing a finger down the center of his chest, my eyes trying not to document the ridges of his abs that are way hotter than any man has the right to be.

No wonder Richard hated him. Hot as fuck, more successful, outstanding in bed, and he looks like this under his clothes. Anyone should hate him.

I would probably hate him if we didn't just have the most amazing first date and he didn't just fuck me into another solar system.

“Why would you do that?” he asks, and I move my face to look up at him. He’s looking at me with a strange expression on which I can’t quite put my finger. A bit of confusion, but maybe also a hint of ... disappointment?

“Because ... you have to be up early? Work? I’m sure you have things to do tonight,” I say. My mind moves to a million nights where Richard and I would go out, have drinks, go to his place to fuck, and then I’d head home because he had some work to do and then wanted a “good night’s sleep.” I apparently am difficult to sleep with, moving around a ton. And hey, being a lawyer isn’t for the faint of heart, and Richard needed his sleep.

I never held that against him.

“It’s midnight,” Damien says with a smile, those straight white teeth gleaming in the dim light.

“But you need your rest, I’m sure. I’m kind of a crazy sleeper; I move a ton. So I wouldn’t want to ... mess with your sleep.” His brows furrow, the smile faltering.

“I don’t ... You lost me, *rubia*. I’m not sure what you’re trying to say.” I don’t respond, feeling weird about this conversation. Instead, my eyes move to my fingers drawing patterns on his chest, my mind trying to think of what to say. His hand is warm when it meets my chin, tipping it until his hand can move just below my jaw, wrapping my neck and forcing me to look at him.

I officially feel self-conscious and like an idiot with his eyes on me, scrutinizing me.

“Hey, no. Fill me in on what’s happening in that pretty head of yours.” I blink at him once, twice.

He's not letting me out of this, no matter how much I want him to.

"Men ... like you ... You need to sleep. To be well rested. You can't do that with a woman in your bed."

"Men like me?"

"Lawyers, people with important jobs. People who—"

"People with important jobs?" That thick eyebrow is raised, and a small smile has come back to his face. I can't help but return it.

"You know what I'm saying, Damien." I smack his chest with a laugh, but his eyes narrow, the smile slipping. His face is so damn expressive. I'm able to read every thought, every emotion on it. I wonder how on earth he wins in the courtroom if that's how he always is.

"Is your job not important?" he asks, and I laugh, rolling off him and onto my side. He follows, so we face each other, and his fingers run through my hair, pulling it away from my face.

"I do makeup at a department store."

"And?"

"It's just makeup. I don't command a courtroom or keep the scales of justice in balance." I expect him to smile or laugh. He doesn't. Instead, concern crosses his face.

"Just makeup." He says it like he's talking to himself, like he's trying to process my words.

"Yeah ... I just ... do makeup." I don't understand where this conversation is going.

"Okay. I see where this is going," he says then rolls until he's over me, propped on his elbow on either side of me. He bends down, brushing his lips against my own.

"What is?"

"I like you," he says, and I smile, but he keeps speaking before I can reply. "I like you, and I like this. This is good. We work. You're cute, and you're fun, and you're a dream when I

fuck you.” A blush burns my face, and I try to turn my face to hide it. But he moves, holding himself on just one arm now and putting that damn hand round my throat again, pressing in a way I can feel in my clit until I look at him again. “No. Absolutely not. You do not get embarrassed about that, especially not with me. We are *explosive* in a way I’ve never had.” I lick my lips as a thrill runs through me, and he smiles.

“There she is.” I scrunch my nose in annoyance, but he just laughs, pressing his lips to the spot between my eyebrows. “As I was saying. I like you. I like this. But it will not work if you pull that shit.”

“What shit?”

“That *you’re a lawyer and I’m a lowly makeup artist.*”

My gut drops, and I rub my lips together, a nervous tick I’ve had for years.

“You are not *just* anything. Are you passionate about what you do?” I move to open my mouth, to answer, but that hand presses, quieting me. “I know you are. You spoke about it at dinner, and I saw it. You help people feel their best. That’s admirable. Better than I do, most days.”

“What you do is impo—”

“This won’t work, even if it’s just fun, if you see yourself as lesser than me.” Every molecule in my body stops moving.

The noises in my mind silence.

I think I stop breathing for a moment in time.

“I don’t understand.”

“A relationship is like the law. It needs balance. If it’s out of balance, if one person sees themselves as less valuable, if another sees themselves as more valuable, the balance isn’t there.” His dark eyes are boring into mine with his words, and any words I could say are stuck in my chest.

“You are not less than me. I am not less than you. We are humans who do what we can to help people.”

Silence.

I don't respond.

I don't ...

This man was supposed to be an ass.

At best, a nice guy who was a little stuck-up and into himself.

I could handle that.

I could handle a man who has a bit of a superiority complex, especially if he could fuck me into tomorrow *and* help me get my revenge.

A no brainer, really.

But this?

A man who is kind and caring and understanding *and* can fuck me into tomorrow?

I don't know what to do with it.

So I just say, "Oh."

Like an idiot.

And for some reason, Damien doesn't find my loss of words annoying or stupid. Instead, he just smiles at me and shakes his head like he finds me sweet.

"Yeah, oh." He leans forward again, pressing his lips against mine. "I want you to stay the night. Here, with me."

"Damien, that's sweet, but I really am a crazy sleeper."

"Are you saying that because you don't want to spend the night here or with me? Or are you saying that because you're worried about my sleep quality?" He says it with a smile. I scrunch my nose but don't answer.

His eyebrow raises, and the smile spreads.

We're in a standoff.

"Your funeral," I say in a mumble. "If I kick you in the balls in my sleep and you can't walk straight tomorrow, not my fault."

Damien just smiles, pressing his lips to mine again, but not in that soft, sweet way.

“Yeah, well, let’s see if I can tire you out. Help you sleep well. Maybe we can make it so you’re the one who can’t walk straight tomorrow,” he says, then his lips move to my neck, licking and sucking a path down.

And you know what?

I sleep soundly all night in Damien’s bed, his leg hitched up over my hip, keeping me pinned in place the entire time.

TWELVE

November 7

-Abbie-

“He *took you there?!*” Cam says, her voice going up at least three octaves with the words.

It’s the day after my date with Damien.

This morning my internal clock woke me up at seven, and I attempted to roll out of his fancy ass bed and dress in my clothes from the night before quietly, needing to be at the store by 10 and knowing I needed to get home, change, and be ready for work in three hours.

His arm, still weighed down with the nicest Rolex I’ve seen, was across my waist when I woke up.

The sheets smelled of Armani.

This was confirmed when I looked on his dresser the night before and saw the blue bottle.

I know my fragrances.

I planned on getting out from under him without waking him, leaving a cute note with a Chanel pink kiss on it, and then patiently (okay, very *impatiently* because I’ve never been a patient person) wait for him to call me.

But instead, his arm tightened, and I felt scruff on my bare skin as he buried his face in my neck.

“Good morning, *rubia*,” he said, the words gravelly with sleep and hitting every nerve ending in my body in the

absolute *best* way ever.

“Hey,” I whispered, suddenly shy.

I’m *never* shy.

I haven’t been shy since Hannah dared me to stand on a table in the mall food court and sing “Defying Gravity” at the top of my lungs in exchange for her buying me a Frappuccino.

I got the Frappuccino and lost every molecule of shyness.

“I didn’t mean to wake you up,” I said, rolling back toward him until we faced each other.

He was smiling, his eyes squinted with sleep.

He looked ... cute. Adorable, even.

Not the words I would have thought I’d use to describe the man in a million years, but here we are.

“I’m glad you did. Were you trying to sneak out?” he asked, moving a blond strand behind my ear, pushing it back behind my neck, and trailing his finger down my arm.

“No, I—”

“You totally were,” he said with a laugh. “Were you going to call me later at least?”

“A woman should never make the call after a first date. She waits so as not to sound desperate,” I said near instantly and then regretted it almost as quickly because it sounded like a bitchy thing.

Damien smiled that megawatt smile I’m sure wins him juries and more, rolling until I lay beneath him, caged between his strong arms. Arms I spent a good deal of time late into the night admiring in all sorts of ways that has my sore body warming just at the reminder of.

“Are you desperate for me, Abigail?” he asked. With his dark eyes boring into mine, his smile penetrating my fortress and deconstructing the plan I carefully constructed, I answered honestly.

I didn’t mean to. It just ... happened.

“I don’t know. I think I could be though,” I said, and my voice was breathy and soft even to my own ears.

He liked that answer.

He liked it enough that he moved down in a pushup, the move so fucking suave I found it hard to concentrate, and pressed his lips to mine.

Nothing crazy.

A sweet caress of lips, a soft good morning.

A great way to start the day.

When he broke the kiss, I was dazed and he was looking down at me with a smirk on his full lips, that dimple I saw last night poking through.

“Glad we’re on the same page,” he said and then rolled to his back, taking me with him. One hand ran down my back, stopping right above my ass, and the other dove into the back of my hair, holding me there. “Why the rush to leave?”

“I have work. At ten. Gotta get home, get cleaned up, eat something, get caffeinated, head to work.”

“Got it. You gotta get back to Long Island. What time is it?”

“Seven fifteen, last I checked,” I said, and he groaned, looking at the ceiling above the bed.

“Don’t tell me you’re a morning person.”

“Is that a bad thing?” I asked. I was almost irritated at how disgusted his words were.

“First negative to you,” he said. “Mornings are created by Satan himself.”

“Aren’t you some big fancy lawyer?” My eyebrow raised, but I was still smiling, no longer annoyed. Something about a powerful man acting like a teenage boy who doesn’t want to wake up is endearing.

“To the best of my ability, I try to schedule things late. On court days, I gotta be up early, but adrenaline helps then. On a

random Friday? Nah. Sleep in. Always.”

“Got it. Well, some of us are governed by corporate America and must be up early as can be, especially when we have to catch the LIRR or grab an Uber home.” Then, feeling braver, I mimicked his move from earlier, raking my fingers through the long hair at the top of his head that was now messy and combing it back. “As much as I’d like to hang here for a while, I gotta get going.”

Now, what on earth would make me say that? I thought, ignoring the voice in my head that was screaming *DANGER!*

“LIRR?” I screwed up my face in confusion.

“Long Island Railroad?” I mean, my extensive Google sleuthing showed he was from the Bronx, and that accent that comes out once in a while confirms that, but maybe he never really left the city? And just moved to Manhattan and stayed there? It doesn’t make much sense, but—

He laughed.

His laugh was magic, deep and full and spicy like mulled wine that warmed my whole body.

“I know what the LIRR is, babe. Why are you catching it?”

“Well, if I can’t, I gotta get an Uber, and an Uber from Manhattan to Long Island at peak times is crazy money,” I said, then I second-guessed my words because I may be a vengeful bitch, but I’m not a gold digger. “I’m good for it, I swear. I just hate wasting money—”

“I’m taking you home, *naranja*,” he said, moving his head up to press his lips to mine again. He did it like he didn’t mean to, like it was an accident or an impulse he couldn’t deny.

“*Naranja?*” I said, almost offended. “Doesn’t that mean orange?” He smiled. “I’m more of a pink girl.” I moved my eyes over to my bag, and dress, and shoes, all three boasting the perfect bubblegum pink color. “If you couldn’t tell. Orange is more of a fall. I’m a spring.”

That *laugh* again.

Looking back, the thing about that laugh is that it's not the way Richard laughed at me when I said things like that. Like I was the butt of my own joke, like he was laughing *at* me. I never realized he did that until I heard Damien's laugh. His laugh was like he found entertainment in my words because he liked to hear them.

"It's a saying, Abigail." Another impulsive kiss, another burn in my gut with how it made me feel. "Can you wait here for ten, fifteen minutes? Let me get ready for the office? I'll take you for food, get you caffeinated, and then take you home before I head in."

"Oh, Damien, you don't have to do that. It's so far out of your way—" He cut me off with a stern face, a hand moving to my chin to hold me with his thumb and forefinger until I looked into his eyes while he spoke.

"No man sends a woman home in a cab after a night like we had. He feeds her, caffeinates her, and walks her to her door. He lets her know he had a fucking amazing time, and he secures that he'll get to see her next time." I just blinked at him. "So, can you wait ten or fifteen minutes?"

I was lying naked on top of a man built like a god, was smart, funny, and kind, who could fuck me until my voice went hoarse, and he was the key to my ultimate revenge plan.

Of course, I could wait ten or fifteen minutes.

But I left that entire exchange out when I relayed the night to Cami and Kat as we drove to Queens to pick up the materials for today's addition to Project: Payback Dickhead after work.

And I also left out what else happened this morning.

This morning, he walked out into his living room, adjusting expensive cuff links on a shirt that fit *too fucking well*, gleaming dress shoes hitting dark hardwood, and his hair still damp but combed back.

Ready for the day.

I was wearing my dress from the night before and holding my heels in my hands like an idiot when he pulled me into

him, the tug sure and steady before he kissed me.

My knees went weak.

He pushed me back and looked me up and down.

“What are you wearing?”

“I didn’t exactly pack a bag, big man,” I’d said, smiling up at him. Without my shoes on, he towered over me.

“No, but next time you will. Come, let’s get you some sweats and a tee,” he said, tugging me back toward his room. “It snowed last night, remember? Too cold for that, especially since you didn’t wear a jacket.”

“Damien, nothing you own is going to fit me unless you have a drawer of clothes from women past,” I said, and the words tasted sour in my mouth.

I hated them.

I also hated that I hated them.

Not the plan, Abbie.

He stopped in his tracks, turning to me, moving me, pressing me to the wall in his room next to the door. “Drop that look, *rubia*. I don’t date. I downloaded that stupid app on a whim and my dream girl dropped in my lap. You’ll go home wearing clothes you’ll swim in, but they’ll be mine, and you’ll be warm. Next time, you bring clothes.”

“Oh,” is all I could say, staring at him with wide eyes and an open mouth.

“Yeah, oh,” he’d said before moving back, grabbing a pair of sweats. “These shrunk, so they might not be horrible,” he’d said. Then he handed me a colossal sweatshirt I told him he’d never see again unless I was in it.

He just smiled and helped me roll up the sweatpants until I could see my pink-painted toes and called it a day.

And then he bought me coffee and a bagel with cream cheese, drove me all the way to Long Island during 8 am traffic in downtown New York City, walked me up ten floors

to my apartment and kissed me at the door, and made me promise to see him on Friday, at the latest.

Who the fuck is this man?

But Cami isn't asking about the escapades of my morning.

She's asking about my night because I just finished telling her how we left the restaurant, walked to Rockefeller Center, and kissed as the snow fell around us like some kind of 00s rom-com my love-drunk sister would have watched on Lifetime.

She's asking because of this crazy fucking plan we cooked up while I was drunk, heartbroken, and looking to deflect that pain back onto the man who dished it out.

"And he mentioned the Christmas party," I say, remembering how him bringing it up made me feel suddenly icky, like what I was doing was wrong.

"No fucking way!" Cami says, nearly swerving her car into oncoming traffic. A horn blares and a taxi driver inaudibly screams at Cam while flipping her off.

"Jesus Christ, Cam!" Kat yells, putting her hands to the dash as she sees her life flash before her eyes.

I would know—it's what anyone who sits in the front seat of Cami's car experiences.

"Oh, shut up. He had plenty of room. We're fine. Abs, he *mentioned the Christmas party!*? This is going by so much easier than I ever thought!" At this moment, I wonder if maybe Cam is more invested in this plan than I am.

Still, I smile as I relay the next part, nearly smug. "He asked if I wanted an invitation."

"No fucking way!" Cam says, flying through a red light.

"Cam, please, pull over and let me drive," Kat says, her tan skin pale and her hand holding onto the handle above the door.

"Stop being a baby, Kat, or you're going to be stuck in the back next time."

“At this rate, there won’t *be a next time* because we’ll all be in the city morgue! And then how would Abbie get her revenge!?” Those magic words seem to click for Cami, and her speed dips just a hair.

But no more than a hair.

“So did you get the invite?!” she asks, turning left into the neighborhood we’re headed to.

“I didn’t get to answer because then he asked if he could kiss me.”

“*Shut. Up!*” Kat says, turning around in her seat to look at me. “That is too freaking cute!”

“Wait, so you didn’t get the invite?” Cami asks like she’s annoyed by the change in conversation. The car stops outside of an apartment, and she puts it into park.

“Don’t talk too much until I get back, okay?! I don’t want to miss anything.” Kat says then skips toward the apartment number from the ad with some cash to buy our next project.

“I didn’t get the invite,” I say, answering the question Cam asked because I know she’s bubbling and dying to know.

“Why not?”

“The time wasn’t right.”

“What do you *mean* the time wasn’t right?” she asks, and quick as that, Kat is back with a box of unmarked keys of various shapes and sizes.

“Oh my god, there’s way more than expected here!” I say, taking the box into my lap and listening to the metal cling together.

“She asked what we were using them for, and when I told her, she added more,” Kat says with a smile, and I laugh. “Okay, so what did I miss?” she asks as Cami puts the car in drive and starts back toward my place. She’s smart enough to know that Cam inevitably did not stop her inquisition when she left for a total of two minutes.

“Abs didn’t get the invite,” Cam says, irritation tinging her voice as she lifts her hands on the wheel. My body tenses until she puts them back at ten and two.

“Well, of course she didn’t. They just met!” Kat says. “Why would he invite a stranger to a Christmas party?”

“Exactly! It would have been weird to ask!” I say, sticking my tongue out at Cam in the rearview mirror.

“You both are such babies,” Cam says.

“I’m sorry that we’re not all as brave and demanding as you are, Camille,” Kat says with a laugh and smacks her in the arm.

“Hey, hey! Let her drive! I want to get home in one piece!” I shout, and the keys in the box jangle as the car swerves a bit.

“Okay, can we please change the subject and interrogate Abs about her date when I don’t have to worry about Cami killing us all?” Kat asks, and I breathe a sigh of relief, both because then Cami can concentrate on freaking driving and because I’m tired of talking about this date and the mixed emotions it’s giving me.

“Yes, let’s,” I say.

“Fine. I can’t believe you’re not going to the concert next week,” Cam says, glaring at me in the rearview mirror.

Shit.

Not exactly the relief that I was hoping for.

This has been a point of contention for weeks and hasn’t improved as the event gets nearer.

“I ... I can’t,” I say. Cam and Kat are attending a concert next week for the boy band we all bonded over when we met in college. It was the ice breaker during rush that turned us all into lifelong best friends. We’ve all been fans since we were kids, and since college, we haven’t missed a single tour they’ve been on. It’s become a tradition, a reminder of what brought us together, and a celebration of friendship. But this time, I won’t be joining in. “I bought the Choos.”

The Jimmy Choo sandals are beautiful and way too expensive, but not the real reason I avoided buying tickets three months ago when they went on sale. Not the reason that, when Kat told me she'd spot me the money for a ticket, I flat out refused, insisting that missing one concert wouldn't be the end of our friendship.

As always, Cami sees through my bullshit.

“That’s not it. You don’t want to go because last year when we all went, you and dipshit got into a big blowout, and he told you to grow up and stop listening to ‘music for children’ because he’s a stick in the mud asshole.”

I bite my lip, knowing she’s not wrong.

Last year they toured the area around the same time, and months prior, we all bought tickets as usual. When the night of the event came, Richard and I had a huge argument about it—he wanted me to help him with something at his apartment, and I told him I couldn’t that night but would be happy to the next day. He went off on me, telling me it was childish to see a boy band when I was “closing in on thirty” and I should prioritize him.

It was that night that he told me I wouldn’t be going to the company Christmas party because I was *too childish*.

I should have left then.

Instead, when the same concert rolled around, a tradition I cherish was pushed to the side to try to prove myself to that piece of shit. And now the tickets are sold out with no hope of making it happen.

I’m ashamed I had to wait for him to break my heart to see it all laid out before me ... but god, how many red flags did the world need to wave at me before I got the damn picture?

And when did my entire personality become about pleasing Richard? I don’t think most of it was intentional, just some subconscious voice urging me to change and adjust to better suit who I thought was my dream man.

Like some kind of weird dating Stockholm syndrome.

How depressing is that?

“Shoes are a better investment,” I say, not wanting to get into it with her and also not wanting to once again admit just how much of myself I lost over the last four years. “Next time they come around, I’ll go.”

“It won’t be the same without you, Abs,” Cami says, eyes meeting mine in the rearview mirror.

“Next year,” I say, a sad smile on my lips.

“Okay, so do we need to stop for anything else?” Kat asks as Cami takes the exit back to my place. God bless her for always changing the subject when I need it.

“Nope. I have the tape, and I cut all the signs out yesterday before my date,” I say of the next step in our “Make Richard’s Life Hell Plan.”

“Perfect,” Cam says, no longer worried about my attending the concert and instead back in villainous revenge mode.

An hour later, we’re sitting around eating junk food and taping “If found, please call” signs to over 300 keys of various sizes meticulously.

The number attached is Richard’s cell phone number. The plan is to scatter them across the city, Long Island, and the mall. I might not be able to see the outcome of Richard being bombarded by annoying calls telling him they found his lost keys, but it’s still satisfying to know it will drive him insane for at least a few weeks.

“You know, I already got the ball rolling with this,” Cam says with a sparkle in her eye. “Last night, I left his number in one of the One Direction Reddit forums and said it was Harry’s leaked cell number.”

My hands stop taping, and I stare at her.

“No, you fucking didn’t,” I say with a smile.

“Well, it wasn’t his cell number; it was his office number.” My mouth drops farther. “His direct line.”

“Oh my god,” Kat says with wide eyes.

“That’s *devious*,” I say with a laugh. “I’m sure he spent all morning fielding calls! And he has to answer all of them since it’s his work number! Oh, my god.” Kat, the kindest soul of our friend group, cringes.

“Should we feel bad about that?” Kat asks.

“Do you remember the time Abbie had the flu and he told her he needed her to drive all the way to fucking Pennsylvania to get those stupid shampoos for him because he was out?” I cringe, remembering that drive of pure misery.

And then he had me leave them at the front desk of his apartment because he didn’t want me to get him sick when I delivered them.

God, how was I so fucking stupid?

“Okay, I don’t feel bad anymore.” She turns to me. “Speaking of less shitty men, you never finished telling us about last night.” A blush burns my face because when I left off, he was taking me back to his place.

“Was it good?” Cami asks, a devious smile on her lips as she tapes another tag to a key and tosses it into the pile with a clang.

My blush deepens from remembering his hands on me and the way he absolutely devoured me.

“Oh, it was good,” Kat says with a smile.

“Stop! You know I hate going into details!” I say, studiously looking at the key I’m working on. “But it was very ... good. An eye-opening experience, to say the least.”

“Ooh, Daddy Damien is *good*, huh?” Cami says with a smile. I scrunch my face and try to hide anything that will give away everything. I have no problem gossiping with my best friends, but something about last night was ... intimate. Too intimate to chat casually about.

My inner self whispers that it should be a sign, but I slap her, taping another note onto a key.

“Okay, so after ... you know. What happened? You went home?” I shake my head at Kat’s question.

“I spent the night,” I say quietly, biting my lip. I didn’t share *that* part yet, either.

“Shut up,” Cami says, her voice low and her eyes moving from her hands to me.

“Shut *up!*” Kat says, I just shrug. “So he was sweet?” she asks, her hopeless romantic side coming out, and I can nearly see the hearts above her head. I sigh. This I can share.

“He was ... sweet. He was very sweet. He took care of me and forced me to spend the night and then ... I tried to sneak out in the morning, but he insisted on driving me home.”

“To Long Island?!”

“At eight am. And he got me a bagel and coffee.”

“Doesn’t he have work to do or something?” Cam asks, always the skeptical one of us.

“He doesn’t do mornings, apparently. And he said a gentleman makes sure his date gets home safe.” I bite my lips and then continue. “He walked me to my front door. Said hi to Fred and chatted with him about soccer.”

“Shut *up.*”

“Did Fred like him?” Kat asks, knowing that Fred, the doorman of my building, absolutely *hated Richard*. Despite my dating him for four years, the few times Richard deigned to make the trip to Long Island, Fred never sent him up without buzzing me. Not that Richard ever *wanted* to make the trip up to my apartment, always meeting me in the lobby. But still, I’d always remind him that Richard was *on my list*, and Fred would just mumble a, “My apologies Ms. Abbie.”

“Fred told him to, and I quote, ‘Make sure that young lady doesn’t get too much alone time, now, sir.’” Both of my friends cackle.

“Stop it! What did he say back?!” Kat asks, and I smile a secret smile, one full of hidden hope and butterflies that aren’t to be in the equation of this relationship.

“He said he didn’t plan to any time soon,” I say, fighting the tilting of my lips and failing miserably.

“*Shut up!*” Kat shouts.

Cami looks at me, less impressed.

“Do you ... like him?” Cami asks with a laugh, like the thought alone is hysterical. And then she looks at me. She must see something there in my face. “Holy fuck.”

“God, no,” I say quickly, trying, but then change. “I mean, I don’t *not* like him. He’s hot. He’s nice.”

“I thought he was an ass,” she says, reminding me of what Richard told me.

“Says *Richard*. But Richard is also an ass.”

“So, what, is your plan off?”

I should have said yes.

Looking back, I’ll think about how I should have said yes at that exact moment, sent Damien a text saying we need to talk, hop on the phone, and tell him the truth.

But then I remember how I felt gutted when Richard told me I wasn’t serious enough to stand by his side at that *stupid party*. That I was just *fun*. And I remember just how fucking *fun* it will feel when I see Richard’s face and he realizes he fucked up.

So I don’t.

Instead, I say, “God, no! Of course not. The plan is still on.” And then I change the subject. “So, how do we distribute these keys?”

And the night moves on.

But the rock that plants itself in my stomach doesn’t.

It stays for weeks.

THIRTEEN

November 13

-Abbie-

Thursday night, my phone rings, and I smile when Damien's name pops up on the screen.

We've been calling and texting for the past few days, and each one feels bright and happy. An internal squeal of giggleness I can't avoid. *Excitement*. That flush of happiness that comes when you first start dating someone.

That can't be a good sign, the giddiness.

My dumbass ignores the warnings, as seems to be my way.

"Hey," I say, a smile clear in my voice.

"Hey," he replies, and panic runs through me.

The problem with guilt is that at any moment, you start to create scenarios in your mind of being caught, your number being up, and of when the lies become too much and overtake your life.

Did Richard talk to Damien?

Did Damien search me, somehow find proof of who I am—or who I once was? Of who I thought I could be?

"What's wrong?" I ask in response to his dull tone.

"I hate to do this." There's a sigh on the other end, and I can almost picture him running his hand through his hair. "I really, really fucking hate to do this."

My stomach sinks to the ground.

I don't respond.

"I have to cancel tomorrow."

Strangely, the panic eases.

This isn't a case of him finding out the truth. It's a reschedule. Or a cancellation.

"At two, I have to be in court for a last-minute case, and then I need to spend the weekend prepping to file a bunch of shit on Monday."

"Oh, god, of course! That's no problem," I say.

This, at least, feels familiar.

Work coming first.

Cases coming first.

Really, *everything* coming first.

A part of my stomach that sank when I feared he might have figured me out stays there because what I thought were my keen instincts were once again proven wrong. He's not a good guy. He's not the perfect man, not some kind of dream.

He's fallible, and he's flaky, and he's just like all of them.

Just like Richard.

Just like my dad.

"If this were a normal case, I'd be fine, but this is a pro bono case." I pause, intrigued. "Domestic violence and custody."

"Oh, god," I say, a light gasp in my words.

"She finally got the guts to leave him and made a plan, but when she did, he beat her within an inch of her life. She just got out of the hospital, and he has the kids. Who the fuck knows why *he* has them, but she's gotta fight for the kids. Tomorrow we're filing for an emergency order of protection, and I need to file custody and divorce papers for Monday, get this ball rolling."

“Of course. God, Damien ... that’s horrible.” I pause, unsure. “I feel silly even saying it, but if there’s anything I can do ...” He laughs.

Again, it’s not that making fun of me laugh. It’s ... different. An at-ease, genuinely happy laugh.

“I should have known a soul as sweet as yours would offer.” He sighs again. “I actually have a favor I could ask of you.”

“Yeah, anything,” I say, and I mean it. The cause is good, the man better. So if there’s something I can do, I’m more than willing.

“Sharon—that’s my client—she’s anxious to go in tomorrow. She’s still beat up pretty badly and hasn’t seen her ex since that night.”

“Okay ...”

“I’ve gotten her an outfit to make her feel better about herself, to feel confident and safe at court.”

God, he’s sweet.

So fucking sweet.

“But I know nothing about makeup.” He pauses; I think I know where he’s going with this. “Could I bring her to you tomorrow? You’re working in the morning, right?”

“Bring her to me?”

“At work. I’d pay, of course. But could I bring her to you, have you do her makeup and make her feel a bit more confident before she has to face that monster?”

God.

God, god, god.

This man is not to be believed with his thoughtfulness.

“You want me to—”

“Look, if it’s not possible or you’re uncomfortable, it’s fine. She’s got some bruising that she’s embarrassed by and —”

“No,” I say, cutting him off.

“Okay, that’s fine, I’ll—”

“No, I mean, yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes. I’d love to. But no, you won’t pay.” He laughs, the sound filling my veins like warm, thick maple syrup.

“I absolutely will.”

“No, seriously,” I say with a laugh. “Makeup consultations are free.”

“You deserve to be paid.”

“I get paid hourly. If you really want to pay money, when I do her makeup, I can make her a bag, and you can buy it for her, so next time you go to court, you don’t have to drag her all the way to Long Island.”

“But what if I want an excuse to see you?” he asks, his voice now low and gravelly.

God, this man has a *good fucking voice*.

“Set the time and we can make it happen, Mister Martinez.” My voice is lower now.

“Wish I could be there now. Send me your schedule. I want to know when you’re free.” His voice mimics mine, the same sense of impatience there.

“You’re the one with the hectic, important lawyer schedule. You tell me when you’re free, and I’ll make it work,” I say, leaning back and sinking into my couch. “I’m just a makeup artist at a department store.”

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Don’t talk about yourself like that.”

“I’m not talking about myself in any kind of way that isn’t true.” My words are flippant and uncaring, but beneath that is a truth I bury.

“What you do is important. We talked about this.” Strange. Part of me thought that was just a sweet conversation, something you say when you’re sleepy and a warm woman is naked in your bed.

“It’s just makeup.”

“Tomorrow, you’re going to give a woman the confidence to face a man who terrorized her and her children. That man is now using his power and wealth to make her scared. Giving her a small boost? That’s important.” I don’t reply.

The truth is, I love makeup. I love playing with color and finding the perfect combination of products to make someone feel their best. I know makeup can change a person, can give them confidence, or bring back a spark. It can hide insecurities or amplify differences. Makeup is an art in and of itself, and I am an artist.

But the general population sees what I do as some kind of cutesy thing. Something unimportant, something *anyone* could do. People get ragged on daily for wearing makeup in any series of circumstances—from working out to going to work to dropping kids off at school. People—mostly women—get shit on for doing something to make *themselves feel good*.

And most of the time, I’m fine with that. I understand not everyone sees the value. Not everyone understands that it’s more than makeup and ego. More than just looking good for the general public. It’s about feeling confident in your own skin, about expressing yourself. It’s more about the person wearing it than who they’re wearing it for.

“Hmm,” is all I can say in response. A phone rings in the background, and Damien curses. “Is that you? Do you have to go?” I ask, already bummed to have to hang up.

“No. I’m at the office. One of the lawyers here pissed off some chick and she gave his office number out, said it was some boy band’s secret number.” My blood runs cold, as I know precisely what’s going on. Damien laughs, though. “Honestly, pretty funny to watch him struggle through calls all day.”

“Sounds ... irritating.”

“It is, but he’s a dick, so he deserves it. It’s not my number they’re calling.” Interesting that he thinks Richard’s a dick.

A second, closer phone rings.

“Shit, that one *is* me,” he says.

“Got it. Go be a fancy lawyer man, balance the scales of justice,” I say with a smile, and he laughs that deep laugh, and I wish I could see his face.

“Got it, *rubia*. See you tomorrow, yeah?”

“I’ll be here,” I say, and when we hang up, I squeal an excited girly squeal before calling my best friends.

FOURTEEN

November 14

-Abbie-

“Oh my god, that’s him,” Kat says in a whispered squeal from beside me as I organize lipsticks on a shelf.

“Calm the fuck down, Kat,” I whisper under my breath at her, trying to play it cool. “He’s just a man. A man bringing in a client to get a makeover. That is *all*.”

“That is not a man, Abigail. That is a god,” she says, and her voice has gone dreamy in that boy-crazy way she has. I sigh and turn and see that he’s not even that close—eagle eyes just can always spot a hot man a mile away. He’s stalking toward the makeup section, a look in his eyes similar to determination, a middle-aged woman striding next to him. She’s blonde with dark roots growing out but dressed well.

I wonder if that’s Damien’s doing or from the wardrobe I’m sure she had with her ex.

But what’s more, is the yellowing bruise on her upper cheekbone.

It’s not swollen and not new, but I can see she tried to put something on top to cover it with little success.

Fuck.

My eyes move back to Damien, who seems to have spotted me—that determination in his eyes has morphed into strange happiness and ease.

That's new.

It's new to see a man—a man like Damien, specifically—look so at ease in this department. Most look around, confused and uneasy, hiding behind the security of whoever dragged them in here.

Not Damien.

“Hey,” I say when he's within earshot. “Funny to see you here.” His lips turn up, and he rolls his eyes, but it's not because he thinks I'm annoying. On the contrary, it's like he's in on the joke.

“Good to see you, *rubia*,” he says then takes another step forward and, to all my surprise and shock, drags me into him, hugging me in front of everyone.

It's thoughts like that—the pure fact that this move is so *shocking* to me—that make me wonder how the fuck I put up with Richard for so long.

Richard would refuse to show me any form of physical affection that wasn't absolutely necessary in public. It was uncouth, he'd tell me. Unnecessary. These days, I wonder if he just didn't want me to further taint his image. He was already stooping so damn low.

God, how was I so stupid and blind to his shit?

“Abigail, this is Sharon, my client,” he says, stepping back and putting a hand on the small of her back.

“Abbie. You can call me Abbie. Damien is way too formal. I'm so happy you're here!” I say, putting on my most bubbly customer service voice. She gives me a smile, but it's forced, stretched, and uncomfortable.

We'll have to fix that.

“Nice to meet you,” she says, and the words are quiet. I turn to Damien.

“This is my best friend, Kat,” I say, motioning to her. With her gorgeous Latina curves, siren-worthy eyes, and caramel highlighted dark hair in crazy curls down her back, I almost

panic that Damien will look at her and question why he's with me.

He's not with you, Abbie. He's been on one date with you, and it's mostly just because you have a plan to follow through with.

It's the *mostly* part that should scare me. That even in my subconscious, I can't say the only motivation is my petty revenge.

"Nice to meet you, Kat," he says and politely puts his hand out, which Kat shakes. But while she smiles at Damien, her head almost instantly turns to mine, smiling even bigger with wide eyes.

"Jesus, Kat. He's not blind. He can see you," I say, and Damien laughs. Even Sharon throws a giggle out there. I shake my head before turning back to the all-important lawyer and key to my revenge.

"Okay, you leave. How long do I have?" I ask, staring at him pointedly.

"We need to leave here by one; court is at two." I look at my watch and smile. I should have known Damien would somehow give me the perfect amount of time. I have over an hour with this beautiful woman.

"Got it. Go wander the mall. I'll let you know when I'm ready." He salutes me, and fuck, it's cute. This man, who I've been told for years is straight-laced and a hard ass and always working, is saluting me.

"Hey, Kat, let me get your number too, in case I can't reach Abigail," he says, turning toward my best friend, and everything in me crashes.

"Uh, yeah, sure," Kat says, turning wide eyes to me before reciting her number.

There it is.

Any guilt I felt for using this man to get mine is gone as he blatantly hits on my best friend in front of me, getting her number.

“Okay, I’m out,” Damien says, waving at us. “Make sure you make that bag like I asked, yeah?” he asks, indicating the bag of makeup he’ll purchase for Sharon when I’m done. I nod and give him a tight smile, and Damien’s eyebrows furrow in the smallest, almost unnoticeable way before he nods slightly and turns away, pulling out his phone to make a call.

Kat, Sharon, and I all stand for a few moments, staring at one another before I clap and put on a happy customer service smile. “Okay! Let’s have some fun!” I say then lead Sharon into my chair before running to get some supplies.

A few minutes later, I have a stack of products ready to start and a mirror situated across from Sharon. I’ve explained to her how the primer works to grip makeup and that if she has questions, to have me stop and explain. I want her to leave here feeling completely confident, not just for today, but for any other future court dates.

“So is it okay to ... put something on this?” I ask, pointing in the mirror at the yellowed bruise. It’s the elephant in the room, but not the first one I’ve seen. It just might be the first where I know the true source of the blemish rather than a made-up story. Sharon smiles at me, a tight, uneasy thing, before nodding.

“Got it. I’ll be gentle.” Then I show her different concealers. We go over the different ways to cover dark circles (she laughs and says her two kids gave her those), blemishes (stress, she told me), and other ... discoloration.

I stay away from the topic of the bruise, of the trial, of anything but fun, girlish makeup information. Over time working with people, I’ve learned when to push, when to ask questions, and when to let my client sit in their own thoughts. As I’m swatching out different foundations, though, she speaks.

“Damien has been a lifesaver,” she says, and I pause briefly, not even long enough for her to register it, before continuing to move and check colors.

“Oh?” I say. A makeup artist doesn’t have the same reputation for being a therapist as a bartender or hair stylist.

Still, when you're in someone's face for a full hour, learning their biggest insecurities about the things they can't easily change, it's easy for people to feel comfortable talking with you.

"I didn't have high hopes. I actually started this ... process a year ago. Slowly saving up money, moving things to friends' houses. I knew before things got ... bad that I needed to get out. For my girls." I nod but don't look up.

If she wants to talk to me, I want her to feel as comfortable as possible doing so.

"I sent out inquiries for help to so many lawyers. But my husband—*ex-husband*—he's got pull. He's got money. So in a way, it looks like I have that too. It disqualified me from a lot of the pro bono stuff, and I just don't have the money for a good lawyer. And with how much pull my ex has ... I needed a talented lawyer."

"I'm sorry," is all I can say, dotting the foundation to her skin.

"It started with words," she says, a whisper. It takes everything in me not to show her words impacting me, not to pause in the stippling of makeup on her skin. I don't want her to stop, so I don't stop working. "Nothing too crazy. Comments on my weight and how I dressed. Nothing ... Nothing was good enough."

My mind moves to Richard, to him asking me to change an outfit or implying I'd look better as a brunette. Commenting on my weight, comparing me to other women.

Nothing was good enough.

"Then it was financial. I had an allowance, but barely. He'd ask for itemized receipts, wanted to know where every cent was going." My stomach churns. "I never thought ... I never thought it would come to this." Her hand lifts, and she points at her face loosely. "I just knew I didn't want my girls to live like that, to think it was normal."

"That's admirable," I say and decide to tell her I can relate to her story. "I have an older sister. She basically raised me.

Our mom was ... not as strong as you.” I don’t need to tell her that my mom was a drunk who was never home and my dad was a cheater. She doesn’t need to know that he left her for another woman and she blamed it on us. It doesn’t matter at the end of the day. To empathize with someone, you don’t need to have lived the same story. “I wish she were. Things could have been different.”

A small smile graces Sharon’s lips, and it’s pretty when it’s comfortable. *She’s* pretty. “That’s good to know. Thank you for telling me that. Sometimes ... you wonder if you made the wrong choice. Should I have just dealt with it and then they wouldn’t be dragged through custody and divorce proceedings? Seeing their mom with a bruise? Hearing that I’m pressing charges against their father? They never saw the bad, so it must have been a shock for them ...” Her voice trembles with her words, breaking my heart.

“The way I see it, you’re showing them to be strong,” I say, leaning to grab a brush to blend the dots. “My mom never showed us what a healthy relationship looked like. My sister—she got lucky. Found a good man who fought for her and treated her like literal gold.”

“And you? Damien seems amazing.” I laugh.

“Believe it or not, we’ve only been on one date,” I say with a smile, leaning back as she tips her head back and laughs, full.

“No way! I thought it was a serious thing when he talked about you on the way here.” I look over at Kat, who listens with a curious ear and whose eyes have gone wide.

“Nope. Brand new. We met on a dating app a few weeks ago.” I add different shades of products, using them to create highlights and contours. “But before him, I had a boyfriend for a long time.” I go quiet as I decide how much to share with this stranger, and so does Sharon. She gives me the same courtesy that I gave her, and I think at this moment, I realize that, in a way, I am like her.

I’m recovering from four years of living in a dreamland that was really a nightmare, and I’m learning how to live with

that knowledge. Learning how to be me again. Who “me” even is.

“He didn’t hit me,” I say and pause, feeling weird. Sharon must notice, must understand, because she reassures me.

“Just because it wasn’t flesh on flesh doesn’t mean it’s not painful,” she says. I look at her, and her eyes are locked to me and watering. It’s like she knows without words. She smiles that tight smile you give people when you want to hold back emotions but also want them to know you understand.

“He ... wasn’t kind. I thought he was. And it took me until recently to realize I lost a big part of myself when I was with him. I didn’t even recognize myself anymore.” I look up to see Kat’s eyes on me, watering as well, and goddammit, this is not how it was supposed to be. It was supposed to be a fun afternoon for a sweet woman before a shitty moment in court. “I got lucky. He ended things. But I think if he hadn’t, I could have been lost to the world forever. I’m coming back to myself now, slowly. But I think if I’d had someone like you? A mom who showed me how a strong woman acts? It would have been sooner.”

I turn my back to Sharon and Kat, pretending to grab something and use a cotton ball to dab at her watering eyes.

“God, okay, my shit is not even close to what you’re living with,” I say with a watery laugh as I turn. “You came here for makeup, and it’s turning into a trauma dump! You must think I’m insane. I was just trying to say ... I guess ... your girls are lucky.” I start to sweep blush on her cheeks, but a soft hand on my wrist stops me.

“Don’t downplay it. I can see a kindred soul. Your own experience is not less because mine was more.” I smile at her, and for a moment, I see it. I see how if things hadn’t ended, and I’d married Richard and had children with him, there is a chance I’d be like Sharon. Maybe not the physical aspect—Richard has never been violent—but the financial abuse ... Definitely the verbal abuse.

He did me a favor, in some ways, by letting me go when I wasn’t strong enough to do it myself.

After that, we talk about fun stuff—she tells me about her girls and what they're into, and I tell her all about the small, petty acts that Kat, Cam, and I have been doing to make Richard's life hell. Sharon laughs and then adds a few ideas of her own, like ordering a bunch of pizzas to his office under his name and making him pay for the office that he doesn't like much to eat.

About ten minutes later, I text Damien when I'm done with Sharon, setting up a bag full of samples and the essentials Damien insisted he buy her. While I worked on her, Kat ran off with sizes to use our store discount and grab some clothes for her and a few outfits for her girls.

Me: She's all ready for you," the text read.

"On my way," he replied, and then five minutes later, he was in front of me with a tray of coffee.

"Here, Sharon," he says, handing a cup to his client. "And Kat—pumpkin spice." Another white cup with a green logo is handed to my best friend, but he's smiling at me, and my mouth is slightly ajar with confusion. "And for you, *rubia*. White chocolate mocha." He hands me the third cup in the tray, the biggest one, and smiles at me.

"What's this?" I ask, confused.

"Coffee."

"Why are you bringing coffee?"

"You like coffee. This is your order, right?" he asks, looking at me confused.

It is.

It's what I ordered the morning after our date.

"Yes."

"I texted Kat asking hers." Confusion and understanding and a really unsettling hint of relief flow through me.

He got her number to get her goddamn *coffee order*.

Not because he's an ass who hits on my hot friend in front of me.

Lord, I really am a complete disaster healing from major relationship trauma.

Kat just smiles, leaving a lipstick mark on the mouth of her cup before tipping it up at me with a wink.

I glare back at her. *She could have at least let me know.*

“Hate to do this, but we really gotta get going. Sharon, you look gorgeous. Not that you didn’t before,” Damien says. “But now I can see you feel gorgeous, too.” He turns to me. “See? It’s not just makeup, *rubia*.”

God, he gets it, doesn’t he?

It’s not just makeup. It’s never just makeup. It’s confidence, a badge of honor, a shield from the world.

Richard never got it, not in four years. And he sure as fuck never tried.

“Thank you,” Sharon says, grabbing the bag and stepping toward the exit. “And thank you, Abbie. For everything. I hope ... I hope I get to speak with you again soon.”

“Bring the girls! I’ll do a makeover on them. Something simple, of course. Lip gloss and clear mascara, blush. But we can have a mall day! My treat!” I say.

“They would love that,” Sharon says with a nod and a smile before writing her number on a business card I keep on my chair.

“Shoot, wait, before you go—I asked Kat to get this together for me,” I say, reaching behind the counter and handing a big, overloaded bag to Sharon.

“What is this?”

“Clothes. For you and for the girls. Just a few outfits to make you guys feel like the rock stars you are,” I say and smile. She looks confused.

“That’s so nice, really, but I can’t—” she starts, about to argue the price, I’m sure.

“Employee discount. A perk of working here. I get stuff for all my nieces and nephews, and I just got two more nieces

today,” I say with a smile, deciding then and there that Sharon is now part of my giant, confusing, crazy family. Her eyes start to water.

“I can’t—”

“I’ll pay,” Damien says, interrupting.

“Nope, I already did,” I say with a smile. This one is less friendly and more devious, and fully pointed at Damien.

“Then I’ll pay you back,” he says, and the look he gives back to me runs a bolt of heat through my body.

This fucking man.

“Nope.” I smile, and his eyes narrow, and I can almost read his thoughts in his eyes. Thoughts about how he’d like to turn me over his knee or squeeze that hand he loves to wrap around my throat.

“Abigail.”

“Damien,” I say in a chiding tone.

“I’m paying,” he insists, and it’s clear that he is rarely questioned.

Unfortunately for him, the old Abbie is slowly returning, and she rarely listens to what others tell her to do.

“I already did. Nothing you can do about it. I used my discount, so it wasn’t even that much.” Sharon looks between us, head moving like she’s watching a tennis match, but Kat just stands there shaking her head, smiling.

“You’re trouble, aren’t you?” he asks with a hint of frustration, but there’s a smile on his lips as he shakes his head at me.

“The good kind,” I say with a smile, and I can’t help but wonder, not for the first time, if I’m making a wrong choice.

I wonder if this could be something good if he wasn’t a pawn in my game.

He’s not looking for something serious, I remind myself. If he was looking for something serious, for love or a

relationship, that would be one thing. But he's *not*. So what does it even matter?

He pulls me into his arms, and when I breathe in his scent, that guilt hits me again, quickly tamed by the quiet peace that flows through me when he kisses me.

Because quickly, he does just that. A peck on the lips, something small and sweet, but a kiss nonetheless.

In front of a client.

In front of my friend.

In the middle of the makeup department in Rollard's.

I freeze.

"I can't show you affection in front of my friends, Abbie," Richard once told me when we were fighting in the car after a night out. "It's weak. And I'm not a weak man."

And here is a near stranger kissing me in broad daylight in front of his client without a hint of shame or embarrassment.

When the kiss breaks, I see Sharon and Kat smiling hugely at me, with Sharon giving me a thumbs up alongside the genuine smile.

See? Makeup does wonders.

"Thank you," Damien whispers against my lips. "For everything. I'll see you tomorrow, yeah?"

"Yeah. Keep me updated on the case?"

And in the same way I was shocked by his kiss, I think my words shock him because his head moves back just a tiny bit before he smiles.

"Got it. Will do."

FIFTEEN

November 13

-Abbie-

Normally, any call or text that comes in past my skincare routine goes straight to voicemail to be answered in the morning. My exceptions are Hannah, Cami, and Kat, for obvious reasons. But everyone else can wait.

But today, it seems I have added a fourth name to that list.

Temporarily, I remind myself.

“*Rubia*, how are you?” Damien’s voice asks down the line, and as seems to always be the case, his voice melts through my veins like honey, pooling in my belly with a comforting warmth.

“I’m good. How did Sharon’s case go?” I ask instantly. It’s been weighing on me since they left, but I didn’t want to be a pain and send Damien a text. For one, I had no idea of his plans for the evening other than knowing he had to get some work done, and for two, I didn’t want to be *that* girl. We’re not even dating, so bombarding him with “*How was your day?*” texts could ruin everything.

For the plan, I remind myself. *Ruin everything for the plan. Definitely not for your potential romantic outlook.*

Unfortunately, I’m having a harder time convincing myself of that one.

“Well,” he says with a low sigh. “She was granted the protective order with temporary full custody.”

“That’s great, Damien,” I say, stretching out under the blankets. The apartment is absolutely freezing during one of the first truly wintry nights of the season, and I already hate it.

“Yeah. We’ve got a long road ahead of us, but it’s a great first step.”

“How was she?”

“Relieved, I think. She got to go home with her girls.”

“And she’s somewhere safe? Staying with friends or family?”

“I put down three months rent at an apartment down the street from the girls’ school.” My heart melts.

“That’s incredibly generous, Damien,” I say in a whisper.

“Yeah, well, it’s the least I can do.” We’re both quiet, caught in our own thoughts, Damien not wanting any compliments and me finding myself constantly reframing how I see him, balancing who he’s showing me and who I’ve heard he was.

“This is weird, isn’t it?” he says. “I haven’t sat on the phone with a girl since high school.”

“Oh, you mean back when the dinosaurs were roaming?” I ask, and I’m not sure what makes me say it. I freeze for a moment, thinking I definitely went too far, but he just *laughs*, a deep, all-consuming sound.

“I should come over to your place and put you over my knee for that,” he says, and even though the words are silly, my body heats.

Somehow, he knows.

“Shit, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?” My tongue comes out and licks my lips, but I don’t answer. “This is the kind of phone call we should have, yeah? I think I’m supposed to ask what you’re wearing next, right?” His voice has gone low, and I feel it through my whole body.

“We really are going back to high school, aren’t we?” I ask.

“I don’t want to hear about the phone calls you made in high school, Abigail.” My pulse is racing, but I don’t have it in me to explain I never had a boyfriend in high school, especially not one I had phone sex with.

“So, what are you wearing?” he asks again, his voice low, and my heart starts to race at his words. “Tell me, *rubia*,” he insists. I lick my lips, trying to decide what to do, and I half expect him to push, to ask again, or to drop it and change the conversation.

He does neither, staying silent.

So I answer.

“A tee shirt. And sweatpants.”

God, could I be less sexy?

“Take them off,” he says, his voice a deep growl that I feel all over. I start to do as he asks, like even though he’s miles away, his words are controlling me. As I’m kicking the sweats off, letting them ball up at the foot of the bed, my confidence returns.

“Are you taking yours off?” I ask, and he laughs.

“Yeah, *rubia*. Just to be clear, I’m going to talk you through making yourself come, and I’m going to jack off while I listen.” My breath catches in my chest, my hands hesitating. “So we’re on the same page for where I’m taking this.”

“Oh,” I say, my pussy pulsing at the thought.

“Yeah, oh. Now take your hand and put it on your tit, yeah? Roll your nipple, baby.” A low moan falls from my lips as I do. “I know you like that; I enjoyed watching it when I had you under me.” Another moan at the thought of that night.

“God, I’m already hard for you, baby. Wish you were here to take care of me.” He’s breathing into the microphone harshly, but the sound isn’t a distraction. It adds to everything. “Sit up, Abigail. Prop yourself up on some pillows. Put me on speaker then put your phone between your legs. I want to hear when you touch yourself.”

“Oh, god,” I murmur but obey, hitting speaker and rearranging. “Okay.”

I always thought phone sex would feel awkward and uncomfortable. Clunky. But with Damien ...

“One finger, baby. Circle your clit but don’t press.” I do as he instructs, moving my finger down my body, the other hand continuing its work at my breast. I gently circle my already swollen clit and breathe out heavily.

Through the speaker, I can hear a rustling of bedsheets, slow and steady, and my mind conjures the image of Damien jacking himself off in that enormous bed, sheets up to his hips, muscles tense.

“That’s it. Picture my tongue there, teasing you. I’m dying to have you come on my face, to have you ride my tongue until you find it.” Another moan and I press just a bit more, dying for friction. Somehow, he senses that. “No, no, baby. Gentle. Don’t press. We gotta drag this out.”

“Damien—”

“I know, baby. I’ve got you. One finger, circling, yeah?”

I just moan a strangled noise in response.

“I’ve been thinking of this all week. Of your fingers on your pussy, thinking of me. Have you, Abigail? Have you fingered yourself to the thought of me fucking you this week? Made yourself come?”

“Yes,” I admit, low and soft. I don’t even have the mental capacity to lie, to feel shame.

“Good girl. That’s what I like hearing. What do you like? What do you do when you’re all alone?”

“My fingers,” I whisper. “Inside. God, Damien, I need—”

“Okay, *rubia*. One finger, slide it in. Slow. Tell me what you feel.” I sigh with relief.

“Oh shit, god.” It feels divine, pure torture, not nearly enough but enough to take the edge off.

“What do you feel, baby? My hand is pumping my cock for you.” Fuck, the mental image is everything. Next time—next time, we should do a video call. I need to see that, his thick hand wrapped around himself, pumping, pre-cum at the tip ...

“Wet. I’m so wet, Damien. God.” My words are breathy. “So wet and so tight.”

“Fuck yeah. I’d have my mouth there, licking that up,”

“More, I need more, honey,” I say.

“God, you’re a dream. Such a good girl, waiting for your man to give you more. Two more, baby. Put in two more fingers. Tell me how full you feel.”

“Ahh!” My body bucks against my fingers, and I crook them, swiping my G-spot. “I need more!”

“You need my cock is what you need,” he says, his voice in a grunt. “Fuck yourself for me baby, hard.” I do as he asks, the phone inches from my wet pussy as I ride my fingers, fucking myself, chasing the invisible ledge. “That’s it. Fuck, I can hear how wet you are.”

“Honey,” I mewl.

“Not yet, Abbie.”

“Damien—”

“Not yet. You come when I tell you. I own that body; I own your orgasms.” His words drag another deep moan from me. “Fuck yeah, you like that. God, I want to fuck that cunt, baby. I’d be so deep in you.”

“I need more.”

“Rub your clit, baby. Rub it. I want to hear,” he says, and I do as he asks, moaning louder.

“That’s my dirty whore. Fuck. Moan for me, baby.” His words ricochet through me, a new rush of wet coating my fingers.

“Oh, god, oh, god, oh, god!”

“She likes my words, my filthy girl. Fucking perfect. Fuck yourself baby. Ride those fingers. Yeah, right there, so fucking good, baby.”

I don't think he's even saying things for my benefit anymore, just as lost as I am.

But I'm ready to detonate, his words, his heavy breathing, my fingers taking me closer by the second.

Thank god he seems to be right there with me.

“Ah, fuck, *rubia*, I'm gonna come,” he says in a low groan, sending another bolt of heat through me. “I want to hear you first. Are you close?”

“Yeah,” I pant, fingers pumping into my pussy, the sound of my breathing and the wetness filling the room. “God, I wish you were here.”

“I know, baby. Next time. Next time I make you come with my mouth.” Another low groan falls from my lips. “I want you to come now, Abigail. Come for me loud; let me hear it,” he says, his voice demanding, and that's all it takes.

Pleasure crashes over me, making my mind go fuzzy, my body shake, my ears ring as I scream out his name. My pussy clamps on my fingers as I buck on them, trying to get more, get them deeper, get *anything*.

In the depths of my consciousness, the part that isn't completely wrapped in the all-consuming orgasm I just gave myself, I hear Damien groan out my name and a deep, “Fuuuuuuck,” and I'm pretty sure another mini orgasm racks through me.

For long minutes after, we're both quiet, breathing deep, and as the pleasure fades, my anxiety and self-consciousness roll in.

As seems to be the way, despite barely knowing this man but also feeling like I know him too damn well, Damien can somehow tell even through the phone line.

“Don't. Stop your brain from overthinking, *rubia*. That was unbelievable, yeah?” I mumble an agreement, not eager to

expand. He just laughs. “I’m gonna go clean up. You go do the same. Get ready for bed and then come back to your phone. We’ll talk until you’re too tired.”

“What?”

“Go change. Clean up.”

“But ... we’re done.”

“As nice as that was, I didn’t call for that, Abigail.” My mind moves, trying to break down the words to understand some kind of subtext. “I want to talk to you before I go to bed. Hear about your day. I was supposed to be spending tonight with you. Today sucks, minus seeing you this morning and what just happened.” Again, I don’t answer, trying to wrap my mind around what he’s saying.

“Go. Clean up. Then give me some sunshine before you go to bed, yeah?”

Give me some sunshine.

Jeeze.

I like that, giving someone sunshine.

So I agree.

“Okay, be back.” I can hear the smile in his voice when he responds.

“Good.”

An hour later, we’re still talking on the phone. I’m curled up in bed with the phone propped between me and the pillow.

“I hate the freaking cold,” I say, tucking my feet in more. They’re still cold despite the fuzzy socks I have on with my thick sweats.

“It’s finally kicking in. But doesn’t the cold right now still fit your timeline of acceptable cold weather?” I smile.

“You were listening.”

“I always listen to you, *rubia*.” I ignore that part and the way it messes with my belly.

“Yes, November is acceptable cold, and I don’t mind it cooler, but my bedroom heat is shit. I think I need to call maintenance and have them take a look. But that always takes forever, and I need to take off work because I don’t trust the maintenance man not to go through my bedside drawers—”

“What’s in your bedside drawers?” Damien asks, interrupting. How did I know he wouldn’t just let that one slide?

I pause, unsure how much I want to reveal about the things I used to *keep myself company* when Richard wasn’t able to do the job.

“Come over sometime, and I might show you.” He groans a deep noise, and I feel it in my clit.

“Don’t play games, *rubia*. I just came, but I can be at your place in twenty minutes.” I just laugh, unwilling to admit I don’t hate that idea. “So your apartment’s cold?”

“Not my apartment, mostly my bedroom. My toes always get cold.” He laughs, and I like this. It’s easy. It could be so freaking easy to fall for this man. That much, I know. It’s almost a relief that we’re not like that.

I yawn, trying to hide it with my hand, but he laughs.

“You tired, pretty girl?” His words are low and soft and make me feel like I’m being wrapped in cashmere.

“No, I’m good,” I say, and he laughs.

“You’re tired. Go to bed.”

“No, really, I’m good, Damien.”

“Abigail—”

“I like listening to you, Damien,” I say, and I assume it’s because I came hard and I’m exhausted and finally feeling warm under my blankets, but I keep talking. “I don’t like being alone. I like listening to you.”

Now, where did that come from?

Damien takes long, embarrassing moments to respond, and for a split second, I think about hanging up, blocking him, and calling it a day.

But then he speaks again.

“Okay, *rubia*. I’ll stay on, tell you about my day. You fall asleep, yeah?” he says.

And I fall asleep to the low tones of Damien Martinez telling me about his day.

SIXTEEN

November 18

-Damien-

Abigail's phone has been beeping since I picked her up, and it's cute watching her face blanch and blush each time it happens. Sometimes she ignores it, and sometimes she puts up a sheepish smile, glimpsing at the phone.

Those times, her face goes slack with ... jealousy?

A part of me fires each time that look passes her face. That jealousy. Is it photos of a man with someone else? Of her ex?

Acid burns each time.

And I know we're not that. We're not serious. I told her that from the start, but right now, watching that jealous look cross her face, I have to wonder if I made a huge mistake.

I want this girl as my own. I do not want to be sharing her, not in the slightest.

The restaurant we're at is some fancy place downtown, chosen by Tanya. It's ... a lot. Strangely low lighting and exotic ingredients and unorthodox methods of cooking.

It's not my favorite, but when I said the name, Abigail seemed impressed, which was a win for me.

But now, she seems less than enthused with her drink, much less the restaurant's ambiance.

And then her phone rings again

“Okay, I gotta ask—who is it?”

“What?” she asks, her face ashen and anxious. *Fuck. It’s another man.*

It doesn’t matter, Martinez. This is easy. Simple. Not serious.

That’s what I wanted. That’s what I told her on that first date, and it’s what she agreed to. And more, it’s what I need, my life and work being too chaotic to commit to a full relationship.

But fuck if the idea of her being *not serious* with another man doesn’t drive me insane.

Plus, I told her I don’t share. That we might not be serious, but we are most definitely exclusive.

“Who is it? Texting you?” She doesn’t respond. “Look, I know we said we aren’t serious, but—” I don’t get the chance to finish.

“Shit, it’s Cami. And Kat.”

“Your friends?”

“Yeah.” That sounds like the most overused excuse in the book. She turns her phone toward me, and I see two women smiling together in a dark room. One I recognize as her friend Katrina. “They’re at this concert together, and I was supposed to go, but the tickets were crazy expensive, and I bought these Jimmy Choos instead because experiences are temporary and shoes are forever.” Her foot pops out from under the table, and she rotates her ankle to show me a high-heeled shoe with a petite ankle strap in the lightest shade of pink. “Honestly, worth it, but now they’re sending me non-stop texts bugging me about it because Cam doesn’t believe in investing in footwear.” She rolls her eyes, and it’s clear this isn’t some elaborate story—she’s telling the truth.

And while she is holding the phone up, a new photo of who I assume is Cami flipping off the camera and the words “Wish you were here, bitch” and “At least you’ll be getting the good dick tonight” pops up.

“Am I the good dick?” I ask, smiling and leaning back in my seat,

“What?” she asks then moves the phone to look at it. “Oh, Jesus Christ. Fucking Cam. Ignore that. Please, for the love of *god*, ignore that.” Her hand reaches out, and she downs the rosé in front of her—not whiskey.

I found that interesting as well, the change in drink.

“Where are they?” I ask, sipping my whiskey.

“Madison Square Garden.” My interest is piqued. “I know it’s lame, but our favorite boy band from middle school is still touring. So when they come to town, we dress up, make stupid signs, get hammered, and sing until our throats hurt.” She cringes like she’s embarrassed to admit this. “But it’s a blast.”

“And you’re not there?”

“Nope. Shoes, remember?”

“Do you want to be there?”

“What?”

“Would you like to be there? At this concert?” I ask, reading her cues. *She wants to go.*

But ... something makes her not want to admit it.

“Oh, no, I’m fine here. This place is ... gorgeous. I’m pretty sure I saw a tabloid piece and Jennifer Aniston was eating here a few weeks ago. This is a dream!” she says, and any other man would pat himself on the back for a job well done.

But my job is to read people.

To know the true words they’re saying beneath the ones they think I want to hear.

To interpret the signs until I find the truth.

“You want to be there.”

“No,” she says quickly. “It’s childish and stupid. I know. I’m happy to be here. It’s just an embarrassing tradition.” There’s something in her face that makes me wonder if

someone else once told her that. Told her that her charming tradition with her friends is childish, is embarrassing. That it is something she should be ashamed of.

“Come on,” I say, standing and putting a hand out to her.

“What?”

“Come on,” I repeat. She stares at my hand, confused. I look at my watch. “Come on, Abigail. They have my card on file; they’ll bill me. Let’s go.” It’s seven, and most main acts will start around 8. We’ve got time, but we also have to get across town.

Slowly, she lifts her hand.

“I don’t understand ...” I grab her hand, tugging until she stands, moving her straight into my arms.

“I have season box tickets at MSG. Call your girls. Tell them to go out front. We’ll meet them, walk them to my box.” Her face is adorably confused. “I’m taking you to see your concert, *rubia*.”

A slow, small smile crawls across her face. It’s the kind of smile I think she’s fighting, like she doesn’t want it to show, like she’s nervous that this might be a trick.

I think it’s then I know I’ll do whatever it takes to make this woman happy, to see that unbridled joy in her face.

“Really, Damien, we don’t have to. It’s childish”

“What brings joy should never be embarrassing,” I say and stare at her. Her face melts into a look I can’t quite understand for once. She waits for a beat, staring at me and moving closer until I can feel her body heat on me.

“What brings you joy, Damien?” she asks, her voice low and soft.

“Right now? It’s standing right in front of me.” She looks at me, awed and slightly confused, but fuck if I don’t love that look on her face.

That look tells me I might just be the first man in her life to put her first.

And we might not be serious, we might just be fun, but every moment I spend with Abigail Keller makes me wonder *why*.

Two women are standing at the box office of Madison Square Garden when we walk in, and they start screaming and jumping.

They're both decked out in what looks like homemade shirts celebrating their love for the lead singer of a band I sort of remember being big when I was in college, but Abbie must have been in middle school when they blew up.

A bit shocking to think of our age difference from that angle, but I choose not to dwell on it.

But the outfits are less surprising than what happens next.

Abbie unhooks her hand from my arm, starts shouting, and *runs* to her friends, where the three of them all start laughing and jumping and hugging.

It's a sight to be seen, with a few ushers looking on with amusement.

I'd let it go on, see just how long it goes on, because there does not seem to be an end in sight, but as she jumps in those unbearably high, unbearably sexy pink shoes, the tight dress she's wearing slowly rides up her curves, and the eyes of the ushers are watching the fabric move as well.

Nope. No way.

I walk over, eyes not on my girl but on the usher closest, and put my hand on her hip. I maintain eye contact with the kid as I move two fingers under the fabric, pinching it and pulling it down.

The kid's eyes shoot to mine in panic, and I just stare, a strange, unhealthy obsession and jealousy coursing through my veins. *This is not my style.*

But with the move, Abbie stops jumping, a shiver running through her. Her head moves up and over to look at me with wide eyes.

And through her excitement and surprise, there's the slow-burning ember of desire.

I just smile, press my lips to her temple, and whisper in her hair, "Later. You almost showed your ass to everyone in this room, and that's just for me." I watch with fascination as her pink lipsticked lips curve into a smile and rub together, a look I've seen a few times and that I'm quickly learning is her *I'm turned the fuck on* look.

"You're Damien," the woman I haven't met yet says, and I turn my face from Abbie, smiling quickly at Kat, and moving to who I can assume is Cami.

"You must be Cami," I say, putting a hand out to shake.

She doesn't take it, instead raising an eyebrow at me.

"You can call me Camile," she says.

"Cami!" Kat says, slapping her friend on the arm.

"Cam!" Abigail says with an annoyed voice.

I just laugh.

"Camile, it is."

"Stop being a bitch, Cam, or you can go back to your plebeian seats while Abbie, Damien, and I all go to his fancy box seats." Cami rolls her eyes at Kat, but it's all fun. It's easy to see these three are less like friends and more like sisters.

"I'll play nice," she says with a hand to her hair, brushing it behind her shoulder with a femme fatale level of attitude before putting a hand to her hip. "Let's get to these fancy seats before the main act starts." I nod with a smile then move to the box office, giving the employee my credentials. Once all situated, the usher I glared at leads us up some stairs, his eyes purposefully locked to me and not deviating to look at any of the women.

Good, I think like a total psycho.

Who the fuck am I?

“This is *amazing!*” Kat says, walking in a circle in the box, a small table in the back with snacks and drinks and comfy seats toward the balcony. The view of the stage is impeccable, as always.

“Shut *up!* Champagne!” Cam says, walking toward the drinks. I just smile and put my hands in my pockets, watching Abigail take in the box.

I refuse to look too far into why I want her to be impressed, why I want her to enjoy this. She looks around then her eyes stop on mine. Her feet lead her to me, and her hands run up my chest, moving until they’re clasped behind my neck.

“This is amazing, Damien,” she says, the words low, and in the roar of the venue, they shouldn’t be audible, but they still reach my ears.

“Are you happy?” I ask, taking a hand and moving a lock of hair behind her ear before setting both hands on her waist.

I love seeing her with me, her height contrasted to mine, the pale of her skin against the dark of mine.

The perfect polar opposite.

“Beyond,” she says with a smile, but it fades, concern and anxiousness moving over her face. “Not that I wasn’t happy before, I swear. I was having a blast, I just—”

I laugh and press my lips to hers to keep her quiet. When I pull away, I don’t miss the dazed look she seems to get every time I kiss her.

“All good, *rubia*. Nothing to explain. You wanted to do this with your friends. Now you are.” I pause, thinking about the high as hell delicate shoes that I can’t wait to fuck her in later. “And you got to keep the sexy shoes.”

“They are pretty,” she says with a wistful sound in her voice. She kicks her foot out, and we both look at them.

“They’re very you. Very sexy. Very pink,” I say. She scrunches her nose at my words.

“Pink is very me?”

“Yes?” I say, confused. She is pink. If there was a person who personified a color, it would be Abigail and the color pink.

“Pink isn’t very ... serious,” she says, and in a way I’ve seen a few times since we met, her eyes go off, somewhere distant. She’s not here with me but somewhere else. With *someone* else.

“Serious?” I ask, and before she can answer, Cami, who must have supersonic hearing, says from a few feet away, two champagne flutes in her hands.

“Her ex was an asshole and told her that when she wore pink, she wasn’t serious enough to be seen with.”

“Cam!” Abigail says, stepping back and snatching the spare glass from her hand. “Can we not dump all of my relationship trauma on the man who is letting us spend the night in his fancy Madison Square Garden box seats?! Jesus!”

I want to smile at her embarrassment, but an anger of my own is brewing.

“Your ex didn’t let you wear pink?” I ask, confused.

“Nope!” Kat says, popping the “p” in the word. Abigail glares at her other friend.

“They’re exaggerating. He didn’t *not* let me. It just ... wasn’t his favorite,” she says, but little white teeth move out to bite her bottom lip.

“Sounds like an asshole,” I say then pull her back into me with an arm around her shoulder. I grab the champagne flute, take a sip, and hand it back with a smile. “You wear pink when you’re with me, yeah?” I say, my words stern but with a smile on my lips.

She looks up at me with wide, shocked eyes, and somehow, I know this is important to her. An important moment.

Across the room, I hear Kat breathe out an “ohmigod,” but I’m focused on Abigail, whose eyes are wide still. “Yeah,

rubia?” I ask, my voice lower.

“Yeah, Damien,” she says with the smallest, self-conscious smile as the lights in the arena drop and fans scream.

But I don’t miss the way her face lit up for just a millisecond before that.

SEVENTEEN

November 18

-Damien-

On the drive back to my place, she's still smiling and giggling, bringing up moments she thought were funny or cool or impressive during the concert and replaying them to me like I wasn't by her side the whole time.

I love it.

"Why aren't you like that all the time?" I ask with a smile when she stops talking. Her face turns to me. Headlights of cars in oncoming traffic flicker across her smile, and her eyes are soft.

Uncaring.

It's beautiful.

"Like what?" she asks, confused.

"Free. Happy," I say, clarifying.

"You mean loud and obnoxious?" she asks with a self-deprecating laugh. We're at a well-timed red light, and I turn to her, confused.

"No. Happy. Like you're enjoying life." She sighs and turns her head, looking out the window and away from me.

"Tonight was a blast, Damien. Really. I haven't had this much fun in ... god. I don't know." She's changing the subject, embarrassed or hiding something. I don't like it. I reach over, grabbing her chin to make her look over at me.

“Hey. Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Change the subject. Why aren’t you like that all the time?”

“I’m always me,” she lies, and I can see it in her eyes.

“Well, why isn’t the normal you that happy, carefree version?” She doesn’t respond. “The version of you being goofy with your friends is not the version that was at a fancy restaurant with me just hours ago. Why?” Her nose scrunches at my words.

“It’s not ... ladylike,” she says with a sigh.

“What?”

“Guys. They don’t ... People ... don’t ...” The light turns green and I drive, giving her the space she needs to feel comfortable answering without my eyes on her. “That version isn’t serious enough. It’s isn’t ... proper. I’m almost thirty. People stop thinking bubblegum pink and sparkles and smiles are cute once you’re past 21.”

“Are you bubblegum pink?” I ask with a smile. I’ve seen hints of it, but not genuine evidence. Another sigh. The light turns green, and I move my hand back to the wheel.

“I used to be.” Her face moves back to the window, avoiding my eye.

“Used to be?” This is about the ex. I know it without asking. This is what Cam was talking about.

“God, are you a therapist tonight?” she asks with a laugh, but it’s not the irritated noise I half expected. Another sigh, and then she answers. “I used to be, but a few years ago, I started to ... change. I have an ex, and I did not fit his idea of the perfect woman. He wanted me more ... conservative. Mellow. I’ve been pink and sparkles and smiles since I was a kid. It was a coping mechanism, to an extent. My childhood ... It wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows, but my sister liked pink, and I loved my sister, so I made life pink and sunshine and rainbows. I figured pushing that part of me aside was part of

growing up.” Her eyes are still looking out the window like she’s traveling back to a different time, different conversations. My hand moves to her thigh, and her hand instinctively covers it, linking her tiny fingers with mine. “But I think I was wrong. It’s not normal to change that way.” I want to say something.

Every molecule of my body is begging me to. But I don’t. I wait for her response, giving her the space to speak.

“I changed. I started dressing differently and doing different things and ... God, this is so embarrassing,” she says with a laugh. “I even dyed my hair brown to try to fit in.” I quickly glance over at her, and she’s staring back at me with a small smile. “It was dumb.”

“What happened?”

“I ... Things didn’t work out.”

“He broke up with you?”

“You can say that. I was told that even after dating for years, even though he was it in my mind, I was basically just ... a placeholder for him. I was a fun time.” Irrational anger runs through me. “It’s fine. I ... got mine,” she says with a small smile that I am pretty sure means more than with words or by moving on.

“Good. I hope it hurt,” I say, and I mean it. Anyone who made this gorgeous woman question herself deserves to burn.

“Anyway. I know the silliness is ... childish. But I’m getting really tired of hiding it. I don’t think I’ll grow out of it anytime soon, so ...” There’s a slight shrug of her shoulders. “It’s just a part of me I’m learning to love again.”

“I like it a fuck of a lot,” I say, turning into the parking garage of my apartment. Her face swings to mine, confused.

“You don’t have to say that, I promise.”

“I don’t just say things to make people feel good about themselves, Abigail. There’s no need for me to. I’m saying it because it’s true. I like the bubblegum pink happiness. I hope you show me more of it.”

She's staring at me still as I navigate the car to my spot, backing in with precision based on months of doing the same thing daily. After I put the car into park and hit the ignition, the car goes silent. I turn to her before I press the button on her seatbelt and put a hand on the back of her neck, pulling her into me. Her lips press to mine and at first, she's shocked, confused even. But it doesn't take longer than a second for her body to melt, for her arm to move and rest on my cheek.

"Come on. We're here. Let me go show you just how much I fucking love that side of you." My voice is already husky from the one small kiss. It's been too long since we were alone in my apartment together.

She smiles a small smile, but her eyes are glazed, in another universe.

"Okay," she says in a whisper, and I can only smile as she sits back in her chair.

EIGHTEEN

November 18

-Abbie-

“I didn’t get around to asking—how was your day? Any good cases on the docket?” I ask Damien, running my fingers through his dark hair. It’s long but still appropriate for a lawyer when it’s combed back. But my hands kind of messed that up when he was eating me ... My belly flips with the memory, and I’m pretty sure he knows it based on the look he gives me.

He seems to read me better than anyone ever has, something that both terrifies and comforts me.

Even so, he sighs a bone-deep sigh.

“It was ... fine. I’ve got a new case that I’m on, and an associate is helping me with it. So I basically spent the entire day in a conference room with this douche, reminding him I’ve been practicing longer than he’s been driving a car.” I laugh out loud, and he smiles.

“You don’t like him? You’re the founder, right? Why not get rid of him?” Damien sighs then runs a hand through my hair, letting it flow down my naked back. He always seems so enamored by my hair, touching it and watching it spill.

“Unfortunately, he’s my cofounder’s grandson.”

“Oh,” I say, my gut sinking because I’m naked in a bed with a man talking about my ex, and he doesn’t know it. Thankfully, Damien doesn’t pick up on the sinking feeling.

“Anyway, I like to spend my days picking at him because he spends his days half hating me, half kissing my ass. It’s an interesting balance.” I give him a smile, and then he laughs. “Oh, you’ll love this. Remember, I told you he dumped that poor girl and she put his number on some fan site? I never told you, but a few weeks ago, he showed up to work *covered* in glitter. She put it in the vents of his car, and it exploded when he turned the heat on.”

I smile big, loving the mental image and confirmation that things went according to plan. “I still see some on his clothes sometimes. I don’t know if it’s just stuck in his vents still or if it’s embedded in everything, but every time I see it, I laugh.” He smiles, and at least I know he’s getting some small thrill from this, too. “Oh, and while we were in the conference room, his cell phone kept ringing. I guess after she listed his number on that site, she taped his cell number to a bunch of keys or something? So for a week, he’s been getting calls from people saying they found his keys. By the end of the day, he was just picking up and hanging up.”

“Stop, really? That’s so funny,” I say. I’m half excited that I get firsthand knowledge that our plan is working, but still, my stomach is churning. “Did anyone say anything?” I ask, hoping it wasn’t too much of a distraction.

“No, the office was pretty empty today with Thanksgiving coming. A few people take off or work shorter hours this week and next week.” I take the change of subject like the lifeline it is.

“I can’t believe Thanksgiving is next week,” I say in a tired growl. “Where has the month gone?” It feels like I was perfectly placing bunny ears on my head just yesterday to walk out the door to that party. Jeeze.

This week, Cam and I crossed off a few more of our petty tasks on the list. The tailor that typically does all the work on any new suits Richard has called on Wednesday, clearly not up to speed about the breakup. I wonder if Richard even knew that I was the person who handled that or if he just assumed it was magically done each time perfectly. He asked if the measurements were still the same, and I instructed him to

remove an additional half inch from the pants. Not enough to not fit, but enough to make Richard think he was gaining weight.

It's interesting how handling these calls without the guise of being his girlfriend definitely feels very personal assistant and less beloved partner.

How was I so stupid for so long?

“What are your plans?” Damien asks, knocking me out of memories.

“What?” I can't quite remember what we were talking about. Exhaustion from a long, exciting night is creeping in alongside my depressing thoughts.

“For Thanksgiving? What are you doing? Do you do anything?” His fingers draw patterns on my skin, making pleasant chills run through my body.

“I'm going home. Well, I'm heading back to my hometown.”

“Oh yeah? Your parents?” My nose scrunches in a “no” way.

“No. My sister. I don't ... have parents.” I pause in the way anyone who has to explain a lack of parents does. “Well, I do. They're not dead, I don't think. But I don't ... talk to them.”

“But you have a sister?” he asks, completely bypassing the awkward conversation of my parents, for which I am thankful.

“Yes, I do,” I say, a big smile on my face because there are few things or people I love more in this world than my big sister. “She pretty much raised me. She's ... She's amazing.” His white smile can still be seen in the moonlight,

“And you're going to her place for Thanksgiving? Just you two or ...”

“Oh, god, no. A million and seven people. She's a nanny, and she married the kids' uncle, so she basically inherited an enormous family. Nieces and a new baby nephew and Ron—that's my brother-in-law's dad.” I sigh. “Plus, friends. My

hometown is small but close-knit. So basically, it's one huge Friendsgiving Thanksgiving."

"You're excited," he says with a smile, and I nod.

"Very much so. It's only, like, an hour from here, but I don't see them enough. I don't have a car, so it's kind of an ordeal getting there regularly. I have to be back in Long Island for Black Friday, but it will be worth the trek." I stop, staring at him, realizing my smile is completely taking over my face. I highly doubt it's gleaming in the moonlight like his is. His hand moves, crossing the moonbeam and breaking it temporarily before he moves a lock of hair behind my ear. "What are you doing for Thanksgiving?" I ask, remembering the manners Hannah drilled into me for years. *We might have shitty parents, Abs, but we don't have to be shitty people.*

"Ordering takeout," he says with a laugh.

"What?"

"Nothing going on. My family moved away from the city years ago. My mom hates the cold, just like you." I smile at his habit of remembering everything I tell him. "My parents will be up for Christmas, but until then, it's takeout and the parade on TV for me."

"You live in the city. Why would you watch the parade on TV?"

"Have you ever actually gone to the Macy's Day Parade? It's a madhouse of insane tourists."

"Valid." I pause, smiling at him, the thin gold chain that hides beneath his clothes dangling as he moves up to an arm. "So you're not going anywhere?"

"Nope." I pause, wondering if what I'm about to do is unbearably stupid.

It's so, so stupid.

It goes against every instinct to keep this simple, casual, and uncomplicated.

And it sure as fuck goes against the need to keep my heart and my life from getting involved.

But I do it anyway, partly because I'm an idiot and partly because no one should be alone on Thanksgiving.

"Would you ... want to come home with me?" I ask, the words soft, and instantly I regret them.

This is not very "cool girl keeping things with the older, high-powered lawyer casual" of me.

I backtrack, trying to cover my mishap. "I mean, it's just a thought. Really, so you're not alone because that's just depressing. No pressure, I swear. This is casual. Not serious. I promise. I just ... hate the idea of—" He cuts me off with that smile somehow wider than before.

"If you're offering, I'm there, *rubia*."

"What?"

"I said, if you're offering—if you want me to come, I'll be there." He's smiling in a way he does when I think *he thinks* I'm being cute.

"Oh."

"Unless you don't want me to, then we can—"

"No, no, I do!" I say quickly. *Too quickly*. "Shit, not like that. I just mean I want you to if you want to. Not in an "I want you to meet my family way," but in a come enjoy the holiday with good people way." There's another big smile before he's moving, shifting to roll me on top of him. "They are. Good people, I mean." *God, shut up, Abbie!* His hand goes into my hair at the nape of my neck, and he softly presses his lips to mine.

"I know what you mean, Abigail. If you're offering, I'm accepting." Then he kisses me again; the heat that only seems to come when his lips are on mine takes over my body and fills me with unadulterated joy.

Shit.

I am so fucked.

When I come up for air, he's smiling at me but breathing just as heavily as I am.

“So you want to come home with me?” I ask, moving hair from his forehead.

“Only if you come to dinner with my family after Christmas,” he says in rebuttal.

With his words, my gut drops. By then, he’ll probably think I’m a manipulative piece of crap, my mind tells me.

But why would he? the devil to the angel on my shoulder asks. *This is casual, simple, and he agreed to that.* Strange how the devil has a striking resemblance to Cami while the angel looks like Kat ...

Is it still feeling simple and casual? the voice in my head asks, continuing the conversation with Angel Kat and Devil Cam.

“You don’t have to do that,” is all I can say in response.

“Are you bringing me home?” He twists a lock of blond hair hanging next to his face and tucks it behind my ear.

“If you want to, but it’s not a big deal.”

“It is, Abigail.” His words ricochet around me, broken shards of reality meeting the crumbling landscape of my revenge plan.

The plan that requires this to stay casual in order to avoid my being a terrible, horrible human being.

And for me to have the guts to actually finish this plan.

Shit, shit, shit.

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.” I don’t ask him to elaborate, to tell me what exactly what “oh” means. Maybe if we don’t say the words out loud, if we don’t say that this is quickly moving past casual and fun, it won’t matter.

“So?” he asks, staring at me. The moon shows the gold flecks in his brown eyes perfectly like this, and I think I could stare at them for hours, slowly documenting the slight differences in shade, shape, and frequency. “If I go home with

you for Thanksgiving, will you go to Christmas with my family?"

I stare at him, reminding myself of all the millions of reasons I should say no. The reason I should confess everything right this second and face the firing squad to go back to start on my plan, but this time, not drag a victimless man into it.

But I can't.

And it's not because I want to finish this plan. Shit, the plan matters less and less with each passing day.

It's because he's looking at me with boyish expectancy, excitement even, and on serious, all business Damien, it's so fucking sweet.

So I agree.

Like the idiot I clearly am.

"Yeah, Damien, I'd like that." And with that, his smile lights up the room, and I decide that for the purpose of witnessing that moment alone, it was the right answer.

"She'll like you," he says, the smile fading, his face becoming more contemplative.

"Your mom?"

"Yeah. She'll like you." I smile big at him and let the playful, bubbly part of me I hid for years come out.

"I'm very likable." My smile must be contagious because it travels to his own lips.

"You definitely are." He leans forward, pressing his lips to mine. "You were good with Sharon," he says in what feels like a change of subject.

"She reminds me of what my mom could have been, but also my sister. She's easy to get along with." I breathe in, feeling the pull to open up, to explain. "My dad left my mom when I was born—too much responsibility, two kids, and a wife. She resented us for it because she *lived* for my dad. She lived and breathed him, and when he tossed her aside, she

didn't know how to handle that." I stop, thinking about how to continue on but also remembering the epiphany I had with Sharon. That I was moving down a path with Richard to repeat history. A family history of living for a man who didn't give two shits about me.

"Hannah, my sister—she resents her for that. Which is reasonable, I think. Hannah had to basically raise me. Mom was rarely home and just ... not great when she was. But me? I get it, to a degree. She lost herself to a man and never got that part back. I ... I get that. Sharon was able to untangle herself in order to be strong for her girls. That's admirable." My nails trace invisible lines on Damien's thick bicep as I try to avoid the look of pity always there when I talk about my family to someone new.

"It is," he says, and I stupidly hope that's where he'll leave it. But this is Damien, after all. "Did you? Lose yourself in a man?" he asks and shit. But, of course, he knows.

I answer.

I answer honestly because it's all I have right now, scattered shreds and shards of honesty that I'm trying to piece together. I purse my lips, moving them side to side as I try to decide how to put it.

"I did. I lost myself for four years. Long years where I worked really fucking hard to change things about myself to keep a man who didn't want me. I'm ... slowly being reminded who I am after that."

"My mom will like you," he says, and that's a ... strange, confident response to what I just laid on him.

"What, that I lost myself in a man who wasn't her son?" I ask with a laugh because the thought of that alone sounds absolutely insane.

"No. That you can sit there, bubbly and gorgeous and open and kind, and tell me your story about your family and your ex and about finding yourself, and you still have that smile on your face. You still radiate fucking joy." I twitch my nose, uncomfortable with the words. "That you can meet a woman,

hear her story, convince her to open up to you, and let her leave your presence feeling and looking ten times better with the confidence to face a man who verbally, financially, and physically abused her for years.” I swallow, feeling uncomfortable with this sort of praise.

“My mom left my father ten years ago.” I furrow my brows because he’s never mentioned his parents were divorced. “She was 53 but realized she had spent 32 years changing herself to be what my father wanted her to be. She spent 32 years being the perfect mother and wife, keeping the perfect home, cooking and cleaning and balancing the checkbooks ... all of it.”

My breath stops in my lungs.

“We weren’t wealthy growing up, but my dad made enough that she could stay home. She lost herself in that. In the need to balance the scales, she told me. He worked, so she had to do the rest. But once I moved away, she started working too, a job at a tailor that kept her busy. My dad worked at a bank, so they kept similar hours and similar physical demands. And it took another ten years after I had moved out and she was working alongside my father to realize that even then when they were equals, she felt the need to do everything. The cooking and cleaning and keeping the house while he relaxed. And he let her. He *insisted*, even. They’d gotten into such a habit over the years, that it was just ... who they were.”

I can see it.

I can see how that would happen, how it could have happened to me.

“My mom left him for a year.” I widen my eyes.

“A year?”

“It only took a year for my dad to win her back,” he says with a smile.

“Oh, was it the Martinez male charm that won her?” I ask, returning the look. He rolls until he’s hovering over me, chasing me the way I’m learning to love.

“Oh, yeah. It was also a lot of groveling. I may have had some words with him too, helped him realize what an idiot he was.”

“You’re a good son,” I say, my hands moving to touch his cheek, just barely rough with stubble.

“Yeah, well. Right now, I’d like to stop talking about my parents,” he says, and I smile bigger.

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“Right now, I have my dream woman pinned beneath and fully naked, and I’ve had enough time to recover.”

“Yeah, it must be hard, being an old man and needing so much recovery time,” I say, and god, the smile is nearly breaking my face.

“Excuse me, little girl?” he asks, his thick eyebrow raised in challenge.

“Just, you know. You’re a full 14 years older than me. It must be hard, keeping up.”

“Oh, I’ll show you how hard it is,” he says in a growl, nipping the skin on my neck before moving down.

And he does show me how well he can keep up.

And by the end of the night, I’m the one waving my exhausted white flag.

NINETEEN

November 25

-Abbie-

Richard never had any interest in meeting my sister or the people I call family back home. That is, not until I told him my sister was marrying the outdoor entertainment tycoon Hunter Hutchins. Then he magically had an interest in my family and who I could link him with.

When Hunter and Hannah came to the city, we made plans for an entire day of fun—I remember it was the first time since I had settled in Long Island where I invited Hannah to hang with me in the city, and I couldn't wait to spend the day with her and her fiancé.

I'd planned a day of sightseeing, chaos, and lots of good junk food—I remember telling Richard this the night before, giving him the itinerary, and he said something along the lines of, "This is Hunter Hutchins, Abbie, not some tourist from your hometown. We should do something big, impress him."

That should have been the seventeen-hundredth red flag. I actually remember for a split second thinking maybe I was wrong—that he wasn't the one, that we were just too different.

But that split second didn't last longer than a breath.

What a shame.

That day, we ran around the city, my sister and I giggling and laughing and enjoying life the way we do when we're

together, and I watched from afar as Richard tried to schmooze Hunter.

It didn't work.

The thing is, there is not a single thing on this planet that Hunter loves more than my sister. It's been that way since they met, no matter how rocky their beginning was. That man would sell his company and move to a tiny cabin in the woods if he thought it would make Hannah happy.

What he won't do is let some arrogant asshole try to downplay the happiness and fun we were having, which is exactly what Richard had tried to do.

By 2 pm, Richard had realized Hunter was not his biggest fan, and after that, he lost any and all interest in what ties my family might be able to give him.

And he never *ever* went to Springbrook Hills with me for a holiday, always leaving for his family's house in Aspen or the Hamptons and sending me a measly "Merry Christmas" text on the 25th.

God, how had I been so fucking stupid?

"Okay, so we're heading there tomorrow?" Damien asks over the phone on Tuesday night, breaking me out of memories that hold a bitter taste.

He's coming home with me to Springbrook Hills.

To meet my family.

The mix of panic and excitement every time I think about that is ... confusing, at best. Exciting because Damien is *good*. And my family is *great*. And no one should be alone for Thanksgiving.

Except, maybe Richard.

I might find a fraction of joy in the idea of him being alone for Thanksgiving. He definitely deserves to be alone on each and every holiday.

But I'm also drenched in panic because this is supposed to be about getting revenge on Richard. The final nail in the

proverbial coffin that is my path to closure. This relationship is supposed to be easy, nothing serious. Damien said that from the get-go. He was clear with that single expectation.

And now he's coming home with me.

And everything between us is feeling less and less simple and easygoing with each day.

Fuck.

“Yup! We can meet at Grand Central at four if that works for you. I get out at two, and should be able to get there—”

“What?” he asks, cutting me off. I pause, confused.

“I'm sorry, I thought I told you. I have work tomorrow morning, so I'm not headed home until the afternoon. I have to set up for Black Friday. Retail and all.” I'm working early tomorrow, mostly in the stockroom, setting up Black Friday displays that will be wheeled out by the afternoon crew right after close, so on Friday, when we get there at an ungodly hour, everything is ready for the chaos.

“I'm not meeting you at the train station,” he states firmly.

I am so stupid.

Of course. A high-powered man like Damien wouldn't take a train, much less on someone else's schedule. I should have thought of that.

“Oh. I can give you the address if you want. You can even come over Thursday morning if you have something to do—”

“I'll drive.”

“Okay, cool,” I say, a small rock tumbling in my belly. I'm not sure why this bothers me or, even more, why it surprises me. The first and only time I took Richard home, he did the same. I took the train, and he drove over the next day for Rosie's birthday party, stayed for a few hours, and headed out on his own time.

The reality is when you're dating busy, high-profile men, you should be happy when they take any portion of their time out to be with you. It's something I had taught myself to

understand, and the few times I had conversations with the wives of Richard's equally important and wealthy friends, they echoed the sentiment.

When time is money, any spent on you should be an honor.

Except ... that's not how it is with Hunter.

Hunter has never once treated Hannah like she comes second to *anything*.

But I guess they're the outlier.

Regardless, I'm happy that this is a phone conversation and not face-to-face. This man can read my body language in a way no one ever has been able to.

I guess that's why he's a successful lawyer.

Richard couldn't read my face to save his life, if that doesn't tell you about his skills as a lawyer.

"What time should I pick you up?"

"What?"

"From your place. You get out at two? Should I be at your place by three, or do you need extra time?" Now he's lost me.

"I don't ... I don't understand."

"I'm driving."

"Yes ... ," I say, my words slow.

"I'll pick you up."

"What?"

"I'm driving you to your sister's after you get out of work." My world spins on its axis for a single moment as his words circle my brain like stars around a cartoon character who just had a brick dropped on their head. "When should I pick you up?" I'm still silent on the other end, still confused. "Abigail?"

"You don't have to do that," I say, my voice low.

"Do what?"

"Pick me up. Drive me. I can take the train."

“We’re going to the same place, *rubia*.”

“Or, you know, we can both take the train,” I suggest.

“Why would I do that?”

“So you can ... work? Get work done?”

“I’m not going to be working on the way there.”

This is a shock.

“I’m not working on a holiday, Abigail,” he says, his voice low, like he’s reassuring a child.

I can’t remember a time when Richard wasn’t telling me he didn’t have time for something because of work. How many nights did we spend together, me watching *The Bachelorette* or some other silly show alone while he worked in another room?

Richard ignoring me while I told him a story because he was staring at his phone, answering work emails.

Or maybe just ignoring me.

“You don’t ... have work to do?”

“I’m a lawyer. I always have work to do. But I’m still driving.”

“But ...”

“*Rubia*, we’re going away for a holiday. I’m not working on Thanksgiving. I don’t work on holidays.” There’s a pause, and then he corrects himself. “And I sure as hell don’t work when I’m with you.”

“Oh.” I don’t know how to respond, but Damien stays quiet like he’s waiting for me to answer, to say more. To explain, maybe.

Silence. I don’t speak.

I don’t know what to say.

“Is this more shit with your ex?” he asks.

More silence, not wanting to confirm his assumption.

“Fuck, this guy was a piece of work, wasn’t he?”

“He was a busy man.”

“Busy man or not, you drive your woman places. You don’t meet her there.”

I don’t touch on the *your woman* part because I don’t think I would want to know the answer to that question I have.

If I’m his woman, deceiving him is wrong.

If we’re fun and simple and just spending time together, deceiving him is fine.

That’s the line I’ve drawn in my mind.

My eyes meet the jar sitting on my counter with all the shitty things Richard did and said, the moments in time I’m using to keep myself strong.

Maybe I should pack it and bring it to Hannah’s, just in case.

“You good, babe?” he asks, and the words are too casual, so simple, so *normal* they take me off guard.

I forget that we’re easy.

I forget that we’re not serious.

I forget that *I’m* not serious.

“Yeah, honey,” I say. “Means a lot, you driving me, is all.”

“You’re starting to mean a lot to me, Abigail,” he says, and because I’ve shelved the smart part of me temporarily, I just smile to myself.

“Yeah, Damien.”

TWENTY

November 26

-Abbie-

“So you have two options—our guest room, which, you know, you’re totally welcome here, but the girls are spending the night to have cinnamon rolls in the morning, so it’s going to be chaos,” Hannah says later the next night over a menagerie of Chinese food containers. It’s a tradition—after a long day of prepping and cooking, we get takeout. “Or you can stay in the cottage.”

“The cottage?” Damien asks.

“No one’s staying there right now?” I ask, confused. Over the years, it’s housed Hannah and Jordan, and part of me assumed once Jordan left, someone else moved in.

“Nope, Aut’s been keeping it empty for girls’ nights, mostly.”

“No offense, but we’ll stay in the cottage,” I say with a smile. I turn to Damien. “It’s a tiny house behind Autumn and Steve’s house. Hannah lived there for years while nannying before Hunter bought this place, then Hunter’s half-sister, Jordan, lived there for a bit.”

“Now we mostly get drunk and avoid responsibilities there,” Autumn says with a laugh.

“You mind driving a few blocks tonight?” I ask, looking at Damien whose eyes have been on me for most of the night, watching me interact with my family and chosen family.

“Trust me, you’re gonna want to stay there. It’s gonna be a shit show here, stupid early,” Hunter tells his friend, and something about my sister’s husband being friends with Damien warms me. Damien laughs and smiles at me.

“Probably for the best, yeah?” he asks, and I nod.

“It’s tiny and cramped. Not very luxurious.”

“I grew up in a tiny apartment in the Bronx, babe. I think I can handle it.” This small crumb of his childhood makes me want to know more—everything, really. I also find it interesting that the farther we get from the city, from his work, from his colleagues, the more that thick New York accent comes out. I freaking love it.

“Got it,” I say with a smile. “Cottage it is.”

“So this is it,” I say, walking into the tiny cottage behind Autumn and Steve’s house where my sister used to live. “Wow, nothing has changed,” I say, mostly to myself, noting the girly pink decor, the floral wallpaper in the bedroom, and the pink blanket on the couch.

“You sure you never lived here?” he asks with a smile, looking around. “It’s like a little dollhouse, tiny and pink.”

“When I was a kid, my sister was my idol. I wanted to be her,” I say, tossing my bag onto the couch and digging in it. I’m exhausted, and somewhere buried in here are my cozy pajamas. “Anything she liked, I liked times a million and made it my entire personality.” My hand hits the pink pajamas, and I whip them out with a triumphant smile. “Hence pink,” I say, smiling at him.

“Ah, got it. How about going for a former player in New York?” he asks, and a chill runs down my spine. He moves, coming closer until I’m forced to stand straight, wrap my arms around his neck, and touch my nose to his. His breath plays along my lips.

“*Former* player?” I ask, the words barely audible, but he hears them.

Of course he does.

He’s Damien.

I’m learning that when it comes to me, he’s always at full attention.

“Thinking of changing my ways. Settling down.” His lips press to mine gently as my heart pounds in my chest. “Why bother, you know? Found a fucking perfect one. Why mess with that?”

It’s then, I know.

I fucked up.

I fucked up because this is *good*. This is *more*. This has *potential*.

And I ruined that potential by starting it off on a bed of deceit and revenge.

“Damien, I—”

“Serious talk for another day, *rubia*,” he says, walking toward me, his voice low. His hands move to my hips, pulling me in close to him. “We’ll talk about us and feelings and confessions another day. For now, why don’t you put those pajamas to the side? You’re not going to need them.” His hands move to the pajamas in my hand, tossing them to the side before he’s lifting me, urging me to wrap my legs around his waist, and having me direct him to the bedroom.

And who am I to argue?

He tosses me onto the pink bed with a canopy overtop, and I giggle as I land, but his face is anything but joking.

Instead of the normal feral hunger in his eyes, though, there’s a softness there.

A softness I'm scared to see because every moment with him is building to something more. Something more that I'm finding it harder each day to ignore exists. And when I stop ignoring that, I'll start to see the truth beyond what's in front of me: that Damien and I are becoming more than just fun, that things are moving in a more serious direction, and this plan of mine might be wrong.

But as is his way, Damien's next words wipe any serious thoughts from my mind.

"Undress. I want to watch," he says, and I bite my lip, suddenly nervous, but acquiesce all the same, wiggling out of my leggings and taking my underwear with them. Then I lift my sweater and unclasp my bra until what I was wearing is just a pile of fabric at the side of the bed. "Lie back on the pillows for me," he says, eyes devouring my body.

I obey, as seems to be my way these days.

"Legs wide, Abigail." I spread them, sitting up in the bed just a bit as I do, my heart racing. "Farther." A low groan leaves my lips as he says it, and I spread my legs just a hair wider, until it's almost uncomfortable. "There she is." The words are to himself, almost in awe as his eyes zero in on my wet center. A hand moves up and I play with my nipple, completely lost to the world.

"Hands to your pussy, baby. I want to see all of you." He's lifting his shirt over his head, tossing it to the pile, and my eyes roam his body, clad only in boxers now. *When did he take off his pants?*

There's no time to overthink as my hands move to my thighs, sliding up and using a finger on each hand to spread myself open, to reveal myself to him. "God, so fucking pretty, baby. I've been thinking about this since the night on the phone." My breathing quickens as I watch him lower his underwear, still standing at the side of the bed. "Show me what you do when I'm not around to take care of you."

This is new, something I've never done before—touch myself for a man. I should probably be self-conscious about it, nervous.

But I'm not. Without my permission, my hand is moving, a finger dipping in and then dragging up the quickly pooling wet, circling my clit with it as I let out a slow moan.

"Fucking beautiful," he says, again to himself, watching the show I'm putting on for him. I repeat the journey, dipping down, dragging up, circling my clit. Then I repeat circling my clit, pressing harder and dragging a moan from my lips. "Fingers. In. Two." Damien's words are sharp, quick like he can't use full sentences, but then I see his own hand is wrapped around his thick cock, slowly pumping.

Another unavoidable moan of his name falls from my lips and I watch his own tip up.

"You like watching that, *rubia*?" he asks, pumping again, my eyes stuck there, watching pre-cum pool at the head. "Fingers, Abigail. Inside, fuck yourself." Like the obedient woman I didn't realize I was, I do as he asks, taking two fingers and sliding them inside of me. I'm so wet, they glide easily, and I groan at being filled, at the tapping of the ache already growing in my belly.

"That's it. Just think about how full you'll be when it's my cock." His eyes are locked to where my fingers are disappearing, where my hips are bucking, his own hand speeding just a fraction. "Such a good little whore, my baby is. Do you like being on display for me?" My fingers move faster, more frantically as his hand follows suit, and a desperate sound leaves my lips.

"Stop," he says, and I mewl in protest but obey, moving to remove my fingers. "Leave them." I keep my fingers planted inside of me, throbbing around them as I watch him crawl up the bed. His hand moves to my wrist, tugging until my fingers leave my pussy, and then he guides them in front of his face. One finger disappears in his mouth as his eyes lock to mine, sucking and cleaning the finger as he does before taking it back out. Then the hand holding my wrist moves, pushing the hand to my own mouth.

"Open." I do, and the finger he didn't clean enters my mouth, the musky sweet taste taking over my senses. His eyes

stay on mine as he gives me my next instructions. “Clean those for me, baby.” As he lets go of my wrist, I do as he asks. He moves to between my legs and then tugs my hips down, positioning me where he wants me as he watches me suck. “Good job, Abigail,” he says, and I clench again at his praise.

He’s on his knees before me, staring down at me as he takes a pillow, moving it to under my hips. My blood races in my veins at the new position, the air unable to get fully into my lungs as I await his next move.

But he just sits there on his heels, kneeling in front of me with his cock hard, watching me as I lie there, my needy body on fire.

“Damien,” I whimper, needing something. *Anything.* He just smiles. I move a hand down my body, desperate for some kind of relief, my wet fingers moving to tug at my nipples. A miscalculation on my part because it just sends a pulse directly to my clit, torturing me, my pussy clenching. He chuckles.

The man chuckles at me in my time of need.

“God, so desperate for my cock, aren’t you?” he asks then moves until his hips line up with my lifted ones. “So desperate for the only person who can give you relief.” I moan miserably, trying to shift my hips to get him inside, to get friction, to get ... anything.

“That’s what you get, Abigail,” he says, his voice tense. “I’ve spent every day for two weeks desperate for you. Dying for your body, needing to be inside of you.” He notches the head and I moan. “Needing this body.”

“Damien, please—”

“This is what you get for turning me into a desperate man,” he says then thrusts in, filling me to the hilt. “This is what you get for consuming my thoughts.” His hands move to my hips as he thrusts again, using the added leverage to somehow get deeper.

“Fuck!” I shout, unable to say anything else, do anything else but clamp down on him and viciously tug my nipples as he fucks me.

“That’s it, baby. You’re so good at taking my cock, aren’t you?” he says, eyes locked to where he’s fucking me mercilessly. “Fucking look at that. Beautiful.” It’s like he’s talking to himself, a monologue about what’s happening, and I’m just along for the ride as he pounds into me, the headboard slamming against the wall with each thrust.

“God, Damien, I need more. I—”

“You’ll get more when I say you do, Abigail,” he says then moves a hand from my hip to my thigh to my knee, looping it around his hips. “Until then, you’re going to take my cock like a good girl, yeah?” I moan in response, my body overloaded with feelings and unbearable pleasure. “Yeah?” he asks again, and it’s clear that he wants a response as he continues to move in me, so fucking deep, each thrust grating against my G-spot at this angle.

“Yes! Yes, Damien!”

“Yes what?” he asks through gritted teeth.

He’s close.

I could probably clamp down, speed the process, and get him where I need him, but where’s the fun in that?

So instead, I answer the way I know my man wants.

“I’ll take your cock like a good girl, baby.” Despite being overwhelmed and the moans ripping through me, I somehow was able to string together the words he needed to hear. A groan of satisfaction comes from Damien.

“Such a good fucking girl,” he says, then one hand moves, a thumb strumming my clit and my body singing in response. “Now come for your man, baby. Scream my name,” he says through gritted teeth.

And with his permission, I do.

Because Damien Martinez owns my body, and what he tells it to do, it does.

“Damien!” I shout, my voice breaking halfway through until I’m convulsing on his cock, mouth open, not a sound leaving as I shatter around him. A hand moves, rounding my

shoulder as leverage to help him get deeper, and I gurgle out another sound of pleasure as the orgasm elevates, taking any shred of sanity I have left.

And then he slams in unbearably deep with a yell, pumping into me as he collapses, murmuring my name into my neck.

“Growing up here must have been fun,” Damien says later that night in the cottage’s darkness. We’ve showered and gotten ready for bed, but I completely forgot how dark it gets out here. Trees line the property and without all the light pollution in the city, all there is is dark skies and bright stars.

“It was. Always someone to hang out with, someone to listen to.” He’s quiet for a moment, and I think he’s done talking, ready for sleep, but then he speaks.

“And your parents?” he asks for the first time since I told him I didn’t really have any. I sigh and answer in the dark’s comfort.

“My dad is off somewhere, on his third or fourth wife. Mom is a few towns over, I think. We don’t talk. Once I was done with school, she was done with us.”

“But you have Hannah.” He says it like a statement, like he’s saying more than just the words.

“Yes. I have Hannah and I’m forever grateful. One day, she’ll give me nieces and nephews that I can cuddle, but until then, I have Autumn’s and Kate’s kids.”

“They’re cute,” he says. “Kate’s kids. Cal’s a blast.” Dean and Kate came for dinner, bringing Cal and baby Jesse, who I loved on just as much as the others.

“The cutest. Kate graduated in my year, so it’s kind of crazy seeing her with Cal. He’s getting so big.” We’re both quiet for another few minutes, Damien running his fingers through my hair in the most soothing motion and us both lost in our thoughts.

Until once again, he breaks the silence.

“Do you want kids?” he asks so quietly, and my body tightens with nerves. I’m unsure of how to respond or if I should just give him an easier, fake answer. Not because I don’t fully believe in the answer I’m about to give, but because society has decided that if you are a woman of childbearing age and not adamant about reproducing, people quickly assume there is something wrong with you.

Still, I sigh before answering.

“No.” His brow furrows.

“No?”

“Nope,” I say, popping the “p” and distracting myself by tracing a path of freckles I can see in a patch of moonlight on his pec with my nail.

“Is ... there a reason?” he asks, and I’ll admit, this is new. Someone rarely asks why before they jump down my throat, telling me how lonely I’ll be when I’m old or how it’s something I’ll regret. How in four or five years, my “clock” will start ticking like I’m some kind of computer program, and I’ll need to scramble to find someone to agree to give me children graciously.

As if that’s all a woman could possibly have to live for.

“I just don’t want them.” I shrug and then roll onto my back. “Kids are cool, but they’re all-consuming. My sister had to raise me because our parents sucked. Not that I think I would ever be like that, but it doesn’t sound ... appealing. Having my entire life dictated by a tiny human.” I look over to Damien, half scared by what I’ll see.

Even Richard didn’t understand this about me.

I was willing to change for him, to try for him.

But Damien doesn’t look confused. Instead, intrigue plays on his face.

I continue talking, my anxiety getting the best of me.

“I’m excited to be the cool aunt. I love being that for Aut’s kids and Kate’s two. But a mom? I just don’t think ... it’s for me.”

“So what do you want instead?” he asks, curiosity in his voice.

And again, because it’s dark and I’m in a comfortable, familiar place, and I’m topped up with love from my family, I tell him.

“I want ... love. And I want passion. Excitement. I want to travel and to spend my money on expensive shoes instead of diapers. I want to be able to up and leave if I want to without worrying about schools and pediatricians and whatever the fuck else.”

And because the room is dark and the walls don’t have ears, I finish my thought, telling Damien the part I’ve kept dear to me since I was five.

I have never confessed this.

Not to Hannah, not to Cami, not to Kat.

“I want a man to be absolutely wild about me.” I take a deep breath, letting the dark be a shield. “My dad left my mom when I was born. Kids were too much work, and it left little time for him. That ... broke my mom. She wanted him to be consumed by loving her, to be his sun and his moon. But when she couldn’t completely devote herself to him because of us, he left her for another woman. She blamed us for that.”

Damien’s fingers move to my hair, brushing it back, a soothing action, but not interrupting my train of thought.

“Hannah isn’t like her. She always wanted to give every single scrap of herself to the rest of the world. Always wanted to be everything to someone, to kids, to her husband. She’s selfless, and empathetic, and compassionate. She was born to be a mom.”

“And you?” My tongue moves out, wetting my lips, nerves taking over.

“I’m like my mom,” I say in a whisper. There it is.

My deepest fear.

Here with this man, in the comfort of the dark and in a familiar room, I'm confessing everything.

"I want to give everything to a man and let him consume me. I want to fall so hard that I don't know where up is. I want to be selfish, and I want to be his and his alone. I don't want to share. I'm like my mom, because I think a small part of me would resent a child for taking that possibility from me."

The true reason for what Richard did gutting me was just this. I gave him everything—time and love and labor—expecting to get that back. And I made excuses why he didn't, four years' worth. I told myself that once we were married, it would change. That once he made partner, he would be different. But I see now that was bullshit.

Knowing I could have lost myself in that man, knowing that I had already started to lose myself in him—it's terrifying. And knowing that a man *let* that happen, that he saw me give and give and give until I was a husk of a person designed to fit his requirement, he deserves to be taught a lesson.

But the truth of it is, knowing I have that poison in me, knowing I have the ability to lose myself in a man and be decimated by him further cements me not wanting children.

"I don't want kids either," he says, his voice a whisper, and I wonder if he feels the same peace in the dark as I do. "I don't want to bring more kids into this world. I see day in and day out the horrors of the world. Just how shitty people can be, how absolutely low people can go. Some days, I look at a case file and the future feels so fucking bleak. I can't bring a child into the world knowing that's out there."

I don't answer because I don't know how to. College boyfriends all thought I was crazy, not wanting children. Even Richard would occasionally question it, despite him apparently knowing we'd never get that far.

"When I saw you with those kids today, I thought for sure this was the end of us."

The end of us.

The end of us.

His words ring in my mind because where was the beginning of us?

The beginning of us started in ways I'm not proud of, and I don't know how to dig myself out.

"Why?"

"You love those kids."

"That's not always enough," I say, a hint of irritation brewing.

"I know that. I agree. I just ... It's rare. A woman as kind and beautiful as you on the same page as me."

"Yeah, well, I'm one in a million," I say sarcastically, rolling away. His arm on my waist stops me, turning me to face him and brushing my hair from my face.

"You are, *rubia*. I see it every time I'm with you. I don't need kids or anything else for that matter to be happy with you. It's just you. You make me happy. I'll do what it takes to prove it to you."

TWENTY-ONE

November 27

-Abbie-

“Okay, so it was chaotic yesterday, but that’s nothing compared to what you’ll see today,” I say as we drive the few blocks over to Hannah and Hunter’s on Thanksgiving morning.

“You don’t have to warn me, *rubia*. I understand how family works,” he says with a laugh.

“This is family on crack,” I say, gnawing on my lip. “I don’t have much family, but Hunter does. And with Hannah comes Sadie, who is a blast and basically a big sister, but more chaotic than I am.” He raises an eyebrow in an “is that possible?” way, and I smack him with my clutch. “Shut up!” He laughs, and it’s deep, and I love this.

This comfort.

This fun.

“Who else, *rubia*?”

“Okay, so Mags will be there because she loves Hunter and basically raised Hannah and me. And because Mags will be there, Luna’s family will be there.”

“Luna?”

“Runs the bar downtown, Mags’s niece. So Luna comes with her parents, who are insane, and two brothers, Zander and Ace. Ace is in a band, Hometown Heroes.”

“I’ve heard of them. I like them.”

“Yup. Okay, so Luna is engaged to Tony, who she’s been in love with since she was like, five because he’s Zander’s best friend.”

“This town is very ... intertwined.” Damien’s eyes drift to me as I untangle the guest list for him, and a smile plays on his lips.

“Oh, it’s absolutely incestuous. A few years back, we found out that Hunter and Autumn have a half-sister, Jordan. She came into town and got tangled with Tanner, who owns the construction site in town and is also Hunter’s bestie. So they’ll be here, too.”

“And Tanner will bring ... ?” He’s catching on.

“I’m not sure. Probably his parents. He has an older brother who moved away and started a tattoo shop down the shore, but he never comes home to the Hills. I don’t know *why* he never comes back, but he left the family business behind when he did. It was a whole thing.”

“You don’t know why?”

“I don’t know everything, Damien,” I say with a laugh as he parks outside Hannah’s. There are already five cars parked out front.

“You sure about that?” he asks with a smile.

“I’m a little sister. I hear the drama, I absorb the drama, and I store the drama until I need to use it to my advantage,” I say, and he laughs.

“Ahh, I got it. Well, I’m excited for your chaos.” I roll my eyes.

“It’s time,” I say, tipping my head to the front door where two little girls are standing in matching pajamas, the oldest holding Colin on her hip in his own set of complimentary jammies.

Instead of getting out of the car, Damien puts a hand up, smoothing it over my exposed collarbone in the off the

shoulder sweater I'm wearing and slowly moving it up to my neck.

He stays there, resting, and I smile at him.

"You like doing that, don't you?"

"Hmm?" he asks, staring at me like he's not listening.

"My neck. You hold it a lot, even when we're not ... you know," I say and goddamn if I don't blush. He smiles that wiseass, cocky man smile that makes me wish I knew him when he was younger and possibly cockier before answering.

"Yeah, I like that," he says. "Your heartbeat is there. Like the feel of it on my palm. I've never met anyone so alive, Abigail," he says.



The meal is as chaotic as one could possibly assume. Mr. Davidson got into a near brawl with Tanner's dad, resulting in all men being kicked out of the house by Maggie to "go bond over fire building or something."

It worked out, because then when the big kids got a little too restless waiting for dinner, Hannah sent them outside with s'mores essentials and sticks, because they had actually gotten a bonfire going.

Then we all sat down for the big meal, three long tables filling the giant dining room and a kids' table dominating the living room where Autumn put on *Frozen*. (To which Cal demanded that next time they get to "watch a 'boy' movie or football or something *good*." Rosie told him to shut up, which, to everyone's surprise, he did, settling to eat stuffing and glare at the TV.)

Once we all sat, Maggie did her tradition of not letting anyone eat before we went around the table with something we're thankful for.

"Jesus Christ, Mags, not this shit again," Mr. Davidson had complained his yearly outrage at Mags's tradition.

“Shut it. It’s sweet.”

“I’m hungry!”

“You can wait five stinking minutes,” Luna’s mother said, and my eyes met Sadie’s across the table, her own comically wide with humor.

It felt ... normal.

Like family.

Dysfunctional family, but family nonetheless.

“I’ll go first,” Damien had said, and my entire body went into shock. Sadie’s eyes went a different kind of wide, intrigued wide, but my head was already turning to my date. “Seems appropriate, to give thanks first, being that I was graciously invited.”

“You better come back next year, too. Nice to have new eye candy around here,” Maggie said, and we all groaned.

“God, Mags!” Hannah huffed.

“I’m just glad she’s not focused on me,” Hunter said under his breath, and I scoffed a laugh, because he wasn’t wrong—Maggie loves to hit on my brother-in-law, trying to make him as uncomfortable as possible.

“Let the man speak so we can get this shit over with!” Mr. Davidson said, and his wife smacked him. I think he complained about the hit, and Mrs. Davidson definitely made fun of him for being “a big old baby,” but I was too lost in Damien.

“I just wanted to say thank you all for opening your arms to let in a stranger. You’re a great crowd. Abigail’s been telling me stories about home for weeks, and it’s nice to put faces to names. This year, I’m thankful to be sitting here with you all, about to eat some amazing food. But most of all, I’m honored to have a beautiful woman on my arm.” His arm moved to pull me into him despite us being seated in shitty folding chairs, and he kissed my hair.

It was precious.

And sweet.

And so unexpected.

And when my eyes met my sister's, the half smile she had on her lips said it all.

You are in so fucking deep.

Hours later, I'm sitting outside near the impressive fire in Hannah's backyard—turns out not-quite Boy Scouts Tony and Zander were the ones to finally make the fire happen—way too full and chatting with Kate.

She's telling me how Dean and Zee helped take the Springbrook Hills Bulldogs to state this year and how she and Dean are working through the process of having Dean formally adopt her son, Cal.

It's as we're watching Dean try to fit a football into Colin's toddler fingers, Cal clapping as he "throws it," when Damien comes over, putting a hand out to me and helping me stand.

"Hate to do this, but this one's gotta get home," he says, looking at Kate then at me. "Come on, *naranja*. Let's get you back to Long Island." The words are low, muffled almost as he presses his lips, touching the top of my head. "You have an early morning."

With his words, Kate's eyes narrow, confusion mixed with ... happiness, maybe, and I clarify.

"Black Friday," I say with a shrug. "I have to be at the store at like 4 am and it's an hour's drive back to the city." I tip my head back up to Damien. "Plus, you have to get back to your place, yeah?" I ask.

"I'm staying at yours tonight," he says, his voice low and only for me as his lips press to my temple.

"We should get going too," Kate says, standing and making her way over to her boys. "You'll be home for Christmas?" she asks me.

“That’s the plan.”

“And you?” nosy fucking Kate asks Damien with a cocky smile. *Bartenders and baristas and their need to direct human relationships*. I glare at her, but she just smiles.

“That’s the plan,” Damien says, and I’m so surprised I can’t do much more than kiss and hug Kate before we make our rounds of goodbyes. But the entire time, my mind is on Damien’s assertion that he’ll be here on Christmas.

But that would be after the party.

After things fall apart.

This is getting so confusing.

Because for something we both agreed would be casual, it’s feeling less and less so by the minute.

And even though I’m not even a little mad about it, I can’t help but feel the impending dread building all around me with each day.

TWENTY-TWO

December 2

-Abbie-

I'm in Damien's apartment.

This is not the interesting part. I've been to Damien's apartment more than a handful of times over the past month.

The new part is that Damien is not here in his apartment.

I want to tell you it feels weird, that it's uncomfortable.

It's not.

I feel ... at home.

That might be the weirder part. How weird this *doesn't* feel.

I dated Richard for four years and never once felt *at home* there. It was a place where I always thought I needed to be on my best behavior: doing something, cleaning something, and dressing to the nines ...

And he sure as hell didn't tell me he wanted me to be waiting for him at his place after work because he'd had a shitty day.

At the time, I didn't even know that feeling was strange.

Today, Damien asked if I would spend the night. We had a date planned, but his work is running past dinner time.

"I still want to see you tonight," he'd said when he called me during a court break. "But once I'm out of here, I need to

return to the office, grab a few things, and make some calls. I don't know when I'll be out."

"Seriously, it's fine, Damien," I said. "We can meet up another day."

"You're not listening, *naranja*." His voice made me pause. Not angry, but firm. The words he was saying, he wanted me to hear, to understand. "I'm telling you I'm having a shit day. A long fucking day. I'm telling you I can't go out, but I really fucking want to see you. I'm asking you to be at my place when I get home." He stopped speaking, but I didn't pick up the slack in the conversation, staying silent.

Confused.

"Look, if you're not comfortable—"

"No. No, Damien, it's not that. I've just ... never done this. It's new." It was his turn for silence, but it was a silence he broke.

"We'll dig into that shit later. We gotta cover all the crazy shit your ex put in your head one of these days. Go over how we can fix it. But until then, can you be at my place?"

"Yeah, Damien. I can do that," I'd said, because what else do you say in that situation?

This brings us to now. Now, where I'm here at Damien's apartment, waiting for him to come home. I left work, and he instructed me to let him know when I was ready to head over because he planned to send a car for me.

And he did—when I texted him I had an overnight bag packed and ready to go, he had a black town car outside by my building in ten minutes.

So I'm here, panicking, because *what am I supposed to be doing?*

Right now, it seems to be that when presented with insecurities and confusion around a relationship, I fall into old habits.

I made dinner—spaghetti and meatballs, the meatballs Hannah's recipe that she perfected when we were still kids.

I baked the world's best cookies (also using my sister's recipe).

I even cleaned up, noticing his apartment was kind of a tornado. I know that the case he's working on now and Sharon's case have been taking over his life. He's been stressed since most things need to be wrapped up before the holidays or else they'll face an extended recess for the holidays and vacations.

It shows in the way his typically pristine apartment looks.

With all cooking and cleaning options for busying my nervous mind exhausted, I'm stuck sitting on his couch (that I vacuumed) in a pair of leggings and an oversized tee shirt, the sauce and meatballs simmering slowly while I wait.

And it all feels so familiar.

A late night, my incessant urge to make a man's life easier.

Working my ass off in my free time to do small things to show I care.

Secretly praying that when he gets home, he'll notice them. That he'll be grateful or appreciative. He'll see my worth, that I am someone he should keep around.

God, I am so pathetic.

Especially when I realize just how much the last man really did not care in the least. Realizing that you survived on scraps of affection and convinced yourself it was a whole meal can be the most eye-opening, humbling experience in the world.

And as I hear the key turn in the door, I'm ready to be hit with the realization again.

Though, I tell myself, at least this time it won't matter as much. It won't hurt as much. This doesn't matter, right? This sham of a relationship can't hurt you.

Maybe if I tell myself that enough, it will become true.

"Honey, I'm home." Damien comes in the door with a smile, his winter coat covering up the suit I know is

underneath and a briefcase in his hand.

In his other hand are flowers.

Not fancy, expensive ones wrapped in cellophane. They're bodega flowers, carnations and baby's breath and greenery, and they look a little on the dry side, but goddammit.

The man bought me flowers.

He bought me flowers on his way home from work after a terribly long day, stopping at some random bodega on the street because ... what? He wanted to surprise me? He was thinking of me?

I stand, walking toward him, meeting him halfway, and he's got this goofy, cheerful smile that I don't think I've seen before. It barely masks the look of exhaustion in his eyes, but when he drops the briefcase to the floor with a loud thump and wraps one cold arm around my waist to pull me in, I don't care.

When his lips hit mine, all I can think is this would be nice. It would be a fucking fantastic way to end each day.

The kiss is short, just a sweet greeting before he pulls back.

"I got you these. They kind of look like shit. They were the only ones left, but ... here," he says, smiling a boyish smile and showing me the flowers.

"They're ... perfect," I say, and I don't know how else to react.

The last time I was given flowers, my sister brought them to my college graduation, where she and Sadie screamed so loud when they called my name, I was red for an hour.

"You look exhausted," I say with a small, nervous smile, pushing the lock of hair that falls to his forehead when he's been running his hand through his hair back.

"I am. I'm sorry I had to cancel plans tonight. I just don't have it in me."

"Stop. You're fine."

“What’s that smell,” he asks, stepping back and moving to take off his jacket. I take the flowers and move to his kitchen to look for a cup or a vase to put them in.

“I ... uh ... I made dinner? I wasn’t sure how late you’d get h—” I almost catch myself saying “home” and stop. “Here. So I picked an easy meal I could just ... you know, heat up.” My face is burning with discomfort and just a touch of embarrassment as I fill a tall cup with water and place the flowers inside.

What was I thinking?

This was such a terrible idea.

I should have sat around on his couch and ordered takeout when he came home. There’s no way to cover up this, though, so I move to the stove. Turning the water on to boil, I look down my body, noting the fuzzy socks I have my leggings tucked into, my cold toes winning once again.

Jesus Christ, I could have at least put on something sexier. I should have let him walk into the apartment with me lying on his couch in nothing but a teddy.

Or naked.

Literally, anything would be better than—

“You made me dinner?” The voice is a rumble against my back as his arm wraps around my waist.

“It’s just ... meatballs. And sauce. Nothing fancy. I can also save it, order takeout.” He turns me, and I try not to look him in the face.

“You made me dinner.” I nod, and he moves his head, looking around his space. “Did you clean up?” My stomach drops.

“I swear, I didn’t touch anything personal. Just vacuumed and tidied up. I did organize your laundry and start a load, but I checked all of the tags, made sure nothing was—”

“Jesus, *rubia*, you did my laundry?”

“I promise it wasn’t weird. I just ... I knew you’d had a rough couple of days.” He drops his forehead to mine and breathes in my air. Taking a step back, he leads me away from the stove until my hips hit the island counter. Despite his warm apartment, the marble is cold even through my thick sweatshirt.

“Can dinner wait?” he asks.

“What?”

“Dinner. You said it’s easy, that it can be heated up. Can it wait?” I’m so lost, his scent and nearness scrambling my mind.

“I don’t ... Wait?”

“Thirty minutes, an hour. Can it *wait*, Abigail?” This time the hands on my hips move to pull me into him, and I feel it then, pressed into my belly. He’s hard.

Heat runs through my veins, and his hands on my hips grab me, lifting me up onto the counter. We’re nearly face-to-face, and when he moves to reduce the gap between us, I realize his hardness is right at my center.

“Oh,” I say.

“Yeah, oh.” His head dips down, and he nips the line of my jaw, forcing me to suck in a breath. “So can dinner wait? Fuck, fifteen minutes. That’s all I need, *rubia*.” His nose traces the line of my neck, his mouth breathing into my ear. “I’ll eat you right here on this counter, make you scream my name, then come again as I fuck you standing.”

I don’t say anything.

I *can’t* say anything.

I never felt this way with any man my age.

It’s like the extra years turned this man feral, helped him learn a woman’s body, the cues, and the subtle changes. It took him no time at all to learn what mine needs, what it craves, and just how to give it that.

“*Rubia*, answer me,” he murmurs in my ear, pulling the lobe into his mouth and sucking. I let out a shaky breath because what I crave most from him is that damn mouth of his.

“You’ll have to turn off the water,” I say then clear my throat of the arousal that feels like it’s coating it. “It’s set to boil.” He smiles—not something I see but more feel against my skin before he nips me again then backs up, leaving me dazed and sitting on the counter.

“Don’t you move,” he says with his back turned as I move my hands to the counter to lower myself. I stop in place, hyperaware of the cold beneath me and my heated skin. He walks to the stove, turning the dial until it clicks off, and then he’s moving back to me, shrugging off his suit jacket and placing it on a bar stool.

My eyes follow his hands as they move to his cuff, undoing the button and moving to the opposite arm. Slowly he walks toward me, undoing his tie, tossing that to the side, and then starting on the buttons of his shirt. When he hits the last one, he’s still a few feet from me, and I can’t help but continue to take in the look of him. Tan and perfect. He takes care of himself but enjoys himself as well, and it shows. I freaking love it.

With a foot still between us, the shirt falls off his body completely until he’s standing before me in just his work pants, a dark happy trail I like to run my tongue over disappearing into the waistband, his erection thick beneath the fabric.

A jolt runs through me, fire and electricity and need.

He smiles, noticing everything my body does, like always, before closing the gap. A hand goes to the nape of my neck, grabbing the hair and pulling it back gently until I look up at his face.

His lips touch the spot between my eyebrows like he loves to then move to kiss my lips, and the gentle kiss and slow glide of his tongue against mine is a stark contrast to how I’m feeling.

The hand not in my hair moves to my knee, slowly sliding up until his thumb grazes the seam of my leggings, pressing in, and I sigh into his mouth before it moves.

“My girl, always ready for me,” he says, a whisper into my ear before his mouth moves down my neck, nipping and licking and sucking.

“Yeah,” I breathe, my mind already gone as his thumb rubs soft circles against my clit. The fabric grates against sensitive skin, and I moan out, his teeth biting where my neck meets my shoulder.

“I bet you’re already drenched for me, yeah?” My hips move, buck, trying to get his hand to do more—anything to get me closer to paradise. “Answer me. Are you wet for me?” I don’t hesitate, knowing this game of obedience and rewards well by now.

“Yes, Damien. I’m wet for you. God, please.”

“Please, what, baby?” His thumb rubs harder, and I groan out. I’m pretty sure I could come like this, nothing more than his thumb over fabric and his mouth on my neck.

“Don’t stop,” I whisper, again bucking to move with him, to get more.

And, of course, because Damien never does as I tell him, he stops, stepping back with a smile. But his hand stays on my neck, keeping me from tipping forward.

Keeping me safe, always.

Once I’m steady—pouting, but steady—he puts the thumbs of both hands into the waistband of my leggings. “Hands to the counter, baby. Lift your hips, yeah?” I do as he asks, and he drags the black fabric down my hips, releasing one foot but not worrying about the other. Those hands move from my knees, up my inner thighs, spreading me until I’m displayed just for him, cold air hitting my pussy and forcing me to tighten.

“God, my little whore, no panties?” he asks with a smile, one thumb running up my center. I can’t help but let out a moan as he drags wetness up, lightly circling my clit.

“Damien—”

“What? What do you want, baby?”

“I want ... you. God.”

“My finger?” he asks, then one finger slips in, dragging against my G-spot as it pulls back out.

“God! Yes!”

“Oh, that’s what you want?” He repeats the action with a second finger, pumping twice this time before pulling out and circling my clit again.

“Ahh!”

“No, I want to do something else, I think.” I moan in disappointment, already on edge, and buck my hips. The hand that’s holding me open lifts, slapping me quick and sharp on my inner thigh, making me moan again. The sensation runs to my clit, throbbing there with painful need. “Stay still, Abigail,” he says, and he then moves, taking a knee until he’s face-to-face with my pussy.

Fuck fuck fuck.

Large hands move, stretching my hips almost painfully until I’m spread and at the very edge of the counter.

“Put your hands here, hold yourself open for me, and do not fucking move while I eat this cunt,” he growls, eyes locked to mine.

I do as I’m asked.

“Such a good girl, Abigail,” he says to me, but the words are so low, I almost think they’re for his benefit.

I don’t have time to overthink the meaning or the intention when his tongue flattens against me, dragging from my entrance to my clit where he sucks hard.

The sound that comes out of me is absolutely feral.

His head moves for a moment, and he looks up at me as I watch him through hooded eyes.

“That’s it, baby. Be loud. You tell your man you like what he’s doing to this body.” And then he goes back to work, fucking me with his tongue, grazing my clit with his teeth, devouring me.

“Fuck! Damien! Oh god, it’s so good. You’re so good, honey.” I moan, barely making any sense, but my words spur a moan from him, the vibrations against my clit moving up my spine where they settle, warm and liquid.

And when he takes those two fingers from before and slides them inside me, giving me what I need, I scream, hips moving to get closer, teetering on the edge of the counter, and one hand leaves my thighs to grip his hair.

Until he stops.

And he stands.

And I moan with the loss.

His hand moves to my throat, holding me there and staring in my eyes.

“You be a good fucking girl, Abigail, and you hold those legs open for your man while I make you come on my face, yeah?”

A small moan falls from my lips, and a smile plays on his wet lips.

Wet with me.

“Agree, baby, and I’ll make you come on my face.”

“Yes, Damien. I promise. Please, god!”

He says nothing, just moves back to kneeling, waiting for my hands to return to my thighs. When they do, he continues to stare, waiting for me to spread them to that almost painful width, the ache just adding to my pleasure.

And then his face is back between my legs, devouring me, moaning against me. No matter how much I want to pull him closer, to use his face, I don’t. I behave. I hold my legs open and let him devour me.

Three fingers join now, fucking me as he eats, and I'm unbearably close. He knows, the noises coming out of me inhuman, and I moan his name. His hand travels gently up my sweatshirt, meeting no bra and causing another moan to fall from his lips into my cunt. And as he holds my eyes, pinching a nipple tight, sucking my clit hard and flexing his fingers, he gives me the nonverbal permission I need to explode, screaming his name.

My eyes stay open, locked to his as I continue to come and come and come, lights dancing in my eyes. My body continues to quake as he licks and nips, slowing down the thrusts of his fingers but not fully stopping until he's standing in front of me.

"You can let go, baby," he whispers with a smile against my lips, and I didn't even realize I was still holding myself open. My hands move to his neck, legs wrapping around his hips, and I kiss him hard, tasting myself on his tongue. When he pulls back, a wet hand is on my chin, and he forces my face to look at him. "You are fucking perfect." And then his hands are on my hips, taking me off the counter and moving up to shuck my sweatshirt. He turns me, gentle hands moving on my skin despite my knowing his body is impatient.

"Now I'm going to fuck you, baby," he says, forcing my hips to hit the marble again, now warm from my ass, before his hand is on the center of my back, pressing firmly until I bend. He keeps pushing until my entire front is on the cool marble, my head to the side.

"God, you're so pretty, lying there, waiting for my cock." The sound of a metal belt fills the room, and soon I feel the thick head of his cock rubbing down my swollen entrance. "Are you going to take me like a good girl, Abigail?" I moan as he notches the head. "I'm going to fuck you hard, baby. You're going to come again because you like when I treat you like my whore, yes? When I fuck you for my pleasure?"

My breaths are coming out shaky, audible against the counter.

“Yes, Damien,” I say, the words quiet, but I know he hears them.

I know because of his next move.

“Fuck yeah, you do,” he says then slams in with a growl. I scream, my head moving back as he slides through swollen tissues, hitting me deeply, the pleasure and near pain acute. “That’s it, baby. You scream for me.”

He pounds into me, my feet barely grazing the floor as he does, hitting the ache in my belly square with each thrust. Each thrust moves me forward on the counter, the harsh pull of my skin on the marble overwhelming, the build of pleasure in my cunt instantly rising again.

“Fuck, god, Damien!”

“You’re going to come for me again, aren’t you?” he asks through gritted teeth, a hand moving from my hips to land hard on my ass, the strike spiking to my clit. It’s like he’s taking his rough day out on my body like I am his escape, and I love it.

“Yes!” I shout, but I need more. I’m teetering on the edge, and I know he’s not far behind. But I need more.

He knows, of course.

There’s never been a person on this earth who can read me the way he can. A hand moves up my back, pressing me into the counter as it does, as he brutally fucks me into it, until it hits the back of my neck. The hand wraps around my hair and tugs harshly, my neck moving back until I’m looking at the recessed lighting in his ceiling.

“So fucking beautiful when you take me like this, baby,” he whispers, then I hear an unfamiliar noise moments before wet hits the crack of my ass.

Spit.

He spit on me.

The hand on my hip moves, a finger trailing the wet spit down until it’s at my asshole. His thumb pulls my ass cheek to

the side as he slows his deep, all-consuming thrusts inside of me, his breathing heavy and erratic.

He's so close.

"Soon," he says, and I know he's staring at my ass, at where his cock is disappearing into my cunt. "I'm going to take this ass soon, baby, and you're going to scream my name as I do." A shiver runs through me. "Have you had a man here before?" A finger, wet with his spit, circles the unfamiliar hole. I shake my head.

"I'll be the first," he says, that finger continuing the circle, his thrusts speeding again.

"God, Damien, please," I moan.

"I'm going to fuck your ass with my finger while I fuck your sweet pussy, baby, and you're going to come for me, yeah?"

"Damien—"

"Yes or no, baby?" he asks, fucking me ruthlessly now, my ass bouncing against his hips, his thumb pressing on my asshole.

I'm shocked that I already love the feel, that the thought of this intrusion is building my orgasm, forcing me to hold back on cresting.

"Fuck, yes, Damien, now!" I shout, and then a thick finger enters me as he fills me, and I've never been so damn full in my life. I *scream* and clamp down, coming on him, the world going black as I shake uncontrollably against the marble. I buck violently against him as he presses deep, filling me with his cum as he moans loud, so loud I'm sure the neighbors must hear.

But I can't seem to care.

The world has stopped spinning, and the only thing I know is this man buried inside of me, making me whole.

It takes long, long moments for the world to become real again, for breathing to slow, and for Damien to slip out of me.

“Okay. Now we can eat,” he says, moving his hands to my hips once more, placing me on the floor, turning my body, and holding me until my Jell-O legs stop moving.

And then I laugh, laugh hard because this whole situation is insane. Damien bends, pulling up his boxers but kicking his slacks and belt to the side, and then he’s laughing, too, pulling me into him tightly.

And when his lips press to mine, his hand moving to the back of my neck to pull me in and hold me in place, we’re both still laughing.

And I feel free.

After dinner, we’re lying in his bed, Damien’s head on my belly. Gently, he presses his lips there, the feeling warm and melting through my nerve endings deliciously.

“Thank you, *naranja*,” he says, looking up at me.

I love how this man looks at me like I’m stunning and beautiful, despite being in a messy bun with a clean face and ready for bed. It’s like I could be in a paper bag and he’d still offer to buy me ten more in different colors because I look gorgeous in it.

“Seriously, it was no big deal,” I say. “I’m sorry if I crossed any boundaries. I know we’re not ... that, but you had a long day, and I had extra energy.” My face burns.

“Stop. There’s no need. Why on earth would you be sorry?”

“This is your home. You asked me to be here, and I ... kind of took over.”

“This place is clean for the first time in a week. I’m usually better at keeping things together, but cases have been piling up. Plus, I’ve been trying to spend any free time I have inside of you. I haven’t gotten to it.” I shiver at his words, and he laughs.

“Yeah, I like that better than cleaning, too,” I say.

“But you didn’t have to do it—it’s not a requirement or an expectation. Let me just say that now. When I invite you here, it’s just so I can see you when I’m home. Not because I want you to clean.”

“I like that kind of stuff,” I say, biting my lip and fighting the all-consuming urge to look away. “Taking care of people. Hannah did it for me when I was growing up; she loves doing it now.”

“And you always want to be like your sister,” he says with a smile, and I laugh.

“You have an excellent memory.” He shakes his head, disagreeing. Before he explains, he moves, caging me in as he lies on top of me, his face above mine.

“No. I pay attention to what you tell me, that’s all.” Again, his words remind me how damn low my bar has been. “I like you taking care of me,” he says and tucks hair behind my ear the way he always does. “Again, not saying I expect it, but it’s nice.”

“Hmm. Well, maybe next time you’re working late, I’ll sneak in and make you dinner again. I make a mean lasagna,” I say with a smile.

“God, how are you still single?” he asks, and my belly churns.

I know then.

I need to tell him.

This is the right time.

It could fuck everything up, but I don’t want to do more damage to this—us—than I have to. Maybe admitting everything now can salvage it.

“Damien, I need to tell you something,” I say, my voice low.

“Is it that you’re not, in fact, single?” he asks with a raised eyebrow.

“No, but—”

“Is it that you’ve got kids hidden away somewhere?”

“No, I—”

“Is it that you’re a serial killer or a gold digger or on the run?” He’s smiling big now, and I can’t help but laugh.

“Then we’re all good. Not tonight. I want this. Me and you and easy. Tell me another night when I’m not full of home cooking and lying in bed with my dream woman, yeah?”

My heart stops.

“Your dream woman?” I ask, my voice low. Damien rolls until we’re lying side by side, his lips pressing to mine softly before answering.

“Oh yeah. Hot and blonde and sweet and a good cook? Fuck, you’re a wet dream, Abigail,” he says, and I laugh, but he doesn’t. “I know we’re not that, but remember that I told you I wasn’t sure about the future. That things could go great and things would grow,” he says.

“Hmmm,” I murmur, not wanting to push the conversation.

“I’m just saying. Let’s get over the holidays and then maybe have these big conversations.”

“Big conversations?”

“Your big reveal, what’s happening between us.”

“Oh,” I say, and he just smiles.

“Yeah, oh. The entire next month will be a shit show with Sharon’s case and a few others we’re working on before the end of the year. Plus the holiday party and the holidays in general—shopping. I’m sure your work hours are insane this month,” he says, and I nod. “So we’ll step into the chaos next year, once things settle. Deal?”

“Deal,” I say, agreeing.

I’m not sure if I should feel appeased or more anxious after this conversation, but at least I can’t say I didn’t try. And he

knows that there's ... well ... something. Just doesn't know the *what*.

And he wants *more*.

God. More with Damien.

“So, what are your holiday plans?” he asks, and it takes every last synapse in my body not to confess, despite my failed attempt moments before.

He's going to ask.

I don't know how I know, but I do know this. I do know what comes next.

With that in mind, I answer carefully.

“Going back to Springbrook Hills for Christmas Day. Auntie Santa needs to bring her big bag.” His smile stretches, and I can feel it on my bare skin. He looks younger, not 42, and surely not some high-powered lawyer.

“Of course. You must make all the little girls' and boys' Christmas wishes come true. Do you wear a costume?” His eyes go warm and soft. “Maybe one of those little Santa dresses?” I grab the small throw pillow he likes to use to lift my hips when he fucks me here and hit him in the head with it.

“You're a perv.” His laugh is deep, and he moves, rolling until his face is near mine and he's hovering above me. Most of his weight is held in his upper arms while his bottom half squishes me into the bed.

“Maybe we can keep that just for us,” he says, raising his eyebrows like some cheesy come on. I laugh, watching him shake with my movement. “So after Christmas? And before?”

“Nothing and nothing. I took a few days off, which will be magical because I'm already beat from the holiday rush and I hate returns season, but I have gloriously nothing to do.”

“What about the 23rd?” God, the restraint I'm using to force my body to stay still is near painful.

“That's a Thursday?” I ask like I don't know, like that date hasn't been circled in my calendar for months.

The question makes me nauseous from knowing I'm adding another layer to the deceit.

“Yes. It's also my work's holiday party. I think I mentioned it?” I nod, unable to speak. “Anyway, it's a big thing, tons of fun, in the Rainbow Room.” Again, I remain silent. “Would you—” He pauses, clearing his throat and reaching for my hand before twining his tan fingers with my own, tipped in pink.

Holy fuck, he's nervous.

Something about that is beyond adorable and endearing.

“Would you want to come? As my date?” he asks, his thumb rubbing soothing paths there.

I should say no.

I should insist on telling him everything.

I should say anything but what I say next.

Because what I say next seals my path.

“Yeah, Damien. I'd love that.”

The problem is when I say that, I'm not thinking about all the reasons it's wrong; I'm not thinking about the end goal or my revenge plan.

I'm thinking of walking into a room of people Damien spends every day with, smiling on his arm, and him bringing me because he wants me there.

TWENTY-THREE

December 12

-Abbie-

“I can’t believe we’re so close.” I’m on the phone with Cami, swiping a pale lipstick in the mirror and rolling my lips to make an even coat. “The party is next week,” she says, and I sigh, moving the phone from where it’s perched between my ear and shoulder.

“I don’t know, Cami. It feels ... wrong.” There’s silence on the line.

I know this silence.

“What do you mean it feels wrong?” Her voice is nearly hysterical, and part of me wonders if she is more invested in this than I am.

Scratch that. At this point, I know she’s more invested in my revenge on Richard than I am. Because when I get a text from Damien, I don’t get eager to advance my plan—I get butterflies. When we meet up for dinner, I’m not thinking about how to bring up the party or work events in conversation—I’m trying to get to know him more, to hear more funny stories of growing up in the Bronx with his friends.

The truth is, I’m falling for Damien Martinez, and I am so wholly fucked because I don’t think there’s an easy way out of this.

There’s no easy way to admit my initial motivation to date him, no easy way to tell him that this started not as a way to

get to know a kind, caring man but a way to get back at a piece of shit ex.

“We’re spending so much time together.” The other end is quiet. “And, Cam ... I think I like him.” I say that part more subdued, almost nervous, because I know Cami will not be on board with any change to the plan.

“You *like* him?” I sigh.

“Yeah, Cam.”

“*You like him?*” I sigh again, already exhausted by this conversation.

“Cam, stop it. It’s not like that. He’s sweet. He’s ... good. He’s different. He’s not like Richard. And he doesn’t deserve to be the butt of some joke.”

“All men are the same, Abbie. All men only want one thing—to control you and then break your heart. They love the power, love knowing they won.” Her words are full of anger, venom, frustrations, and retribution.

Full of *knowing*.

And with what her ex did to her, she *would* know.

“Cam, I don’t—”

“Trust me, babe. It’s true.”

“It’s not. Some men, yes. Richard? Absolutely. Jason? Fuck yes. But Damien? He’s not that. And I’m a shitty person for doing this.” She doesn’t respond, and I sit on my bed, preparing to drop the final bomb that will destroy Cami’s entire plan.

“I’m going to tell him.”

“What?!”

“I’m going to tell Damien everything. Tonight.” I think I decided on the night in his apartment when he talked to me about the party. Despite my failed attempt and him telling me to wait, I need to get it off my chest. The churn in my gut isn’t worth any hint of revenge.

There is officially a real chance of someone other than Richard getting hurt in this. I don't want Damien to be collateral damage. He doesn't deserve that.

So when I woke up this morning, I decided that at some point tonight, I'm going to tell him. I'm going to lay it all at his feet and let him decide how big of a piece of shit I am.

"You can't do that, Abbie."

"I'm an adult, so I can do what I want," I say, standing again and moving to grab my bag.

"Abbie, please. We'll have a girls' night tomorrow. Talk it through. You just ... need time to refocus."

"Appreciate it, Cam, and love you to the ends of the earth, but no. I'm done. I need to—" My phone vibrates against my ear. "Hold on, I think that's him," I say mid-sentence, pulling my phone from my face that just beeped with a text.

But it's not Damien telling me he's on his way up like I thought.

It's Richard.

Richard: Please remove any photos and tags of me off of your social media.

I stare at the words, trying to understand them.

Why would I—

Another message comes through.

Richard: I don't want anyone searching and finding us together.

I think in that moment, I'm going to be sick.

Four years.

Four years of photos and moments that I thought were precious, even now, despite knowing how much of a shit person he is. Moments of my life that I found important enough to put on the internet for the world to see. Four years of posting about him with gushy captions that I subconsciously

thought would make him realize who I was to him, who I could be.

Four years of him never seeing it. Never appreciating the small things I did to make his life easier.

And now, four years later, just weeks after our break up, he wants to make sure there is no proof of him ever having stooped so low as to date me.

To date the not serious, not wife material, *and definitely not worthy of a prestigious lawyer* girl from New Jersey.

All hesitations are wiped away.

This is why.

This is why.

This is why I can't stop.

My mind snaps back into place, and I hear Cam talking through the receiver, not at my ear, so I move it back to speak.

“Abs? You good?” she asks, and it’s obvious it’s not the first time she has said it.

“He just texted me,” I say, and even to me, my voice sounds hollow. Empty. Defeated.

“Damien?” In her voice, there’s shock. I know it’s not shock that he texted, but shock that I sound the way I do.

“No. Richard.”

“Oh, Jesus, that scumbag?”

“He hasn’t reached out since Halloween.” I remember the days following the breakup, coming to terms with many, many things about our relationship, but one of the most glaring ones was that I didn’t have to go to his place to pick up my stuff, nor did he have to come here to get his.

We were two complete entities.

It was another wake-up call, just how separated he’d kept us and how delusional I was about it.

He always made sure I brought my things home.

I once left a box of tampons under the sink cabinet for emergencies. The next time I slept over, he sat me down and told me he didn't appreciate my "*being sneaky*" and asked me not to do that again. That the clutter made his life difficult.

In hindsight, the box of tampons wasn't the clutter.

I was the clutter.

"He wants me to delete all of the photos of him from my social media." Cam is silent. Another text comes through.

Richard: Please confirm when you have done this task.

God, he speaks like I'm his assistant and he's going to dock points from my performance review if I don't do it in a timely manner.

How was I so fucking stupid?

"What the fuck?" Cam says when I have my phone back to my ear. "Why?" I quote his text for her without glancing at my phone, each word already seared into my subconscious. "What a fucking piece of shit."

"You're right," I say. "I need to stick to the plan."

This must be a sign from the universe. A sign saying don't stop now—it's a necessity. This isn't a bad thing. You're doing what you need to be doing.

Why else would it line up like this, Richard texting as I'm talking to Cam about confessing, as I'm waiting for Damien to come pick me up?

"Atta girl," she says, a smile in her voice. "Fuck men. Fuck the patriarchy."

There's a knock at my door. Damien.

"Gotta go, Cam. Damien's here."

"Remember the cause, Abbie," she says, and despite the reminder, I can't help the jolt to my stomach at her words.

"It's not a cause, Cam. It's real life," I say, my voice low as I walk to the door, grab a coat, and end the call.

TWENTY-FOUR

December 12

-Damien-

“Where are we going?” she asks, smiling up at me with those big eyes and that big smile. We’ve left my car at my condo’s parking garage and are walking toward our destination.

I’m almost shocked she doesn’t realize what’s happening, where we’re headed. Granted, it’s New York, so we could be anywhere, doing anything.

“It’s a surprise,” I say, leaning down as we walk to press a small kiss to the tip of her nose. It’s red with the cold, but at least this time she’s in jeans and a warm coat.

“Can you give me a hint?” she asks, and her face is lit up with the excitement of not knowing. She loves surprises, I’ve learned. Not big extravagant things, but little ones. Texts to say hi or bringing home shit flowers from a bodega. A date that she doesn’t know the end of.

She’s simple, my Abigail.

“Nope.”

“Come on! Just a hint.”

“Almost there, *naranja*. Calm down.” We turn the corner and our destination comes into view, but that’s not what I’m looking for. No, I’m looking for the two people out front. Tugging on her hand in mine, I speed up just a hair, waving at the couple.

“Damien, what—”

“Hey!” the woman says, her smile huge but not pointed at me.

Instead, it’s at my girl.

Her sister.

“What the—” Abigail starts, but she’s being pulled into her older sister’s arms as she laughs, and Hannah rocks her back and forth. I move, putting a hand out to Hunter and shaking it.

“Hey, man. Thanks for making this happen.”

“If Hannah found out she had a chance to surprise Abs like this and I said no, I’d lose my balls,” he says, but his smile is wide, and his eyes quickly return to his wife.

I get it.

The squealing and jumping coming from the Keller girls is part adorable, part hilarious, but I’m completely unable to stop watching.

After a bit, they stop, and Abigail looks over at me.

“Did you do this?” she asks.

“Shot Hunter a message, asked when they might be free for a night in the city.” She looks up at me with a small smile. “You said you don’t see your sister enough. Here she is.” Her eyes go gooey and warm, and I know it was the right decision to set this up.

“Aww, you miss me, Abs?” Hannah says, grabbing her sister’s chin and tugging it like she’s some kind of annoying auntie. Abbie rolls her eyes and hits her sister.

“No, never. I miss your cookies.”

“Liar,” Hannah says before moving back to her husband, who wraps her in his arms. I put my arm around Abbie’s waist and tuck her into my side.

“So what’s the plan? Are we going to dinner?” Abbie asks, and god, she’s so lost. I tip my head at the marquee above us and wait for her to look up.

She does.

And it's gorgeous watching the emotions and thoughts flit across her face.

Confusion, then understanding, then shock.

"What?" she asks, but the words are soft.

"You said you watched the video with your sister as a kid, right? But never got to make it?" She nods. "The firm has tickets."

"We're going to see the *Christmas Spectacular*?" she asks, her eyes wide. "But you said it's dumb."

"It is," I say with a smile.

"Then why are we going?" While we have this conversation, Hannah and Hunter are standing to the side with smiles, Hannah's softer, Hunter looking like he's watching his past play out in front of him.

I wonder just how much trauma the Keller girls went through and how similar it is.

"You want to go." That's all I say, and when I say it, I know it's all I *have to* say. Her eyes soften, and her mouth opens just a hair as she looks at me.

Fuck, she's gorgeous.

And for a moment, I can't think of a single thing I wouldn't do to put that look on her face.

Abbie sang and wiggled in her seat through the entire performance, Hannah laughing at her and rolling her eyes. It's easy to picture what they would have been like as young girls, Hannah watching her sister while she watched it on some bootleg VHS and rolling her eyes at her sister's antics.

And now we're sitting together at dinner while Hannah tells a story about Abigail turning some cheerleader's hair purple because she'd said something nasty about her sister.

“Abbie is the queen of revenge, I swear. She doesn’t let anyone get away with being an ass to her or the people she loves,” Hannah says with pride in her voice. After Abigail told me about how her sister basically raised her, this makes sense.

“Except with that Dick—” Hunter starts, but then his body jolts, and he looks to his wife with wide eyes.

“We don’t need to talk about *Abbie’s exes* with her new guy here, *Hunter*,” she says with a glare at her husband. It’s hilarious watching her make this man who I’ve known as a take-no-prisoners businessman and full-on player instantly back off whatever he was about to say.

“Oh, I’ve heard all about Abigail’s shitty ex,” I say, trying to help out my friend. Hannah’s eyes go wide, an eyebrow raised in my direction. “If I ever meet the guy, I’m punching him right in the face,” I say.

“If you ever ... Oh. Right,” Hannah says, and her wide eyes move from me to her sister.

“He’s very ... protective,” Abigail says, her words stilted.

“Good. Abs can use that,” Hunter says. “We worry about her being so far away without anyone near.”

“We’re not *far*,” Hannah says, “But I’ve been watching out for her my whole life.” I can feel my girl shake her head and probably roll her eyes. “I’m just saying, having extra eyes on you to keep you safe and *happy* is a relief.”

“I’m happy to take on the job,” I say, moving to press my lips into Abigail’s hair, and I don’t miss the little sigh she lets out or how she melts just a hair further into me.

It reminds me how badly we need to discuss where this is going after the holidays. Of course, that was our deal—but there isn’t a part of me that thinks whatever crazy story she has to confess will change how fast I’m falling for her.

After dinner, we're all waiting for a cab—Hunter off to take Hannah to his condo in Manhattan while I plan to convince Abigail to come to my place for the night. If she wants to go home to her place, I'll follow her there, though.

I want to spend the night with her.

I'm standing behind her, her head coming up to my chin even in her high-heeled boots, and I pull her in closer, pretending to fight off the cold but just wanting her as close as possible to me.

My hand moves to above Rockefeller Center, pointing.

"You see up there?" I ask in her ear, and she nods. "That's the Rainbow Room." A gust of wind blows through us, and her body tightens against mine with the cold.

"I've heard of it," she says, her voice low. Not her normal low, a strange sort of low I've never noticed.

I wonder if it's the cold freezing her lungs the way it is mine.

"Next week is the party," I say, turning her in my arms. Her eyes are wide, probably from moving from the dark of the sky to the bright lights under the marquee. "You'll be there with me, as my date." She doesn't speak, but her little tongue comes out to wet her lips. My own tip up with a smile. "Make all those old assholes jealous, having a gorgeous blonde on my arm," I say, and again, her body tightens, but there's no breeze this time.

"You just want me there because I'm a pretty, young, blonde thing?"

"Absolutely," I say with a smile. "But also because I can't think of a single thing that would make that night more enjoyable than to spend the night with the literal personification of sunshine and happiness." The wind whips her hair, and I tuck a strand behind her ear. "You're coming, right?" I ask, suddenly unsure. She seems ... nervous.

But a slow smile spreads on her lips. And it could be the lights, could be that it's been a long day for her, could be my

mind seeing things that aren't there, but the smile looks hesitant. Anxious, even.

Still, she smiles, and she nods. "Yeah. I'd like that, Damien."

TWENTY-FIVE

December 22

-Damien-

The judge bangs her gavel to silence the audience, but Sharon is already turning towards me with watery eyes. The man on the other side of the aisle, Sharon's absolute monster of a soon-to-be ex, has been shouting for two minutes and continues to do so as a bailiff detains him.

Things are not looking good for Todd Sparks.

Sharon was just granted full custody in all legal ways of the kids, and Todd will be forced to pay hefty child support.

We won.

The battle of the formal divorce and alimony is still ahead of us, but Sharon has the kids and the help she needs to get on her feet.

"Oh my god," she says, a whisper, and I pull her into my arms to hug her. "You did it."

"We did it." I pull back to stare at her, eyes watering. "We did it. You loved those kids, and you stood up for them and for yourself. You wanted more for them. You risked everything for them. You were strong, and you did this. You worked until you found someone who could represent you. You were the one who found a way." A tear drops, spreading on the pink shirt she's wearing. "Nope, no. You don't cry over that piece of shit. You go to your beautiful kids, and you make them feel

loved and wanted. You take that fucking money and give them a good, easy life.”

“I don’t ... I don’t know what I’d do without you. Thank you. Truly. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Thank me by giving those kids a great Christmas. Celebrate with them. We’ll get started on the divorce next year,” I say.

“You changed my life, Damien. Changed the lives of my girls. And Abbie. Please, please—thank Abbie for me.”

“Abbie?”

“Yeah. She had this sent over to me.” Her hand moves down her outfit, a pretty pale pink top and well-fitting black slacks. “Told me to use it today and for interviews next week. Even sent over stuff for the kids and makeup and ... gosh. Tips for my hair!” She smiles at me, but my mind is elsewhere.

On Abigail asking when Sharon’s court date was, where she was staying. Her apartment address.

I want to send the girls cookies! she’d said.

“She’s a keeper, that one. You make sure you don’t mess that up, yeah?” Sharon says, pinching my cheek as if she’s not a few years younger than I am, but ten or twenty years my senior and giving me valuable advice.

Advice I don’t need, but I’ll take anyway.

“I don’t plan to,” I say with a smile, and then she’s swept off to sign paperwork.

By the time I leave the courthouse, I’m already putting my phone to my ear, briefcase in hand, as I walk toward the parking garage. It’s cold, a few flurries flying around.

Flurries now always remind me of one person, of a kiss at Rockefeller Plaza with a gorgeous woman. A kiss that, sometimes, I think changed the entire direction of my life.

Normally after a win, I grab a drink and a meal then head home to prepare for the next case. There’s always someone

else who needs representing, a divorce that needs filing, alimony that needs setting up.

Today, I have a voice that sounds like sunshine and rainbows in my ear.

“Hey, how’re you—”

“We won,” I say, cutting off Abigail before she can finish her hello.

“What?” she asks, her voice soft but excited.

“We won. Sharon has full custody, and her ex has to pay child support. We won.”

It’s strange, I think as I beep the key fob to unlock my car, thinking that I’ve never felt the need to call someone to update them on my cases before. Of course, I’ve had women in my life—great ones, kind ones—but none like Abbie.

None I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, would react the way I needed them to.

“Oh. Oh. Oh! Oh my god! Damien! That’s amazing! Holy shit!” she says, and I can almost picture her jumping around in her excited chaos. I can surely hear her feet hitting the ground rhythmically as she jumps.

I smile, a true smile I find creeping onto my face more and more when I’m in Abigail’s presence, and then there’s a tumble through the phone and an, “Oh, shit.”

“Are you okay?” I ask, stopping in my tracks despite the fact I’m in the middle of a crowded parking garage. A car honks at me, and I flip them off before walking out of the way.

“Shit. Yeah, sorry. I was painting my toes because the shoes I’m wearing to your fancy party are open and I don’t have time for a pedi, but I forgot they were drying and then I looked down and thought I smudged them, but I was still kind of jumping so I fell.” There’s a soft giggle in her voice when she talks, and fuck, it’s sweet.

“What color?” I ask, reaching my car and opening the door.

“What?”

“What color were you painting your toes?” A pause.

“Pink,” she says, and I smile.

“Good,” I say. “I know you have to be up early tomorrow, working before the party,” I say, getting in, closing the door, and waiting for the Bluetooth to catch up with my call. “But can I see you?”

“See me?”

“Yeah, *naranja*. Can I see you tonight? Come over to your place to celebrate?”

“Don’t you ... have people to celebrate with?” she asks, and there’s that strangeness in her voice, like she’s lived this before and knows the answer. Even more, she knows that she doesn’t like the answer.

It’s not the first time I’ve heard it, but while a part of me is dying to know where that lived experience is, another just wants to live in this bubble.

“Yeah,” I say.

“Oh.” The word is a breath, almost disappointed and sad.

“You, Abigail. You’re the people I have to celebrate with.” I crank the heat, rubbing my hands together while I wait for her to respond.

“You don’t have like ... friends? Or ... coworkers?”

“I have both. I’ll say, my coworkers don’t necessarily champion my pro bono wins the same way they do the wins that bring money into the firm. But still, I have friends.” There’s a beat of silence. “But I want to celebrate with you, Abbie.” I don’t call her that often, but when I do, she always smiles. And sometimes when she smiles at me like that, she’s just an... Abbie.

“Damien, honey, I would ... I’d love to. But I gotta be up early. I don’t—”

“I’m not looking to go out and get drunk. I’m looking to bring my girl pizza and wine and relax. I’m looking to fuck

her until we're both exhausted, drive her to work in the morning, and then pick her up tomorrow night for a fucking phenomenal night."

There's a long pause, and I wonder if she will say no. If she's going to say I should head home or go out with friends. It's strange how I've always done that—won a case then headed home alone—but now it sounds ... hollow.

"Yeah, Damien. That sounds perfect. But I'm paying for dinner," she says with that obnoxious but sweet layer of iron will in her voice.

"The fuck you are," I say with a laugh, pulling out and heading toward Long Island. "I'll see you in a bit, *rubia*." And then I hang up, ignoring all of her subsequent calls and texts, which start by telling me I better not pay for my own celebration dinner and end in her telling me to get garlic knots and cannoli.

So I brought wine and pizza and garlic knots and cannoli to my girl's place and we celebrated in style.

It was the best win of my entire career.

TWENTY-SIX

December 23

-Abbie-

“So Cam is being crazy defensive, telling me there’s no way I can change the plan, and if I do everything is ruined,” I say, refilling a display of blushes while the store is slow. “But I don’t know. It feels ... weird, now. It feels wrong, like I’m fucking something good up. And for what?”

“She’s projecting,” Kat says, a soft sigh in her voice, the kind a disappointed mother makes. “Jason fucked her up, and since then, she’s been unable to get over it. Every guy is a piece of shit to her.” I nod, knowing she’s right. “And even when they aren’t, she finds a reason that he must be shit. She self-sabotages.”

“Sometimes I wonder if she wants us to be miserable with her,” I say quietly, and I feel guilty saying the words I’ve thought for some time out loud. But Kat nods, agreeing.

“I’ve been trying to get her to go to therapy. She needs to talk to someone about it. A professional.” I keep organizing, distracting myself from the guilt of knowing we probably should have stepped in earlier. “But honestly, Abbie? I think you should.” Her smile is tight and sad. “Confess, I mean.” I stop organizing, giving my friend my full attention.

Part of me was hoping Kat would be on Cami’s side, that she’d tell me that my failed attempt at confessing was good enough, that I should wait until the new year like Damien and I agreed.

“What if he hates me?” I say in a soft voice, my true fears coming out. “I don’t even care about Richard anymore. I’m over it. We did enough shit, and it was fun and felt good, but I think ... I think this is too far.”

“If he’s going to hate you, he’s going to hate you. But honestly, he seems like the type to understand.”

“No one is understanding of being used, Katrina. Trust me.” Her eyes have that soft motherly look to them. “Richard used me for years, and as soon as I realized, I literally put a plan together to get revenge. We glitter bombed his car, changed his food orders, told his tailor to bring in his clothes, and posted his phone number all around New York City. Not to mention I’m sleeping with his boss. I had absolutely no interest in “understanding” where he was coming from, Kat. At all.”

“But you lived that for four years. You planned your entire life around the lies he told you.” I scrunch up my nose, knowing she’s not wrong. “Damien has not dealt with that. In fact, from the start, he told you this was for fun, right?”

I nod.

“But it’s ... not anymore. I don’t think so, at least. It doesn’t feel ... fun.”

“It’s not fun anymore?” she asks, an eyebrow raised.

“Oh, it’s fun,” I say with a devious smile, thinking of our celebratory night last night, and Kat laughs. “I just mean it’s not just fun. You know?” I hear my phone vibrate on the cash wrap counter and tip my chin toward it. “Can you check that? I want to make sure the plans haven’t changed,” I say, grabbing a few boxes to move the display around. Already knowing my password (because best friends always do), she grabs my phone and then ... silence.

I look up, attempting to see her over the boxes I’m artfully stacking but failing miserably.

“Kat?” She doesn’t reply.

Now, Cam? She’s my drama queen. She’s my man-hater. She’s the one I can count on to overreact about literally

anything.

Kat? She's sugar and sweetness, not an ounce of spice. She's hopelessly romantic and gooey-eyed.

So when I finally see her, holding my phone and with wide, glazed eyes, I start to panic.

"Kat?" I say, putting down the boxes and walking over to where she stands, staring at my phone.

Shit. Something terrible has happened.

"He calls you *naranja*?" she asks, her voice low and ... concerned, and I stare at her, confused.

"What?"

"*Naranja*. He calls you that?"

"What are you talking about?" I grab my phone from her hands, the grip loose, and look at the message from Damien.

Damien: I'll be at your place at four. Is that good, *naranja*?

"Oh. Yeah. We had this entire conversation about how I'm not a fall, and that orange is so not my color, but he still calls me it. I think he's just making fun of me because, ya know, pink," I say, moving a hand down my outfit with a pink top, the requisite black pants, and a pair of pink heels. I look back at my best friend, and I can nearly see the *Powerpuff Girls*' hearts in her eyes.

Shit.

"He's Latino."

"Yes," I say, confused.

"*Media naranja*." I blink at her. "It means half an orange." I continue to blink at her then look back at my phone, assuming my friend has officially lost her mind.

"Got it." I tap out a reply to Damien, confirming that time is good for me while side-eyeing Kat.

"It's a saying," she says, continuing. I stop and look at her, a strange feeling creeping over my skin like little needles of

awareness.

“Why do I feel like whatever you’re about to say is going to fuck with my head.”

“There’s a lot of reasons why it’s used. Some people think it’s because of Ancient Greek translations; others say it’s because no two oranges are identical.” I keep staring at her, waiting for her to get to the point. “But basically, in Spanish it means my other half. Or my better half. But most frequently, it’s used in place of something like soulmate.”

The world stops spinning.

The low Christmas music playing over the loudspeaker quiets.

The hustle and bustle of last-minute shoppers disappears.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“He calls you *naranja*. It’s not because he thinks it’s funny that you like pink and hate the color orange, Abbie.” More blinking. “He’s calling you his soulmate when he says it.”

“Wha?” I ask, and a small, horrified chuckle leaves my lips. “No. God, no. You must be confused.” She shakes her head slowly, almost sad.

“It’s a saying. There’s no real confusing it, Abs.”

“He said it after our first night together, Kat,” I say, panic moving through my system.

Not because I don’t like Damien.

I really freaking like this man.

I like this man absolutely more than anyone should like a man who they were never supposed to be with longer than six weeks.

I like this man in a way that I can see a future with him. A future I’m not allowed to see. A future that is impossible, given the way this relationship started.

I’m panicking because if this is true—if all this time it’s been more—I’ve lost all high ground. I’ve lost any hope of

being able to play this off in my mind as anything other than a really shitty thing to do to another human.

When it was fun, it was easy to convince myself it wasn't a big deal.

When words like soulmate are being thrown around, feelings get hurt.

And I don't want to be that person.

And though I want to sit down and grill Kat about every single tiny translation of the stupid word, I don't because the slow spell ends, and I spend the rest of my shift running around the store, helping customers, and never meeting up with Kat again.

But when I leave for the day, headed home to get ready, all I can think is how I need to tell Damien.

TWENTY-SEVEN

December 23

-Abbie-

“I need to tell him, Cam,” I say, my voice low as she gently brushes out the loose curls from the rollers she helped me put in.

When I got home from work, Cam was already in my place, getting things laid out for me for an afternoon of prepping.

She’s a good friend, trying to help me ease the anxiety, but I know a part of her wanted to be here in case she needed to talk me out of the conversation we’re about to have.

Her hand stops halfway through, her eyes meeting mine in my vanity mirror.

Hers are shocked, wide.

Mine are soft, concerned, and honestly, a little nervous.

“What?”

“I need to tell him,” I repeat, taking a deep breath. The brush slides through the rest of my hair before she moves a step back, sitting on the foot of my bed. Her brows gather with confusion.

“I don’t ... ,” she starts. “I don’t understand.”

“Today, before we head to the party, I’m going to confess. Tell Damien everything.”

“But ... why?”

“It’s not simple anymore, Cam. It’s fucked up, really. I can’t do this anymore. I should have told him weeks ago. After the first date, I should have told him. I’m a complete asshole for letting it go on this long.”

“No, you’re not. You’re ... We have a plan, Abbie.” A strained air of frustration wraps through her words. “We’re so close.”

“Cam.” I say her name calm but steady. With compassion but also firmness. “This is my life. This isn’t a plan. It isn’t ... It isn’t a game. I shouldn’t have let it get this far.”

“So why did you?” she asks, her voice gone cold. She’s answering me before I can even try to address the question. “I know why. It was because you wanted this, Abbie. You want this revenge. You want to see Richard’s face when you walk in on Damien’s arm, want to see his face when you show him what he fucked up.”

“I did, Cam. I did. You’re right. I was hurt, and I was angry, and I wanted to get mine. But now? It *doesn’t matter*. People’s feelings are getting involved. *My* feelings are getting involved. People are going to get hurt.”

“You can’t do this, Abbie.

“Why?” I ask. I still haven’t turned from facing the vanity, eyes still locked on her through the mirror.

My voice is low, though. Soft. Cajoling. Like the voice you use when talking to a child or a hurt animal.

Her eyes look like that. Hurt, pained.

It’s then all of my thoughts are confirmed.

Cam has been using this process to soothe her own pain.

When we were in college, Cam fell for a man. He was older, a teacher’s assistant, and no matter how many times we told her it was a bad idea, she wouldn’t listen. She fell, and she fell hard. They made plans for the future, plans of marriage and children, and after a life of being told that you don’t marry for love but for money, she found her happily ever after.

She used to be like Kat, a hopeless romantic who wanted the white wedding and the picket fence.

Until his wife came to her.

He'd been married for five years.

He had two kids.

And Cami was torn apart, absolutely, unendingly destroyed.

Since then, she hasn't believed in love. She hasn't seen the promise in any relationship. It's why all the years of her telling me Richard was a shithead didn't truly stick—she thinks *every man* is a shithead.

She never got her payback, instead burying herself in school and letting in only Kat and me over the next year while she graduated early. Then she went into finance, making it her mission to beat out any high-powered man who got in her way, her heart turning cold and bitter.

We call her *maneater* for her ability to chew up men and use them for sex, entertainment, or a free meal before she spits them out when they lose their taste.

“Cam, this isn't your fight,” I say, my voice that same cajoling tone. “Damien is good. He's kind—”

“They all seem that way.”

“He's not Jason.” I say the words without registering them in my mind first, but I instantly know I went too far.

“This isn't about *him*,” she says, venom in the words.

“Cam, I know he hurt you, but it's been years—”

“It's not about him, Abbie!” She tosses her hands in the air. “God! I just want you to finish what you started. Richard deserves ... He deserves what's coming to him!” she says, pacing to the other side of my room.

“And what about me, Cam? What about Damien? Do I deserve to ruin whatever is brewing between us, something that could be so good, just because Richard deserves to eat shit?”

“You can’t quit now, Abbie,” she says, hands on her hips.

“I’m not quitting, Cam. It’s not a game. It’s my *life*. I really like this guy. I’m falling for him.”

“God, you’re so naive,” she says, grabbing her coat. “I can’t do this. I can’t watch you do this to yourself. When it all falls apart, call me.”

And then my best friend leaves, her pain of ten years following her out the door like a trail of poison.

I text Kat, telling her to find our friend and make sure she’s okay, before I continue getting ready.

Because one way or another, the truth is coming out tonight, and I’ll be damned if I don’t look good while it happens.



I spend the next hour after Cam storms out trying to balance finishing getting ready, preparing myself mentally for the ruination of my relationship with Damien, and trying to call Cam and make sure she’s okay. I never reach her, but I eventually get a call from Kat, who confirms she’s found our friend and has her safe.

“If things go ... bad, I’ll call you. We can all meet up and drink and cry. But Kat ... we need to talk to Cam. We’ve let this go on way too long, and I think soon it’s going to be too late. She needs to talk to someone about this. She needs to ... move on from it. It’s not healthy,” I say, using a sparkly clip to pin back the left side of my hair.

“You’re right. We didn’t do it, and we’re not to blame, but we also haven’t done anything to stop it,” she says with a sigh.

“Okay, keep me updated?” I say.

“Of course. And you keep me updated on the Damien thing, okay?” The words make me nauseous.

“Got it,” I say. “Love you.”

“Love you too. Remember that true love can tolerate bumps, Abbie.”

“It’s not love, Kat.”

“Sure, Abs. Talk to you later.” And then the line is dead, and I’m staring in my vanity, holding a silent phone to my ear. I jump when I hear a knock on my front door.

The knock on the door signals the arrival of Damien Martinez here to pick me up for the Schmidt and Martinez Law Firm holiday party.

And the potential end to something beautiful since I can’t let myself leave this building without confessing.

Of course, Damien has somehow made friends with Fred at the front desk, meaning that once I confirmed Damien is, in fact, with me, he is simply buzzed up when he comes here.

I want to be annoyed, but it’s kind of nice and definitely sweet, so I let it go.

But I feel like barfing right now, knowing what’s coming in the next few hours.

Two months of planning and manipulation are about to come to fruition for the most brilliant kind of revenge a woman can have.

The revenge of showing an ex just what he missed out on and doing so by being on the arm of an even better man.

Except the taste in my mouth isn’t the sweet cotton candy taste I thought it would be. It’s not what I had hoped for that Halloween when I was crying to my best friends and trying to find someone—anyone—who might treat me well and make me forget about my asshole ex.

Instead, it’s bitter.

Bitter and ... scared.

I messed up.

I messed up because this ... this could have been good. If I had let it play out the way the world intended, if I had matched

with this man and just been ... me, it could have been beautiful.

But now I'm going to get my revenge, and I'm going to lose this man who I think I could have fallen for if given the chance.

Who would have known that curing one heartbreak would lead to another?

Before I answer the door, I walk over to the burn jar, one final slip of paper in it. I know what it says.

I'm the one who wrote it.

"You're not enough."

Funny how the thing Richard did that gutted me the most was the last one in the jar. The reason I needed most to finish out this plan.

Instead of unraveling and reading it, I pop it into my clutch. I'm not sure why—maybe as some kind of talisman, strength to do what I know I need to do. But all the same, I do.

Another knock comes, this one more impatient, and I scramble, grabbing the small clutch and a jacket (after that first time I learned my lesson) before heading to the door.

I turn the knob halfway until the automatic lock clicks, and then the door is pushed in.

I step back, a heel hitting the shitty tile that lines my entryway with a loud clack, and then there's Damien.

Fuck, he's handsome.

His hair is combed back near perfectly, hair product used to keep it that way. I'd joke with him about it, but I just ... can't.

Because the man is in a black tuxedo.

Now, I was warned.

I know that this event is fancy and that proper dress code is expected, and after that first night when Cami googled him, I

did so a few times on my own, noting how fucking *delicious* he looked in a classic black and white tuxedo.

But here he is in the flesh, and he's perfection. So damn handsome, so damned perfect, I can't breathe.

So I don't.

And when he says a quiet, "Hey," to me, I don't respond because I'm still not breathing at the sight of him.

His hand goes to my arm, and the warmth seeps into my skin. "Breathe, *naranja*," he says, the words low and intimate. A small smile plays on his lips and as always, I do as he says.

A gulp of fresh air fills my lungs, making my head dizzy with the necessary oxygen.

"Hey," I breathe.

He smiles for real now, the full, happy, glorious smile and the laugh lines and his perfect fucking tan skin on display, and *shit, shit, shit, I'm going to lose this.*

This smile.

I'm going to lose it in the next ten minutes.

"Hey," he says back, stepping farther into my apartment and into me, kicking the door shut, and putting a hand on my chin to tip it up until my lips are on his.

The kiss is soft and sweet and everything good about this man and this short relationship.

I'm going to lose this, too.

He steps back, taking me in before his brow comes together slightly in what can only be described as confusion.

"What's up with the dress?" he asks, and my stomach sinks to my feet.

Fuck.

He doesn't like my dress.

It doesn't fit the idea of what he wanted to have on his arm when facing the business he's helped build.

Maybe Cami's right.

All men are the same.

I look down at the sleek black dress hitting a respectable length paired with my hint of pink pumps and loose, pinned half-up hair. The sleeves are cap sleeves stopping just under my armpits, and the collar is a respectable sweetheart barely showing my décolletage. I paired it with silver stud earrings and a simple necklace.

It's ... pretty.

Cute.

Something Richard would have loved seeing me in.

And I absolutely hate it.

And it seems it also doesn't fit what Damien wanted me to wear.

"Is it too tight? Too revealing? Too—"

"It's boring," he says, and I look up at him, confused.

"What?"

"It's ... not you." The look on his face is hard to pinpoint, but it's almost ... disgust.

"I don't understand."

"Abbie. Are you black dresses and conservative cuts?"

"I—" I try to move, to look away, to guard my heart and prepare for the worst, but he grabs my chin between his thumb and forefinger again.

"Are you the kind of woman who blends in?"

"I—"

"No. So why are you now?"

"I ... I thought ... I thought since we were going to dinner with your work, you'd want me to look more presentable."

"This more shit from that ex of yours?" I don't answer, but I guess not answering is answer enough.

I don't avoid answering because he's wrong or because I'm embarrassed.

I don't answer because of the guilt that's been building up all week.

For the past month, if I'm being honest.

This is wrong, the voice in my gut says. *This isn't a game anymore. It's more. So much more than what you intended.*

But that voice keeps getting quieted by the other voice, the embarrassed one, the hurt one.

The one who wants nothing more than to show Richard he was wrong. That I'm not just fun, not just a good time.

I want Richard to see that I'm worthy.

But as the past two months have progressed, as I've gotten closer to Damien, the man Richard spent four years complaining about, talking about, kissing his ass, I've realized that I was *always* worthy.

The unworthy one was Richard.

He never deserved me, the love I could give, or the hope I held for our future together.

Never.

But does that mean I should give up? And even more, what does giving up look like?

Confessing?

Skipping the party?

Breaking up with Damien?

All of those sound like horrible choices.

The only thing my mind can settle on is I need to tell him *everything*. Right now.

"Damien, I—"

"Come," he says, grabbing my hand and twining his fingers with mine in a secure, safe way. He leads me to the

dressing rack in the corner where I keep my dresses, forcing me to sit on my bed while he runs through my clothes.

His bowtie is pink. A faint, fair pink that goes with his skin tone so fucking well, but pink all the same.

Not black or all-American red or a classic dark navy like Richard always insisted on wearing.

But pink.

And I know the only reason a man like Damien Martinez even *looks at* a pink bowtie is because he expected the woman he's going on a date with to be wearing a pink dress. He wore it to match me.

“Damien, we don't have to—”

“This one,” he says, pushing hangers as they scrape noisily on the metal bar. “This is what you'll wear tonight. It's perfect. It's you.”

The dress in question is exactly that and more.

I had bought that dress months ago, saving to afford the extravagant piece I saw in the store for this exact day. Last spring, I'd seen it in the back room at work before it was even put out onto the floor, and I knew I needed it. This is what I wanted to have photographs of me wearing, a hand to my mouth and the other in Richard's, who would be on one knee, his coworkers looking on with a look of serene congratulations.

A pink so fair and creamy, it almost looks like a sparkly champagne color in poor lighting—a big fluffy bow over one shoulder, the other bare. It's knee-length, fitted through the end with a short slit up the back.

I saw it, and I needed it.

And when I was going through outfit options, my hand grazed it, equal parts guilt and longing searing my skin.

I couldn't wear it.

I *wanted* to wear it. So badly. But even looking at it made me realize I had fucked up.

And now, that is reinforced as he stares at me expectantly.

I need to tell him.

I need to tell him *right now*.

And he might hate me, and that will be valid, but he'll absolutely loathe me if I let him take me to this party without telling him the full truth of who I am. Of who my ex is. And what my true intentions were—at the beginning.

“Damien, we—

“This one. Go, now, *naranja*.”

“Seriously, Damien. I need to—”

“Fine, I'll do it,” he says then turns me until my back is to him. “Take off this damned funeral dress.” I laugh because he's not wrong. Cami said nearly the same thing with a sneer when I walked out of the dressing room, sliding the curtain and standing in the doorway.

His fingers move to the top of my back then tug on the little zipper.

It brushes every vertebra on the way down, and once it's to my hips, the top gives way, parting down my arms. His warm hands push the dress off my shoulders, and the dress pools on the floor.

“Thank god,” he whispers like he's relieved not to have to deal with it any longer. “This. This is much better,” he says, his hands gliding down whisper soft over my sides, over the lace thong and bra hidden under the dress. “Much fucking better,” he says then uses his hands on my waist to turn me to the mirror.

“This. This is what I want everyone to picture when they see you in that dress. Fucking miles of perfect skin. Curves I want to sink my fingers in. Absolute perfection, Abigail.” The use of my full name always gives me chills, but right now, I have them even more when he's behind me in a damn tux while I'm nearly naked.

“But only I get to see this beauty. My fucking beauty, yeah?” His face moves down, brushing my hair behind my

neck and nipping the skin beneath my ear. My breathing accelerates, going even more ragged than before as every muscle in my body tenses.

The hands on my waist move up, up until his thumbs are dipping into the top of the cups of my bra, tucking the fine lace beneath my breasts.

“Only I get these, Abigail.” Thick, tan fingers move to pinch my nipples, and I watch the contrast as he tugs, the feeling translating directly to my clit.

“Ah!” I say in a low moan. “Damien, we need to—”

“You’re right,” he says, moving me, tossing me to my bed on my back. Then I’m lying there, staring up at him as he towers over me. Fingers move as my chest heaves, looping under the lace of my thong and pulling them down over my heels.

“Damien—”

“I’m going to fuck you quick, Abigail,” he says. “Quick and hard right now to remind you whose you are and that you are the sexiest woman I’ve ever seen.” His finger moves through my newly exposed wet, dragging it to my clit and circling one, twice.

I moan at the feel, writhing, needing more.

“*Damien*,” I say in a breathy voice that doesn’t sound like my own. I’m no longer protesting, trying to tell him we don’t have time. “I need more.”

“I know exactly what you need, baby. I’m going to give it to you when I’m good and ready to.” His smile is downright devious as he looks down at my squirming body.

Dark hands move to his belt, slowly undoing it as he watches me. My hand moves to my breast, still in the bra with the cups pulled down as seems to be Damien’s favorite way to have me, and I tug on a nipple.

“Fuck, Abigail. So pretty when you play with yourself for your man.” I bite my lip, shyness taking over. He grabs my chin, keeping my eyes on his.

“You think I want a sweet innocent girl, Abigail. That I want to show off some matronly woman? No. I want everyone to know I’m the luckiest person alive. I have a woman on my arm who is every man’s wet dream, but only *I* get to play with her.” The wet finger moves to my mouth. “Suck this like my good girl,” he says in a whisper, and I comply, my mouth opening to take in his finger and suck on it.

“That’s it, *rubia*. I know what you like. What you need.” He straightens, using one hand to finish undoing his belt and releasing himself.

I don’t speak.

I can’t, my entire body a riot of flames and need.

His cock is in his hand, and with his finger still in my mouth, I watch it pump, a drop of pre-cum forming on the head.

“Is this what you want, Abigail?” he asks, his voice low and ragged. I nod. “Of course you do.” He drags the head through my wet, and I moan, bucking my hips.

“Uh-huh,” he says, moving his hand, the fingers wet with my spit, to my chest and pressing. “Still. I decide when you get my cock, Abigail. You’ll lie here until I give it to you, yeah?” I know he’s looking for an answer. I nod.

“Such a good fucking girl,” he murmurs to himself, his hand gently moving up until it’s wrapped around my throat. He notches the head of his cock in my entrance and holds my eyes, waiting for me to disobey. Waiting for me to move, to try and get him deeper.

I don’t move.

I barely fucking breathe.

The only thing in this room is Damien, his eyes locked on me, and I’m using them as my lifeline.

He smiles.

“My good little whore,” he says in a whisper then bends forward, his hand pressing on the sides of my neck as he does, and gently, so gently pressing his lips to mine. My eyes drift

shut at the feeling of his body over mine, his hand on my throat, slowly tightening, of his breath on my lips, and then finally, of his cock slowly sliding inside of me. At this angle, everything is so fucking tight, and he fills me perfectly, almost painfully.

He groans against my lips as the feeling takes over us, but I can't get a noise out.

He straightens, his hand releasing gently, quickly, letting blood to return to my face, letting me gasp in air and then quickly moan it back out as he rears back and slams in again.

“Fuck! Damien!”

“Whose are you?” he demands, the hand that was on my hip moving, thumb hovering over my clit.

“Yours! Fuck, god, I'm yours, Damien!”

“Who gets this pussy whenever he wants it?”

“You do. God, it's you! You!”

“Who do you dress for, Abigail?”

“You! My body is yours!”

“That's right, baby.” He slams in, hand tightening on my throat once more.

He's close.

I can see it in the set of his jaw, the way he's slamming in deeper, the way the thumb that was hovering over my clit is now circling it with each thrust. His hand tightens, slowing the blood flow, making me lightheaded, and my hands move to my breasts, pinching both nipples hard.

“That's it, play with yourself for me. So fucking pretty.”

A noise grates from my chest, and he knows.

He grinds my clit harder, slams in deep, and moves his hand from my throat.

“Come for me, Abigail. Right fucking now,” he says, and I do because my body belongs to him, obeys him. When we're like this, it no longer responds to me.

My eyes go dark, stars shining through as my body explodes, my back stiffening, his name a garbled cry from my throat. Faintly, I can hear Damien continue to slam into me and then roar out my name before collapsing on top of me. He stays there, deep in me, lying on top of me for long moments as we catch our breath.

Time passes.

Eternities pass.

Eventually, my mind catches up to the universe.

“We should ... get going,” I say, a murmur through strained lungs. He nods, his skin caressing mine as it does.

“Probably.”

He doesn't move, and I can't help but giggle.

“Damien,” I say, and he kisses my neck, sweet and fun and a contrast to the man from minutes ago.

“Let's skip it,” he says, mouth grazing along ticklish nerve endings.

“Okay,” I say, hand moving to caress his bare back. I can't even remember why I wanted to go to this stupid party, why I would opt for anything other than a naked Damien in my apartment.

“We gotta go,” he says.

“Probably,” I agree. He nips my collarbone, and I squeal, feeling him slip out of me. A different noise slips from my lips—one of longing and emptiness. He pauses from his retreat and stares at me.

“Don't make noises like that or we'll never make it out of this place,” he says. I just smile. Damien shakes his head then kisses my nose. “Stay. I'll get a towel.” He stands, and I watch him, broad shoulders and narrow hips and tan skin, as he walks away.

He's not gone long when he returns with a warm wet washcloth, wiping me clean and setting it aside. Then he

gently lifts the cups of my bra and helps me stand. He's already back in his boxers and has my panties in hand.

"As much as it kills me ... ," he says then places one of my hands on his shoulder before bending over. "Lift," he says, tapping a heel, and I oblige, stepping in then repeating the move. He slowly lifts the lace up, grazing every oversensitized nerve as he does.

Then he's standing, putting his tux back on and draping the tie around his neck then walking over to the dress and grabbing it, gently taking it off the hanger and unzipping it.

"What kind of bra do you wear with this?" he asks, looking at the black lace one I was wearing under the funeral dress.

"Uh ... none," I say. "It has one built in. No lines and whatnot." He smiles.

"Perfect," he says, once again bending and helping to drag the dress up my body.

It's strangely a more intimate experience than any we've shared before, him dressing me. He has me stand and does the zipper on the side as I face him before he moves things around, shifting the dress I fell in love with to help it fall into place.

I can't resist retuning the favor by reaching out and grabbing his bowtie, settling it, and then beginning to tie up the pink silk with finesse. When I finish the knot beneath his chin, I smile at him.

"Turn," he says, looking into my eyes, his voice low.

He does that a lot, looks in my eyes when I'm in something sexy, something I know he likes how I look in. It's like he wants me to know that despite the extravagance, it's me he finds attractive. Me. He wants to see beneath it all.

It's absolutely intoxicating.

I do as he demands and face the mirror with him behind me.

He's tall, dark, and handsome with that black tux and pink bowtie, but his face is serious. So damn serious as his eyes take me in.

I'm small and blonde and pink, and for a split second—a microsecond—I see what Richard meant. I don't look serious. I don't look professional. I look like a fun time. And though I look and feel like *me*, the version of me I repressed for the past few years, I can't help but wonder if letting her out was a good choice.

And then his tan hand is on my hip, spanning it and pulling me back into him.

“Beautiful,” he says in a whisper, like he's saying it to himself and not to me.

“My hair is a mess,” I say, taking in the hair I had perfectly pinned into a modest style, the half updo Damien's fingers had destroyed, leaving my hair in loose waves around my shoulders.

“You look like I fucked you before we left.” My face goes white.

“Oh, my god, Damien, I—”

“Only I'll know. I'm kidding, Abigail,” he says, using a hand to move my hair behind my shoulder, revealing the big bow. “You look like a present I want to unwrap. An early Christmas gift. Let's go.”

And though I smile as he kisses my temple before he walks us out, making sure to grab my jacket on the way, I can't help but feel like this is a terrible decision.

But I'm out of time.

The clock hit midnight and I didn't confess and now my fairy tale will crumble around me.

And whatever happens next, I deserve it because I played a good man to get revenge on a shit one who didn't even deserve that effort.

TWENTY-EIGHT

December 23

-Damien-

The lobby is decked out in full-on magic when we walk in before an employee takes our coats and quickly ushers us to the stairs and elevator. I look down at Abbie, whose eyes are locked on the stairs with disgust.

“How many flights is this?” she asks.

“Don’t worry, *rubia*. We’re taking the elevator,” I say with a smile, pulling her that way. “I won’t make you do any crazy cardio.” She rolls her eyes at me. “At least not until tonight.” That sends a shiver down her spine that I don’t miss. When I see the elevator attendant and feel the shake of Abbie’s hand in mine, I turn to him. Reaching into my pocket, I pull out my wallet and some cash before slipping it to the kid working the elevator. “Give us this one, yeah?” I ask, tipping my chin to the empty elevator with a smile. The kid’s eyes go wide at the cash, and he nods.

“Uh, sure, yeah. It’s the 60th floor,” he says, holding the automated doors open as we step in. “Have a great night, sir.” And then the doors slide shut. I know this elevator—I’ve been on it enough times. It’s slow and takes forever to reach the top. We’ve got at least two minutes of peace.

I move, pinning Abbie in place in the corner against the wall.

“You look fucking beautiful,” I whisper in her ear, dipping my head until my lips brush the soft skin of her neck. My

hands move from the cold metal wall of the elevator, grabbing her hips and then moving up in a slow glide. I skim her waist and then the sides of her breasts, marveling at how her breathing changes, before burying my hands in her hair. Finally, I tip her head back until she's looking at me.

"Stop, you're going to mess up my hair," she says with a smile, but it's not her usual smile. It's a different smile. One covering anxiety and panic.

What is she so nervous about?

My mind moves to the conversation about the dress, about wanting to fit in, to fit some image she thinks I need her to slip into.

If I ever meet the shithole ex of hers, I'm going to punch him square in the face for doing this to her. For making her self-conscious, for questioning that she's anything but beautiful and perfect.

He's an idiot, pushing this gorgeous, loving human being aside.

Thankfully, I am *not* an idiot.

"Good," I say, pressing my lips to hers gently.

"Good?" The furrow in her brow forms, and I kiss it too.

I fucking love that furrow.

I hope when she gets older, she gets a permanent crease there that I can kiss every fucking day.

If I could, I would press a kiss on every ounce of confusion and insecurity she feels.

The truth is, this started as fun, as a way to pass the time and get a date for these mundane events. It's morphed into so much more.

So much more.

And I'm still not fully sure if she knows that.

"*Naranja*, why would I want to go into that party with you on my arm and let any man in there think I'm not keeping you

satisfied?” Now she fights a smile, that smile of hers that is from her devious, reckless side. I wonder how much of that side was suppressed, how much has come back.

How much is there left to discover?

“But they might—”

“Drop this perfect shit. You’re real. I’m real. We? We’re real. These assholes? They don’t fucking matter.” Her face drops, a mix of panic and adoration that is absolutely confusing taking over her face.

“Damien, I need to talk—” she starts, the ding of the elevator going off, signaling that we’ve reached the Rainbow Room. I press another kiss to her lips.

I’m sure she’s about to tell me things have gotten too far, that this isn’t just fun and easy for her anymore, and I can’t wait to have that conversation with her, watch the look of shock and awe come over her face when she understands I’m not letting her go, no matter what she says.

“We’re here, *rubia*. Tonight, yeah? Tell me tonight after I fuck you in this dress,” I say, and her eyes widen.

The entire firm is staring at us as the doors slide open, and I tip my head back with laughter, pulling my woman into me.

TWENTY-NINE

December 23

-Abbie-

Dread is curling in my gut, heating my veins, and clouding my mind as the elevator dings. Damien's laughter is filling the tiny space and spilling out into the room I once wanted more than anything to be in.

Right now, I want nothing more than to run from it.

I fucked up.

I fucked up so badly.

I think about all of the times I tried to tell Damien, all the times we got interrupted ... and I know now that there is no way I couldn't have found an opportunity to tell the truth.

To tell him the real reason I accepted his date, why this all began.

To tell him that regardless of why this started, my intentions changed. Really, they changed that first night, if I'm being honest with myself. And they changed again when he brought Sharon to my store. Further, when he took me to the concert, and when he recognized my taking care of him and appreciated it. And finally, when he took me to see the damn fucking Rockettes with my sister, fulfilling a silly childhood dream because I told him about it once on our first date.

There is no way, if I had *truly wanted* to risk it, to open myself up and tell the truth, that I couldn't have just stood

there and said, *No, Damien, I need to tell you something very important right this moment.*

Because I know down to my very core that if I ever told Damien something was important to me, he'd stop and listen instantly.

Because what's important to me is important to him.

It's part of what's so fucking beautiful about him.

And so incredibly tragic.

To know what both sides of that coin look like, feel like.

My eyes scan the room as Damien walks through, smiling and waving, his arm wrapped around my waist proudly. Eyes follow us, but they aren't shocked eyes like Richard always made it seem like the prestige of this event would attract.

I'm not a hidden embarrassment with Damien.

I'm a shining gem he's showing off.

A trophy.

Something he *won*.

Goddammit, I fucked up. I fucked up.

Every part of me wants to rewind, to redo all of this, to accept that first date and at the restaurant tell him that one of his employees is my ex, but I was looking forward to getting to know him. That I thought we were a good fit.

It could have been *so fucking simple*.

I could have walked into this room with the same effect, but without the stress and betrayal. Shit, Damien probably would have gotten a kick out of it, leaned into it even. I would have shone. Instead, Damien shines with pride and joy on his face, and he moves me around the room while I stand with a tight, fake smile pulling at my lips.

And then the room stops moving.

The world stops.

Because Richard's eyes meet mine, and fuck, if the look of shock and confusion in his eyes isn't everything I thought it

would be and more.

The look morphs again when he moves to look at the man on my arm. It morphs to pure anger and disbelief and then ... panic. Panic is in his eyes.

And fuck, it feels good to see that. The look I had daydreamed of, the look I thought he would give me upon realizing the woman he betrayed, used, and threw away was on the arm of the man he most wanted to impress.

Locking eyes with him, I push my hair over my shoulder, messy from Damien's hands in the elevator, smile wide, and move just a fraction to get closer to Damien. He looks down at me with a small, soft smile, and I return it.

He's oblivious to what's happening.

I've gotten my revenge, cold as the snow forecast tonight.

The only problem is, that the revenge feels sourer than I thought it would, tainted by panic and shame. I can only hope my own punishment doesn't hurt as badly as it should.

It only takes ten minutes after our arrival to get to Richard's corner of the room.

It took about thirty seconds of those ten minutes to realize the *blonde* woman at his side was the paralegal that worked with him, who he told me was flighty and annoying.

Blonde and flighty and annoying, but apparently not too much to be disqualified as arm candy at this *prestigious event*.

I guess it was the lack of curves and the addition of a conservative outfit that made her win, making her a very blonde Jackie to my outlandish Marilyn.

Whatever. I'd rather be a Marilyn over a Jackie any day.

When we're standing in front of Richard and ... Misty—her name is fucking *Misty*, for Christ's sake—I put on my favorite fake face.

It's the one I use when asshole men come into the store, boss everyone around, and then try and come over to me to get a discount and my number.

Soft, sultry eyes, a pouty smile, a relaxed face.

I'm at ease.

I'm a pleasure to talk to.

I'm going to force you somehow to double my commission by the time you leave my store.

I'm going to make this revenge sweet as fucking candy.

If I'm already going down, I may as well enjoy it.

"Oh, Dick," Damien says like he forgot Richard was here, his hand on my waist. It takes absolutely every fiber of my being not to laugh, both at the nickname that Richard despises and the subtle jab of *not noticing him*. "Almost missed you. Nice to see you were able to make it. Merry Christmas." His voice is firm and friendly, but underneath that, it's irritated, and I remember that he doesn't like Richard. Turns out, Richard wasn't so far off all those times he told me Damien didn't like him.

I mean, who could blame him?

"Martinez. Happy holidays," he says, putting a hand out and shaking my date's hand in the most awkward way I've possibly ever seen. His eyes move to me, back to his boss, and then to me, confusion and frustration still burning in their depths.

But he doesn't say anything.

Doesn't expose me for who I am to him.

He doesn't do ... *anything*.

"Oh, my manners. Dick, this is my beautiful girlfriend, Abigail," he says, tipping his head towards me.

Girlfriend.

Fuck. That's new.

I like it a lot.

Too fucking much.

And here, at this party I hoped Richard would bring me to, to prove I meant something to him, at this party I thought would be the beginning of forever, Damien is starting something of our own.

Will it make it past this doomed night?

Richard's eyes widen, but barely.

It's the kind of subtle widening you learned to take note of because you spent four years with a man, reading his every emotion and trying to balance how to best combat it.

So many days were spent trying to counteract his terrible mood swings, to fix what I hadn't broken.

"Oh, I've met Abbie before," he says, and I think that's it. I'm done. "I like the hair, Abbie. It suits you," he says about the blonde.

Then he nods once more before he's pulled to another corner by *Misty*, her eyes shooting daggers at me over her shoulder.

Seems *she* knows who I am.

I can't help the urge to wiggle my fingers at her in the most passive-aggressive wave known to womankind.

"Well, that was weird. You know him?" Damien asks, confused.

"Uh, yeah. Kind of. I ... That's what I wanted to tell you about. We'll talk tonight?" I ask, hope in my voice. The way things are positioned, it seems that I may have gotten my sweet revenge and possibly the guy. But there is no universe where I can just brush this off and never tell Damien.

No matter what happens, before I go to sleep, I'll have to tell him the full story.

And if he decides to forgive me, I'll spend a lifetime proving to him that he made the right choice.

The Rainbow Room is as magical as I always thought it would be. The drinks are flowing, the food delicious, but the true glory of the whole evening is spending the night with Damien.

Just as he has been every other time we've been together, he's attentive, pulling me into conversations with a natural ease so I don't feel left out, introducing me to absolutely everyone as his *beautiful girlfriend, Abigail*, and whispering in my ear funny information about the people around us, giving me all the dirt on his coworkers.

The night is perfection.

And when a spoon is tapped against a champagne flute, servers walking around the room with trays of the bubbly beverage to make sure everyone has a glass to toast with, we all stop what we're doing and look up at Simon Schmidt.

Richard's grandfather.

Damien's partner with whom he started this firm over ten years ago.

He smiles, looking around the room with genuine joy on his face, then starts to speak.

"Thank you all for coming! Each year this event grows, families growing, our firm growing, and each year it's the highlight of my year to see it happen. To have you all—the family that helped Damien and me build our dream—spend this busy holiday season with us." Damien tips his glass up to Simon. "We all know Damien isn't much of a talker outside the courtroom, so as usual, you're going to have to hear this old man ramble on for a bit as I go through the extensive list of company accomplishments and milestones that you all have achieved over the year." Everyone laughs, and Damien rolls his eyes, putting an arm around my shoulders. "At least he seems to have a good one on his arm this year! Don't mess this up, Martinez—I want to be able to look at that one again next year, yes?" he says, and I blush a burning, deep red.

But instead of shaking his head or waving off Schmidt, he nods, speaking over the crowd of laughter with another tip of his flute to his partner. “Don’t plan on it, man. Keeping this one around for a while.”

If you had told me two months ago this exchange would have happened and had me predict my next move, how I’d react and respond, I would have told you there is no way my eyes wouldn’t have drifted across the room to where Richard is sitting with Misty and cataloged his every facial expression.

I don’t do that.

I smile.

I tip my head up, my shoulder pinned between Damien’s arm and chest, and smile at him.

A full, true, down-to-my-soul smile, forgetting the pit I dug myself into, forgetting that tonight I have to confess, forgetting that my ex is watching my every move.

And while I’m smiling and soaking in the sun that is Damien, Richard’s anger starts to boil.

But I’m too caught up in the shine of this new relationship even to notice.

Simon Schmidt spends a good thirty minutes recognizing employees for their accomplishments in the workplace, congratulating them for milestones outside of work, and even mentioning some big moments for their guests—it seems Joanie’s son in attendance won MVP of his little league team, and Henry’s daughter got into NYU.

This place is a family, just like Damien told me. It’s what keeps him here, even when he doesn’t always agree with the cases.

It’s also something Richard *never* shared with me about this place—how close the office is.

And when Simon winds down his speech with promotions and accolades, there's an awkward silence.

An expectant silence.

One promotion is missing.

One very important promotion, one announcement, is missing.

Richard as partner.

The silence lingers, so thick in the air you can almost taste it, before Simon tips his head to the DJ in the back of the room. "Want to get some songs playing, my friend?" he says with a forced smile, not looking around the room with warmth the way he had been all during his speech. "I'm ready to boogie!" There is a general sigh of relief that it's over as music starts.

But I watch Simon as he steps from where he was speaking, from the mini podium they put together for him, and watch Richard stand, his face a deep, angry red I can see even from here.

Even more, something I didn't notice before—he looks like shit.

His clothes are ill-fitting. His pants are too tight, the buttons on his shirt pulling. His hair is greasy, but if I'm not mistaken, it looks thinner.

He's falling apart without me.

A strange feeling of pity runs through me.

Unexpected.

Not the kind of pity that makes you want to change something, not the kind of pity that makes you want to help pick up the pieces, but the kind that makes you sad to have the person breathing the same air as you.

Quiet shouting starts, and it takes everything in me to avert my eyes, to stop watching what is going down. I lean into Damien, asking a question I know the answer to.

“What’s going on there?” I ask, looking up at him. Damien’s eyes are dark and fixated on the argument. Before he can answer, Richard is ushered into another room with Simon, the door slamming behind him.

Damien sighs, a hand running through his hair. “Richard thought he was going to be promoted to partner today. He’s Simon’s grandson, but he’s not performing up to the standard, and I won’t entertain nepotism.”

Richard has assumed for months this would be his day. Today would be the day he achieved partner.

But Richard also thought he was a good lawyer.

Richard blamed any and all losses on everyone but himself: the jury, the judge, the plaintiff’s sob story, an incompetent client. It was never his own shortcoming.

“Should you go check on things?” I ask, looking from Damien to the door and back. He sighs and shakes his head.

“No. They’ll handle it and will call me in if needed. Let’s enjoy our night while we can,” he says and then stands, putting a hand out to me. “Dance?” he asks.

“I’d love to,” I say, grabbing his hand and standing, letting him lead me onto the dance floor and away from my terrible choices.

For now, at least.

THIRTY

December 23

-Abbie-

That peace and happiness last about an hour before they shatter like a Christmas ornament, tiny, thin shards of glittering glass embedding into the carpet for you to step on for weeks to come.

“You know, if you’d looked like that for me, we could have worked out,” I hear behind me as Damien and I stand talking to his assistant, Tanya. She’s sweet and adorable and doesn’t take any shit from Damien, and I find it absolutely endearing watching her tease him and put him in his place. Even more, watching Damien actually *blush* when she does it.

Hilarious.

But that voice breaks me from the happy spell I let myself fall into.

Because I know the voice.

I also know the slur that’s woven through that voice.

Some people get silly when they drink.

Some people get tired.

Richard gets *mean*.

Never violent, never forceful.

But he was always the type to say all of those mean things that you keep to yourself out loud when he drank.

It was the one thing about him I never told the girls, knowing instinctively that if I did, they would be worried. That if they knew that part, they'd work to get me to leave.

Damien turns to face Richard, a look of confusion crossing his face.

“What?” he asks, and god. *God*. I had every stupid hope we could escape this mess, that I could be the one who told Damien, that I could tell him gently, give him my side, and how everything *changed*, but no.

As always, Richard is fucking up everything good in the world.

Except this time, it's my own damn fault.

“Was this your plan? Come to the party I never fucking brought you to like a hooker? And then what? Rub it in my face?”

“No, I—”

“What the fuck is going on?” Damien asks, but his hand stays on my waist.

All of my worst fears are unraveling, showing him my rotten intentions, but he's still close. It's a cruel punishment, getting to have this peace he gives me, him touching me and holding me during this, knowing it's going to end.

“Abbie is my ex,” Richard says, but his eyes, half open, can barely focus on me or Damien.

Fuck, he must have been doing shots ever since he didn't get that promotion.

My body freezes beneath Damien's touch, and of course, as the man who is so in tune with my body and my reactions and my goddamned emotions, he notices. He looks down at me.

“She probably started fucking you to get back at me. That's what whores do.” My head turns to Richard. “Or were you fucking him before that? All those times I told you what an ass he was, you said I should try and win him over.” He

weaves where he stands a bit. “Instead, you were a whore, fucking my enemy.”

“I am *not* a whore. I can’t believe you would even—”

“Your mom was a whore. You’re a whore. I bet your sister is one too. That’s how she caught Hutchins.” He laughs a mean, drunken laugh. “I bet your sister is better in bed, though. That’s how she caught a billionaire. That’s also why you couldn’t keep me.”

My body goes cold with humiliation and utter horror.

“Richard, that’s—”

“What’s going on here?” Damien asks, looking from Richard to me and back again, putting the pieces together slowly and carefully.

“Is that true, Abigail? Is he your ex?”

“No, Damien. No I—”

“You said you knew him, that we needed to talk.” The wheels are turning in his mind. He’s so damn smart. There’s no way he won’t be able to figure out the truth. “Fuck. Is he *the* ex?” he asks, and I pull my lips into my mouth, rolling them and trying to fight the watering of my eyes.

Jesus. I’m a horrible person.

I fucked up so badly.

I nod.

A strange, unexpected softness enters his eyes for a split second before it’s covered with that same anger and confusion.

He’s angry with *me*.

As he should be.

And his next words cement that he understands the full picture now.

“Did you know I was his boss?”

My stomach drops.

The blood leaves my face, leaving me light-headed.

I know.

I know this is done. I see it in his eyes, in the hurt there, the confusion. I can feel it in his hand that grips harder, the hand still on my waist, like the world is playing a sick trick on me and using that touch to make sure I feel all the harm I did.

“I ...” I want to say no. I want to deny it. I want to tell him that Richard is insane and rude and jealous and we can talk about this later when I can tell him the *full* story without onlookers.

But he deserves more.

He deserves everything. And he deserves the truth, most of all.

“Yes,” I say, locking eyes with him.

I try to tell him everything there.

That this started out as fun.

That this started out as revenge.

That this started out as a stupid fucking game.

That it changed ... and we both know it.

I pray he sees it all in my eyes. Pray he remembers how I tried so many times to tell him, that the world got in the way, and yeah, I should have tried harder, but here we are.

Here we are, and I'm falling for this man as I'm breaking his trust.

And my stupid fucking ex won't shut his dumb mouth and leave me in my puddle of misery.

“Of course she knew. She was with me for four years. Always wanted to come to this party, didn't you, Abbie? So I guess you finally got your wish,” Richard says as if he's a part of this extremely personal conversation. “But fuck, went right back to dressing like a whore, didn't you? God, didn't I train you better than this?” he asks. I want to vomit.

Flashbacks of the years of shit he said to me, of the way he crushed my self-worth into the ground, come back in full

force.

Why did I wear this dress?

“Train her?” Damien asks, his fingers digging into my hip. It might be painful in the real world, but right now, I’m living in a nightmare, and it’s the only thing keeping me tethered to the ground.

And if this is the last touch I get from Damien, I hope it leaves bruises.

“Didn’t she tell you? I tried for years to make her into a good wife. To make her dress appropriately, to be quiet and pretty. But no. She never had that ability. Such a shame.” His eyes look me up and down. “I dumped her on Halloween, you know. She was going to come to the company party dressed like a slut.” His eyes travel my body, greedily eating my exposed legs and curves. “Just like she is now.”

“Halloween,” Damien says, and the cogs are working in his mind. He’s putting together that match. The account I made on Halloween, the swipe he made on that same night.

“Damien, please, let me—”

“God, this is rich!” Richard says with a drunken laugh. “You didn’t know. God, what *great* skill you have, sir. Fuck. Couldn’t even tell that she was a hooker dressed up to impress you.” He turns to me, venom in his eyes.

“You thought you could win? Thought you could beat *me*?” he asks me like he’s some champion in a game we’re all losing. “You’re pathetic, Abbie. Always were. A loser who never grew up. You were never worth the time I wasted on you.”

Something in me snaps.

I lose all grasp on reality, on decency. I forget where we are, in a fancy, expensive party room filled with some of the most powerful people in New York.

I forget that Damien is on my arm, that I should forget Richard and try and salvage what I can.

Instead, I find myself.

I find the last piece of that puzzle I've been putting together for two months.

When I met Richard, I was whole. A beautifully flawed portrait that was a testament to my dreams and hopes and the life I had lived up until then.

Richard saw that beauty and decided the sky wasn't the right shade of blue. He asked me to fix it.

And I did.

Then the trees were the wrong variety, so he covered them up, taping them over with magazine cutouts to see what he wanted.

And I let him.

Then he took scissors to the whole thing, cutting and shaping it and tossing aside bits he didn't like until he just scrapped the entire project and threw it away.

He threw me away.

And I've spent two months finding those pieces, pasting them together with tape and drunken nights with my friends and hair dye and hot cocoa in the snow and tickets to the Rockettes with my sister and a chaotic plan to win back *me*.

I thought I got them all, that I'd found all of the scraps and I was whole and finding what I looked like with the scars and folds and tears and glue.

But Richard kept a piece for himself, a trophy.

And being here in this room with him, I got it back.

I wonder if all this time, I was working less toward revenge and more to get that last piece of me.

I open my mouth, and it all falls out.

“You know what? Fuck you, Richard. You're right. I did this all to fuck with you. You *crushed* me. I spent years waiting for you to commit, wasted so much of my life doing everything for you, and you never even cared. So many nights I'd stay up late when you had to work on a big case, making sure you had food and coffee. Nights I stayed up waiting for

you to come home when you were out with the guys, probably fucking some other woman. All the backhanded comments you gave me, and I took them as fucking *advice*. I thought they were things I needed to do to get you to commit, to fucking *love me*. Lose weight. Dress differently. Get fucking *Botox*. Speak quieter. Dye my hair. I became *less* for you. Because I thought if I became less, you would give me more.” I step away from Damien, getting closer to Richard.

A tether has snapped as I iron out the new version of me, and I’m free.

That final tether Richard tied to me over the years we were together to keep me in his grasp, it’s gone.

And I’m free. I’m whole.

Maybe that’s what the true point of this whole thing was. To free me.

“But you never gave me more. You just kept taking and taking and expecting everything. You left me on the side of the road in a Halloween costume, crying because you broke my heart, and you drove off because you didn’t want to get a fucking parking ticket.”

“That’s what this is all about, isn’t it?” Richard rolls his eyes at me, a drunken scoff leaving his lips. “Jesus, Abbie. Grow up. What did you want, a polite conversation in your apartment?”

“Yes, you jackass!” I yell, waving my arms. “Yes! That’s what normal people expect! That’s what normal people do when they date for *four years* and end things suddenly!”

“God, so fucking dramatic. You were always doing shit for attention, trying to get me to fucking care about you.” There’s an audible gasp from the small crowd that has started to form, and *goddammit*, now there’s a crowd to watch me shatter.

“There it is, Richard. You never cared. You never cared and you used me because I was convenient and I loved you. So yeah, I wanted to get back at you.” My eyes move up him, and venom enters my veins, some small part of the femme fatale I envisioned I’d be on this night. “So yeah. I started dating your

boss. And I stopped the delivery of the shampoo to stop your stupid hair from falling out. And I changed the orders at the coffee shop and your lunch spot, because you were too dumb to understand that wasn't my job anymore. Looks like the full-sugar, full-fat diet is really doing well for you. Your suit looks just a bit ... ill-fitting, doesn't it? Not very becoming, Richard. Oh, and did you ever stop getting those calls for lost keys? Did the glitter ever come out of the carpet in your stupid, ugly mom car? I guess you shouldn't have underestimated the *low-class department store makeup artist*, now should you have?"

My final hand dealt, I let Richard stand there with his mouth open like a fish and turn to Damien. The man who I've been deceiving for two months but who, somehow, I fell head over heels for.

Fuck.

Isn't that just the best karma?

"I'm sorry, Damien. I really didn't intend for ... any of this. I didn't think things with us would go anywhere. I thought it would be a good fuck you that the world dropped into my lap. I was drunk with my friends and heartbroken and it sounded like a good idea. That if I could come to this party and show Richard what he missed then ... I don't know. It would make us even. It would make me feel like I won." I look around the room at the faces that are looking at us. "But things ... changed. You know that, Damien." Damien looks around the room too, and god, this is the worst-case scenario.

What did I think was going to happen, though?

He opens his mouth to speak, probably to tell me to fuck off, that I'm a bitch, that I used him—all things I deserve—but he's cut off by Richard, who would probably cut off his own mother if he thought he could get in the last word.

"You can have her, man. Sloppy seconds," Richard says, and he sways a bit.

With his words, something changes in the air.

A sharp coldness creeps in, fog on the floorboards that only I can see, it seems.

“Excuse me?” Damien asks, turning toward my ex, his current employee. His shoulders are tight and firm.

Angry.

“I said you can have my sloppy seconds, boss man. Just know, she’s a real bore in the sack. Trainable, but boring.” His eyes move slowly to me and back. Acid churns in my stomach, and I have to fight the urge to vomit at his feet. “But I bet you already know that,” he says.

And then the unthinkable happens.

Damien cocks his arm back and, with his unencumbered, fully sober strength, hits Richard square in the jaw.

THIRTY-ONE

December 23

-Abbie-

There is shouting after the strike.

There are people moving to help Richard.

Richard is there floundering, a cut to his lip and his eyes wide.

There is a lot to watch in the commotion, all of it centering over a thirty-second span of time.

But I don't watch any of that.

I watch Damien shake his fist like the hit was nothing, and then I watch Damien leave, his back to me, those broad shoulders slouched just a bit.

They aren't slouched enough that the average human would notice, but enough that someone who has been studying his body, his posture, his words and expressions—they'd notice.

I notice.

It's defeat.

I wonder if that's what he looks like when he loses a case, when he's leaving a courtroom knowing he tried his best and failed.

Or maybe that's the look he gets when he wins but he knows who he was fighting for shouldn't have been the victor.

I will never get to learn little things, small facts, and parts of who he is. Things I would kill to know about this man.

And at that moment, I know.

If I want to learn the minutia about him, I need to go after him to keep him in my life. I need to explain. To explain that while this started as some stupid plan for revenge, to get even and be petty, what is between us is real.

So, so real, and I'm a complete idiot.

I move for the elevator, hoping I can catch it before the doors slide shut and talk to him as soon as possible. The less time I give Damien to sit in his thoughts, the better.

I take one step forward, though, and fingers wrap my wrist painfully.

Richard.

Somehow he's standing, slightly more sober looking, with a growing red spot on his jaw.

"Let go of me, Richard," I say, my free hand moving to try and remove his fingers from my arm as I turn to look at him.

He's not as handsome as I once had convinced myself of.

Especially not now, since I've started dating Damien, arguably the hottest man in New York City.

And once he opens his mouth, he becomes even less attractive, spewing disgusting bullshit.

"I can't believe you pulled this shit, Abigail. Such a fucking child." His fingers start to tighten on my wrist, and panic builds. Richard may not have been kind, and he may have been a shit boyfriend. He may have used his words as a weapon and said the nastiest things to me to get me to act the way he wanted.

But he never put his hands on me.

Ever.

I think after growing up the way I did, that would have been a wake-up call, but it never got that far.

Until now, apparently.

“Richard, let go of me.”

“You were always nothing more than a whore.”

“You’re hurting me, Richard,” I say, my voice low, trying to not draw attention.

Because even now, I’m trying to protect his image.

Trying to make sure I fit the meek, docile version of a woman he wanted me to be.

Why?

Why the fuck am I making myself smaller for him?

“Good. I can’t believe you thought you could win against me.” He laughs with venom and looks around the room, looking for the good ol’ boy friends who usually stick up for him. But this isn’t a frat party. This is a family-friendly party at a law firm of prestige.

No one is looking to join in on a laugh with him. In fact, the eyes that are on us are looking with confusion and worry. “You’re trash, Abbie. Always were. You were supposed to just be a piece I hit when it was convenient. But then you became useful, taking care of shit and making life easier for me. I kept you around. Why hire an assistant when I can just fuck a woman and convince her that I’ll make her my wife if she does all that shit for me?”

The glaringly obvious truth that Richard not only *knew* about how much I was doing for him but also knew my motivation, kills a small part of me. It’s the part of me that thought that maybe, just maybe, he was too dumb to understand that part. That perhaps he was so dumb and deluded in his WASP upbringing as a wealthy white boy only child that he thought that was just normal behavior.

But I should have known.

He is an ass, but Richard isn’t stupid.

“But then you lost your usefulness, Abbie. Lost it when you started *expecting* things. So I lost you.” The room spins

just a bit, and I feel the specific urge to vomit at his feet.

“You’re fucked up. I’m a person, Richard. You treat people like property, like they owe you something. But no one owes you shit.” His hand tightens on my wrist, and a small noise falls from my lips, panic and pain and fear rolled into one.

“Richard, let her go,” a voice says.

Simon.

“Grandfather—“

“I said, *let her go.*”

“You have no idea what—” Simon cuts him off and I’m not going to lie—I’m surprised at the backbone the man has after the stories Richard told me. Then again ... nothing Richard said was true, apparently,

“I heard everything. You deserve worse than what she did to you.”

“She ruined my chance at partner,” Richard says with a childish whine.

“You were never going to get partner, Richard,” Simon says, and the entire room goes silent. The DJ is still playing Christmas music, but it seems even lower with Simon’s words.

“The fuck I wasn’t!” Richard says, but he drops my wrist, turning to his grandfather. I worry for a second that he’ll move to him, strike him, and grab the old man, but he just stands there.

“Richard. You weren’t.”

“I deserve partner, Grandfather. I waited six years, never gave you shit about not doing it sooner.” With his words, I can’t help but scoff because the fuck he didn’t. I’ve heard calls he made to Simon, complaining about wanting to be a partner. His head swivels to me, and I bite my lip, remembering I need to *get out of here and find Damien.*

“You don’t deserve anything just because of your blood, Richard. You don’t win cases on your own. You’re not a team player. Everyone in the office has issues with you—”

“That’s bullshit.” And then, to my all-consuming joy, I hear some agreement and snickers, indicating that the office does, in fact, not like Richard.

Maybe this revenge plan was worth it, if only to see this fall apart.

“It’s not. You only take on cases with shitty intent.”

“I take on cases that will *make money*.”

“You take on cases with a greedy heart, Richard. That’s not what this firm is for.”

“This firm is to make money.”

“And there’s a way to do that without aiding abusers. Without only taking cases for high-profile clients.”

“I don’t—”

“Damien and I were going to talk to you next year and have a discussion. But you seem so intent on having it now, here it is: The firm is shifting gears. We want to help more people, choose our clients wiser, so we won’t be accepting cases where there are accusations of abuse, be it physical, emotional, or financial. All clients will have to sign a morality clause.”

The room now *actually* goes silent, the music having been cut a minute ago, and every person in the room is watching, listening with intent.

“Jesus Christ, Grandfather. He’s gotten to you. You had something great going on here, and you’re going to fuck it up?”

“The only person fucking up right now is you. The way that Damien looked at Abbie here all night, I don’t think he will be keen to know you put your hands on her.”

“What the fuck do I care what he thinks?” Richard says, spit flying with his words. “He’s a fucking loser. A piece of trash from the Bronx that got lucky. He’s fucking *nothing*, and he only wants to help losers—”

And with the ugly words that spill from his mouth, I lose it. I pull my arm back, wishing I had an older brother to teach me how to throw a punch, and hit Richard in the already red spot Damien left.

“Fuck!”

That’s me.

That’s me shouting because I think people forget to tell you that when you punch someone with the intent of hurting them, it also hurts you.

I shake my hand, jumping like that will help, my heels clicking on the expensive marble floors.

But as this happens, I don’t miss three people grabbing onto Richard.

Because as I moved to strike him, payment for talking about Damien the way he did, Richard lunged at me, trying to ... I’m not sure.

I don’t really want to know.

And now Richard is drunkenly yelling, fighting the hands of the larger, much more sober men holding him.

“You fucking bitch!” he shouts, but I can’t even listen to him. Simon’s hand, warm and soft and kind and so unlike his grandson’s, touches my elbow.

“Go, darling. You’d better go catch that partner of mine. He’s got a temper, but the way he looked at you tonight ... He just needs to cool down. Go find him.”

I should stay.

I should help clean up the mess I made.

But instead, I nod and run toward the elevator.

Unfortunately—or maybe fortunately, depending on how you look at it—it’s still descending, currently on floor twenty of sixty.

I don’t have time to wait for it to come back up. Instead, my eyes move to the staircase that’s calling my name, and I

curse before starting down them, praying I don't break a leg or deflate a lung or melt into a gross puddle ten floors in.

By the time I reach the 45th floor, I'm cursing at my shoes.

By the time I reach the 30th, I'm cursing the dress.

By the 15th, I'm cursing myself, wondering how long someone would take to find me if I collapsed and died in this stairwell.

By the 1st though, when I hit the lobby, I have a renewed sense of urgency, sprinting out of the building and into Rockefeller Plaza. The cold air shocks my lungs and burns my skin, but I don't care.

I have a man to find.

And then I see him, crossing 49th. I book it to the light, watching the "walk" light turn into an orange hand.

"Damien. Damien!" I shout across the street as I get closer, his dark hair with those streaks of gray creeping into focus. I can see from across the street that his jaw is firm, tight with anger, and I wonder why he's there, not headed toward the valet. He turns his head to me, somehow hearing me over the sound of New York City chaos, and just stands there.

"One minute! Please!" I shout over the noise, running to the curb and starting to step into the street. A horn blares, but I'm only looking at Damien. His face has gone slack with panic, but someone grabs the back of my dress, stopping me from running straight into a car.

"Jesus, lady, what the fuck!" the guy in his early twenties asks, a look of shock on his face like he can't decide if he should call the police and put me into a mental hold or if this is just a case of New York being New York. I give him a small appeasing smile and apologize, thanking him for essentially saving my life.

I should be embarrassed.

I almost died trying to get across the street to a man who most definitely hates me. A man who most definitely does not want to hear my explanation of things.

But I'm not embarrassed. I'm determined, if anything. More determined to get over there, to explain, to try like hell to salvage this thing that is *really, really fucking good*.

"*Wait for the light, you crazy woman!*" he yells over the zooming traffic, and I assume that's a good sign. I assume that if he's telling me to wait, then he's willing to wait.

I stand there, freezing in the cold of a New York winter's night, though the adrenaline running through me won't let me feel it, waiting. I move, pressing the "walk" button repeatedly, as if it will help.

It never does.

Honestly, I'm convinced that button is a con, a placebo to make you wait just long enough, so you don't risk it and run into oncoming traffic.

Finally, the light turns green, the little walking man shows up, and I bolt, running in those stupid shoes and regretting the open toe and, honestly, not wearing the funeral dress, which may have been easier to run in.

But then I'm there, jumping slightly to hop the curb before I'm standing in front of him.

And fuck, he does not look happy. He does not look welcoming or humorous or warm or any of the other things I feel when I normally stand before him and look up at him.

"Please, Damien. Let me explain."

He doesn't say a word, and my stomach drops. He just keeps staring at me. Somewhere down the road, the bell of a Salvation Army Santa rings, asking for donations.

I say the first thing that comes to mind, the first thing I can to try and get him to *stay*.

"I didn't think I'd like you," I say. His eyebrow raises. "Shit. Fuck. I don't ... I didn't mean it like that. I didn't think I'd *care* for you." I breathe deep, my lungs so not used to any kind of excessive cardio, much less running down 60 flights of stairs then through Rockefeller Plaza in heels as my heart continued to pound in panic.

The move is almost imperceptible, the slight softening in the furrow between his brows, but I see it. The thing about working in retail is you learn to read the expressions on people's faces. Even more, when you work in makeup, you *have* to read people's faces to see how they really, truly feel about what you've presented them with.

"I'd been dating Richard for four years. Four years that I spent convincing myself he was it for me. That we were meant to be. I did everything and anything I could to show him I was right for him, that I fit in this ... " I wave a hand toward the building I just fled from. "Stupid fucking world that I was dying for him to accept me into. I created this fantasy in my mind where we just ... fit." I look at the mistletoe in the doorway behind him, wondering what it would be like to dip into a doorway and kiss him when there was nothing between us.

No lies.

No misleadings.

Just us, a fresh start. Two strangers in New York who fit.

"I told myself that this stupid fucking party was the key. If he took me to this party that he'd been going to for years and *never took me*, we'd be it. If you'd asked me four months ago, I would have told you that tonight Richard would become partner and I would have his ring on my finger." I rub a hand over my eyes, probably destroying my eye makeup, but what does it matter anymore? If this goes terribly, it will be a river down my face anyway. "God, I was so fucking stupid. *So fucking stupid.*" My head tips to the sky, to dark, ominous clouds that reflect how I feel right now.

"I changed for him. Cami saw and hated him for it. Kat saw it and tried to talk me out of it. Even Hannah knew. She worried about me. But I ... I thought I loved him. I thought he was my everything, and what would a little self-sacrifice mean in the end if I had my soulmate? I dyed my hair to look like the women at the country club. I started dressing more conservatively. I was less fun, less sparkle. I talked less when he was around. I ... I wasn't me."

All of these little changes I didn't even realize I was doing until he was gone.

Small ways I molded myself to fit what he wanted and for what?

Four wasted years of a precious life.

“What does this have to do with anything? With us?” Damien asks the first words he's said to me other than directing me *not* to run into oncoming traffic.

Progress.

I'm calling that progress.

“I promise, I'm getting there,” I say, and again—a small clue, a small hope when the corner of his lip tips up. “Halloween, I was supposed to come to the company party. He came to get me. I was in a bunny costume—”

“A bunny costume?” he asks, the small smile he can't fight growing.

I return it, my soul lifting.

“A bunny costume,” I repeat with a small smile. “It was modest. It wasn't like ... a *Playboy* bunny or anything.” He raises an eyebrow, and I'm thinking this is good. His intrigue in a costume, right? “Anyway, Richard lost it. I don't know. He just ... It was over. He told me I wasn't serious enough, that I wasn't what he needed. That I was fun but was never going to be his wife. That I didn't fit the image he needed to be partner.” I scoff, “I guess his paralegal Misty was, though, huh?” Another shake of my head. “It doesn't matter. He left me crying outside of my apartment in the cold in a Halloween costume, and I think ... that snapped the spell. I called up the girls, and we got hammered while we made a list of silly things to do to make me feel better about my life, and Kat made me download a dating app.” I lift my eyes from where they were focused on that pink bowtie to his eyes when he speaks next.

“And you matched with me.”

“And I matched with you. And ... Shit. God. This is where it gets bad.” That ounce of soft I had earned hardens. “I don’t remember a ton about that night. I was ... I was a mess. But I do remember seeing you, remembering Richard always bitching about you and saying, ‘I’m going to fuck his boss.’” With that, Damien laughs out loud.

That’s a ... good sign, right? I think?

“We made a plan, Cam and I. Kat was an ... unwilling bystander,” I say, and Damien smiles again.

“That seems on brand for her.”

“Very much so,” I say and forget what I’m supposed to be saying.

“So what was—” His hand moves toward the Rainbow Room. “—all that? Why didn’t you say anything?”

Ah, that’s where I was, begging and pleading. Yes.

“Say anything? Like what? Oh, my ex of four years who shattered my self-worth and identity works for you, and I’d love it if you took me to the holiday party and proved to him that I *am* lawyer’s wife material?” I pause for a moment. “Oh, and while you’re at it, we can fuck a bunch, and it’s gonna be killer, and I’m most definitely going to develop feelings for you because you’re fucking amazing and kind and supportive and everything I thought he was going to be but never ended up being?”

“Okay, I see how that would have gone poorly.” I smile, but I know it’s a sad smile. A tight smile.

“I lied to you three times, Damien.” I fight the urge to step closer to him. “The first was not telling you who I was. That was wrong. I regretted it every moment of every day I was with you. God, there were a few times I tried to tell you, I swear. Today was one of them. I tried to call it off, but something always got in the way. Or I was reminded about what a fucking *scumbag* Richard is and it blinded me.”

“How did he remind you? Were you still seeing him?” Dark clouds roll over Damien’s eyes, similar to those over our head.

“No. Just ... small things. He texted me the other day, telling me to delete his existence from my social media. We had a jar of—”

“What?”

“A jar. A pickle jar. It had little slips of paper with reminders—”

“No, the other part.”

“Oh. He, uh ... The day we went to the Rockettes, I was on the phone with Cam and told her I was going to tell you everything. It was ... We were too real. Too raw. I was going to and then ... he texted me. He didn't want me to ... you know, taint his image, so he wanted me to delete every photo of him, undo any tags, and then *report back* when that was done.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.” I don't say anything. “What are the other two?”

“What?”

“The other two things you lied about.”

“Oh. Uh. I don't like whiskey.” He smiles, a big one this time, and shit, that hope sparks again.

“No shit.”

“It tastes terrible.”

“You like sweet things. You don't want to taste it when you drink.” I smile and nod.

“Yeah. But I remembered once Richard had me buy you a bottle for an event—

“A Glenlivet ... I remember that. You bought it?”

“I did extensive Google research. I didn't want him to look bad.” His eye twitches.

“And the last?”

“I hate country music.”

“You prefer boy bands,” he says with a smile, and I roll my eyes.

“Yes, I prefer *pop music*. But I like it now. That’s the truth. It’s ... been growing on me.” I smile at him, and shit, it’s there. It’s not hate, but a shine in his eye, that shine that’s there when he thinks I’m being amusing. “But that’s all. Everything else is all me. Everything I told you, how I feel about you.” I move, testing my luck, and place a hand on his chest. The warmth of his chest races up my arm.

“I swear—”

“Why is your knuckle bleeding?” Damien asks, interrupting me.

“What?”

“Your knuckle. It’s bleeding. Why?” I look down, and sure enough, the first knuckle on my ring finger is bleeding. It’s almost poetic, to be honest.

“I punched Richard.” He looks at me, confused.

“No, I punched Richard.”

“Well, yeah. You did, and then you left, and then I tried to leave, but Richard grabbed my arm—”

“He what?”

“He grabbed my arm. Simon made him stop. And then he said some nasty things to me, and then he said some nasty things about *you*, and then I punched him in the face. And then I ran off. I was going to take the elevator, but it was already going down, and I didn’t want you to get that far. That elevator is so damned slow. So I ran down the stairs and—”

“You ran down the stairs?” he asks, now a slight smile on his lips. “You did cardio to get here?” His voice is very “aw, honey, you baked,” a la Christian in *Clueless*.

“Yeah, and I’m all sweaty, and it’s making me freaking itchy, but I guess it’s okay because it’s cold as shit out here.”

“Where’s your jacket?” he asks, nearly glaring at me.

“I didn’t have time to stop at the coat check and have them find it. I had a man to run after.” The glare softens into something that sparks something else in me—hope.

A gust of freezing wind runs down the road, and I shiver.

“Jesus Christ,” he murmurs under his breath before pulling me into him, opening his tux jacket so I can fit my arms under and wrap them around his back.

It seems he didn’t have time to get his coat, either.

I breathe in his scent, that signature Armani that I pinpointed on day one filling my lungs. I let his warmth seep into my bones, and when his arms wrap my back, I let that feeling sink in too.

If this is the last time this man will hold me like this, I need to soak up enough to tide me over for the rest of my life.

I once thought that Richard was my soulmate because I liked the idea of what he could offer me.

A simple life of devotion to a man who was important.

A life where I could spend every moment living for the man of my dreams the way my mom was unable to do.

I think I thought in a way that if I succeeded where she failed, all would be well in the world. The balance would return. Life would be easy.

But a soulmate doesn’t work like that. A soulmate isn’t supposed to be easy or one-sided. It’s a balance—a give and take.

I think there’s a chance Damien could have been the give to my take, and I may have ruined that.

He pulls back just a hair to look at me, and I mirror him, tipping my head back. The sky is dark, a mix of a storm brewing and the early winter night, but we’re under a streetlight, and the highlights and shadows it creates on Damien’s face are so unbearably handsome.

“Did you do it to get him back?” Damien asks, his voice low and questioning.

“What?” I ask. I don’t understand the question, my mind not being able to focus on anything but the way he looks right now, staring at me with kind eyes.

Not angry eyes.

Worried eyes, maybe.

Should I be relieved? Or nervous?

“I said, did you do it to get him back? Was this whole scheme with the intention of getting Richard back?” Ah, there it is.

“What? No. Never,” I say quickly, scrambling to explain. “You have to know, there was never a part of me that wanted that. Ever. Once he broke up with me, it was like ... a spell was broken. I didn’t understand what I saw in him anymore. It was like I could finally see the reality. I just ... I wanted him to hate that he let me go.” I look over his shoulder, back at the Rockefeller Center and the Rainbow Room atop it. I keep talking, not looking at him, but I feel his eyes burning on me. “I spent some of my best years trying to make his life easier. I thought that was my duty, my comeuppance for what would be a beautiful life. And I think he knew that. I think he always knew I wasn’t it for him, but he liked what I could give him.” I breathe and finally look back at Damien, afraid of what I’ll see.

Mixed emotions. That’s what’s there.

Might as well finish digging the grave of this beautiful relationship.

“I knew who you were when you first popped up on that app. Richard hates you, by the way. Whines about you all the time.” The edges of Damien’s lips tip up. “So you came on that damn app, and I said fuck it. I was drunk with Kat and Cam, but I distinctly remember saying, ‘I’m gonna fuck his boss.’” Repeating those words makes Damien laugh, his head tipping back with a boom. I keep talking, a smile on my lips. “So we made a plan. Turns out, I already fit your type,” I say and widen my eyes. “Short and blonde and curvy?” He smiles too. “I just ... I wanted to prove to him I could do better. He said he couldn’t stay with me because I didn’t fit the firm’s image. That I wasn’t serious enough. I wanted to prove to him that ... I could.”

Damien's face goes dark again, the smile draining from his face.

"I swear if that first night you told me you were looking for something serious, I would have dropped it then and there. I promise, Damien. I never would have led you on ... But then ... things changed between us. It became more for me. You became more. And I tried. I swear, honey. I tried to tell you a few times. We always got ... interrupted."

"So it was never about him?" he asks.

"Not in the way you think. You were never my ticket to win him. You were my ticket to making him feel as shitty as I felt." I take a deep breath in, ready to spill. "And somehow, along the way, you undid all the damage he had done and made me feel beautiful and loved and cherished. And I stopped caring about him or revenge or getting even. I thought we would just be fun. But it was more. Every day you showed me what I was worth and that I deserved more than someone tolerating my presence. I deserved to be equal in a relationship instead of an assistant to some man. It took one date with you to see you were nothing like I had been told. It took one visit to Rollard's to know you were a good man. It took one trip home to realize that you and I were something more."

And here I go.

Because if this is going to blow up in my face, at least I'll do it with a clear conscience, no word left unsaid.

"It took one night of you coming home to your place and seeing me there to make me fall for you." I roll my lips in on themselves, rubbing them as I fight to keep my eyes locked on his. "It was never about extravagance. It was about feeling like an equal. Feeling cherished. Feeling appreciated. You do that. You've shown me that from the beginning. And I know I started this off shitty, and I know you probably think I'm insane and a bitch and ... a million other things. But I'm begging you, Damien. Give me a chance. Give me a chance to prove this was all as real as it gets. That this—"

"You don't need a chance, Abigail." His words are firm, and I stiffen at them, my hands tightening around his warm

waist because this is the last time I'll be doing it.

And that's fine.

That's fair.

"I already know this has been real from the beginning. I should have told you earlier, told you we weren't just fun anymore. We danced around it, and you're right—you tried to tell me, and I told you to tell me later." His hand tips my chin up before sliding to my throat, feeling my rapid pulse there.

"This tells me everything I need to know. The way your pulse is panicked. The look in your eyes right now. The way you're holding me, the way you ran. Though, *naranja*, you try running into traffic like that again, I'm spanking you when we get home." My eyes widen, but my mind is so confused, trying to put things together.

"This was always more, Abigail. I don't blame you for wanting revenge. If you had told me from the start, I would have agreed. Richard's an ass. An ass who won't have a job after the holidays."

"Damien, you don't—"

"I do. I will. It was bound to happen regardless, but that's a story for another day. All you need to know is that this is real. I am falling head over heels for you, and even if you weren't with me, I'd drag you along." My heart speeds, and Damien's lips tip up. "Yeah, baby. I feel that."

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh. Now can I kiss you, and then can we grab our jackets and head back to my place so I can fuck you properly?" Another skip of my heart, another tip of his lips.

"Why don't you have your coat?" I ask, my brain finally working enough to ask.

"Baby, you were never leaving without me tonight. I needed air. I went for a walk. I was headed back when you found me." My mouth drops open, and his hand tightens just a hair at the look. "You're getting it. I told you I'm falling, and I'm taking you with me."

With his words, all I can do is stare at him, letting a small smile play on my own lips.

“You don’t have to drag me anywhere, Damien. I’m already there.”

Then he kisses me, full and deep, just as the snow begins to drift down.

It’s the magical Christmas moment of my dreams, kissing this man in a tux, the Rockefeller tree framing us, the air clear.

Revenge never felt so good.

THIRTY-TWO

December 25

-Abbie-

I'm sitting cross-legged in my little apartment, a mess of ripped paper surrounding me, boxes of Chinese takeout scattered throughout it.

Damien Martinez, family law lawyer extraordinaire, is sitting across from me.

He hasn't left my presence in nearly three days, other than to use the bathroom and to call his mom, making sure he had her flight information correct after saying Merry Christmas.

It's been magical.

"This should be our tradition," I say without much thought to my words. "Holiday party, my sister's for Christmas Eve and Christmas morning, then back to the city for Chinese and presents and alone time." I've already opened a few gifts from Damien, which shouldn't shock me, but it did. Getting gifts from this man that I know he picked out himself—not some kind of personal shopper or an assistant—makes me swoon.

So far, I've opened two—light-pink sweatpants and sweatshirt ("Leave those at my place, yeah? So you have something to wear") and a travel case for my makeup ("Since you'll be going back and forth"), all perfectly my size and color.

Damien has opened a set of cut crystal whiskey glasses, a new bottle of his cologne, and a bottle of that whiskey he

loves. All were bought before the party, my conscience telling me I could just leave it at his place if he refused to see me ever again.

But as he tosses me a third gift wrapped messily in red paper (yes, the man wrapped his gifts, believe it or not), the goofy smile on his face clues me into my mishap, making yearly plans when we've been dating for less than two months.

Jesus, Abbie, play it cool!

"I didn't mean—it's too early, I just—

"It's a great tradition, *naranja*," he says, smiling. "I like it."

And then, because I can never keep a hold on my words, I speak again.

"You know, Kat told me what that means," I say, smiling. "You've been calling me that for weeks."

"Orange?" he says with a smile, but his eyes tell me he knows what I mean. I ball up a chunk of ripped paper, tossing it at his head. "*Naranja* means orange. *Media naranja* means half orange."

"So she told me," I say, slowly easing a finger under the tape of the gift in my lap.

"My dad calls my mom that. Says she's his other half, despite how different they are." My finger stops moving, pausing, freezing at his honesty. "Now it means that no matter how much they fight, how many mistakes they make, they always fit. She's always going to be his other half." I lick my lips, and his eyes watch before he keeps talking. "I guess I knew then. That first morning after with you."

I don't have words.

I don't have a way to respond or tell him what that means to me without the fear of fully and completely scaring him off.

"Open it, baby," he says, tipping his chin to the gift in my lap. "You've got one more after that."

Opening a gift is the easier option on my overloaded emotions, so I do as he says, tearing off the wrapping paper and revealing ...

A blanket.

“A blanket?” I ask, a small laugh in my voice. It’s a dark blue, utilitarian and basic, but soft and seemingly warm.

“They didn’t have pink or I would have gotten that,” he says, smiling as I start to unfold it. “It’s heated.”

“Heated?” I ask, confused.

“You said your bedroom gets cold. Your feet were cold.” I drop the material on my lap, seeing the cord that raises and lowers the temperature. “It’ll be good for warming it up in the winter before you get in. You can’t sleep with it on—that’s not safe—but it should take the edge off.” My mind is reeling.

“You got me a heated blanket because I told you my bedroom is always cold.” My face is soft, confused by this simple action. “I told you that one time.” He moves closer to me, placing the containers on the coffee table until our knees are touching.

“I remember everything you tell me, Abigail,” he says, pushing hair behind my shoulder. He said that once before, and I thought it was a line ... but here we are. “You’ll get used to it, me taking care of you,” he says, pressing his lips softly to mine.

I still don’t quite know what to say.

“Come on, one more,” he says, placing a small box on my lap. This one he did not wrap, the box the size of a book wrapped perfectly with a big red ribbon. My fingers grab the end, pulling before I tear off the paper, revealing the plain white box. Taking off the top, I unfold the tissue paper and see a hot pink string bikini. Lifting it, I look up at him with an extremely skeptical raised eyebrow.

“You’ll have to wear it, with what I have planned.”

“What you have planned?”

“Keep looking,” he says, and his face is split with the biggest, most boyish grin I’ve ever seen. The man can’t contain himself with the excitement rolling through him. I move aside the tissue paper to see an envelope with my name written in black, utilitarian man’s writing.

As I open the envelope, my brows furrow once again before looking up at him.

“What is this?” He just smiles, leaning forward to press the space between my brows. I keep looking. “Bora Bora?”

“In March. Me and you.”

“We’re going to *Bora Bora*?” I ask, and his smile falls just a tiny bit.

“Yeah. Kat said you always wanted to go.”

“*Kat?!*” The smile returns.

“Yeah.”

“You talked to Kat about this?”

“Yeah, why?” God, that smile is infectious, and I can’t help but return it.

“She knew about ... the party! The plan! She didn’t mention it!” My mind goes to her agreeing that I need to tell him the truth, and I wonder if she knew then.

“Yeah, well. Maybe she had more faith than you did.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I say, moving pamphlets and plane tickets around. “I’ve never been out of the country.”

“That’s why it’s for March. Kat said that would be an easier takeoff, anyway. You’ll have time to get a passport.”

“You want to go on vacation with me?” I say, staring at him, now completely blown away.

Each moment since that party, I’ve come to understand just how much things have changed since our agreement for things to be *just fun*. Damien’s hands move, taking the pile of papers and moving them aside before holding my face on either side,

forcing me to look at him. My heart is racing, the pulse definitely able to be felt in his hands.

“Abigail, I want to go anywhere with you. You said you wanted to be the cool aunt and travel and ... be consumed.”

My heart stops with his words, but he keeps talking. “You consume me. I don’t know how you did it, but I have fallen madly, deeply, in love with you. Every moment of every day is consumed by thoughts of you, planning the future, dying to be with you.”

“Damien, I—” I don’t know what I’m about to say, but it doesn’t matter. He cuts me off.

“Day by day, baby. We’re taking this day by day. But day by day, with an eye to the future. And right now, that future looks like you in a hot pink bikini on the beach in Bora Bora. Okay?”

I smile because what else am I supposed to do?

“Okay,” I say.

And then he’s kissing me, and I don’t have any headspace to think about anything but his lips on mine.

He seems to agree, hands sliding up my hips and under the oversized Christmas sweater I’m wearing, tugging it over my head. Instantly, his hands go to my clasp, undoing my bra and tossing that aside too. His fingers move to the waistband of my leggings, pulling and snapping it against my skin.

“These, off,” he says and I stand, frantically taking them off while watching him remove his own clothes.

God, this man is in-fucking-credible. Hard in the right places, harder in the best ones, that happy trail leading to my favorite place of all ...

He’s sitting on my area rug, a pile of paper around him, and I decide I need them. He’s watching me intently as I unhook my foot from the leggings, throwing them aside before moving down to the floor and crawling his way.

“Jesus, *rubia*, fuck yeah, that’s hot,” he says in a low, panted breath, and I just smile, crawling until I’m right

between his legs. “What are you—” My hand moves to his hard cock, pumping it slowly while I keep my eyes on him, licking my lips. “Jesus fucking Christ,” he says under his breath.

I dip forward, putting the head in my mouth and sucking, laving the pre-cum already dripping from him.

“You want that? Want my cock, baby?” The words are almost sweet, and his hand moves to my head, grabbing the silky scrunchie and tossing it to the side, my hair tumbling over my shoulder.

I move farther, pressing my tongue to the underside and moaning gently at the taste of him. I concentrate on his hands in my hair, on his heavy breathing, on the hard floor on my knees, biting in an erotic way as I ease him into my mouth until he taps the back of my throat.

“That’s it, baby, fuck yeah,” he says, and when I look up, he’s staring down at me, his hand holding the hair he released in one hand. “Suck my cock like a good girl.” I moan at his words, and he groans as the vibrations travel through him. The noise alone has me clenching, has me feeling empty, needing my own form of release. I move a hand down, gently parting myself and feeling how wet I am. As my head bobs down, taking him as deep as I can, I circle my clit, moaning as the head of his cock hits the back of my throat.

“Fuck, that’s it, baby. You finger that pussy while you suck me off. God, I can hear how wet you are.” I moan, again looking up at him, and the way his eyes are locked to me has me moaning again.

“Actually, fuck that,” he says, bending forward so I have to release his cock. His hands go under my armpits, and he lifts me, pulling me along his body until I’m straddling him. “You’re going to ride my cock until you make me come.”

My body goes into panic mode.

Hot? Yes.

Am I terrified I won’t have half of the skill Damien does? Absolutely.

“Damien, I—”

“Stop it. Nothing sounds hotter than this right now.” His hand moves to my hips, helping me lift, and the other hand moves to line his cock up with my entrance. “Now, baby, sink down.” Slowly I move, filling myself with him, and god, I’m so *full*. “That’s it, take all of me.” Once I’m at the bottom, sitting and full, I circle my hips, groaning at the feel.

“Oh god, fuck, Damien. You’re so deep like this.” I moan, lifting and dropping gently, trying to get used to the angle, the size. As always, he’s consuming my every thought.

“Easy, baby, get used to this. God, you’re fucking beautiful,” he says, hands on my hips holding me down, a terrible, wonderful torture to be full and unable to move. “Stay here until I tell you to move.”

As always, my body listens to him.

Traitorous body.

His hands move up from my hips, grazing my waist, continuing up until he has a breast in each hand. A thumb grazes oversensitive flesh, and I moan, low and loud. “That’s it, baby.” He leans forward, letting one hand pinch and roll and taking the other nipple into his mouth. I buck on him, the sensation diving straight to my pussy where I clamp down, and he groans against my nipple before releasing it.

“Uh uh, Abigail. You stay fucking still.” His eyes bore into mine, but I can feel him twitching inside of me, dying for more the same way I am.

I smile, clamping down on him, moaning softly.

“Jesus Christ,” he says under his breath, like an actual prayer.

I just smile, repeating the move, moaning again. This time, his fingers roll my nipple harshly in response.

“Okay, you win,” he says, and I smile again.

“I think I like it up here,” I say.

“Even when you’re on top, *rubia*, remember that I’m in control. Now fuck your man’s cock.”

I want to argue.

I want to tease him.

But right now, I’m full of Damien, and my clit is throbbing, so I move, grinding my clit on his pelvic bone as I move on top of him.

“Lean back,” he orders, and I listen, leaning back and moving my legs amidst the sea of wrapping paper as I do.

“Oh, god,” I moan, unable to control myself. The slight angle change has him brushing against my G-spot in the most unbearable way. “Fuck, Damien!” I move my hands back to support myself, resting on his thighs as I slowly move up and then back down. “Shit!”

“That’s it, baby. Fuck me. Ride my cock like a good girl.”

“Damien, shit, god!”

“Keep going,” he says, moving hair behind my back then moving his hand to my neck, holding me there gently. “You’re doing so fucking well, Abigail. Taking all of me, riding me.”

“Damien, I can’t—” The pressure is unbearable, the feeling overpowering. I’m going insane, the pleasure taking over my entire body but in an untamed way that has my emotions on a roller coaster.

“You can. Look at me, baby. Harder. Fuck me harder.” I do as he demands, lifting and dropping down firmer, and another moan falls from my lips, my eyes closing to try and focus. “No. Fucking look in my eyes when you take me.” I open them, moving up then down, his hand tightening on my throat, the only thing keeping me grounded.

“You are mine. You don’t question that, not ever. Mine, Abigail, you understand me? Whatever you want, you ask and it’s yours.” A small moan leaves my lips, but I keep staring, keep moving. “God, I’m so fucking proud of you, taking me like this. Holding it together. So fucking pretty, Abigail.”

“Damien,” I whine, the need to come creeping in.

“What do you need, baby? Anything, I’ll give it to you.”

“You. I need you. I need to come. Oh, god, Damien. It’s too much. Fuck!”

“I’ll take care of you,” he says, and then the hand not on my throat leaves my hip, sliding inward. His fingers move between us, mimicking the move I did that first time, feeling where his cock disappears inside of me. “God, this is so fucking pretty, watching you take all of me.” He licks his lips, eyes fixated, sending another wave of heat and need through me as I clamp on him. “Should I let you come?” I’m still moving, more frantically now, with no rhythm or pattern.

“Yes, please, god!”

“Okay, baby, I’ve got you,” he says, then his hand moves, thumb rubbing my clit and giving me the last stimulation I need to shatter, screaming his name. The hand on my neck presses as I try to collapse on him as I come, keeping me tipped back as I continue to move my hips, fucking him.

“That’s it, take me with you,” he says, and I move, fucking him as I keep coming and coming, the world turning black and my mind getting hazy. And just when I think I’m going to lose it, pass out or start crying or fall apart, he groans, an arm wrapping my back and pulling me down onto him as he thrusts up, filling me deeply and coming inside of me.

We lie there for long minutes, both of us sweaty and panting on my living room floor.

“So what about that kind of cardio? Are we against that too?” he says, and I lift my head to see a boyish smile on his lips.

“Shut up, Damien,” I say, collapsing again but kissing his neck. His hand moves my hair to the side, kissing the skin he reveals.

“Merry Christmas, Abigail. I love you,” he says, his voice now genuine and sweet. I try to move, to look at him, but his arm locks me down, pressing my body to his.

So with the comfort of not having his eyes on me, I reply.

“I love you too, Damien. Thanks for an amazing Christmas.”

EPILOGUE

December 23

-Abbie-

Today is the Christmas party.

Three years after the *Christmas party*.

This Christmas party is still at Rockefeller Center, in the Rainbow Room, packed with lawyers and employees and friends and family.

This year, I know everyone who will be there. I've met them all. I've had meals with them all. I've laughed with them all.

Richard is not one of them.

He was let go (though he blasted on his socials that he *quit, of course*, according to a few people I've spoken to) before the start of the new year that first year and I haven't seen him since the party.

Damien's work family has become my family, in a way.

And now I'm here, ready to leave, sitting on the edge of the bed as I weave the delicate strap of my shoe through the buckle before securing it, standing, and smoothing my hands down the dress I'm wearing.

The dress is stunning.

Tight and bright and so fucking me that I actually took a break at work just to try it on as soon as it came in a new shipment.

Perfection.

Damien hasn't seen it yet, and I can't wait to see his reaction.

Which should be right about ...

A knock comes to the bedroom door.

Our bedroom door, for about two years now.

"Come in," I say, turning toward the door. It opens, Damien stepping in in his tux, his fine black shoes tapping on the wood floors.

My fucking man.

The salt and pepper has grown, creeping into his temples in a way I can't stop myself from touching anytime we're together, and the laugh lines near his cheeks have deepened, but he's never looked hotter to me.

I move, cocking my hip and moving my hands to my sides before smiling at him. "What do you think?"

There was a time when I would do that self-consciously. Where I'd ask because I need the reassurance, need to know I'm wanted, adored, loved.

Not any more.

Not a single day passes where Damien doesn't tell me I'm gorgeous. Doesn't murmur in my ear that I'm his dream woman, doesn't find a way to touch me, to glide his hands over curves and try to get closer.

I know without a doubt that this man would devour me if he could.

"Jesus, *rubia*," he says, taking a step closer until he's right in front of me. I tip my head up to look at him, and his hand moves to wrap my neck the way he loves to do. Slight pressure, just feeling my pulse beneath his hand.

He doesn't look at the dress when he speaks next.

"Never seen anything more beautiful in my life," he whispers on my lips as his other hand moves along the satin at

my hip, pulling me closer.

“We don’t have time, Damien,” I say, a small smile hiding the fact that I’m already pulsing for him.

“We can make time, *rubia*.”

“After,” I say, my voice breathy. “I’ll be tipsy, I’ll be full of Christmas cheer, and you can have your way with me.” He smiles that devious smile.

“You could be full of me right now,”

“Damien,” I whisper, “my hair. My makeup.”

“You know I love you mussed up, *rubia*.”

“Damien.” He steps back, leaving me feeling cold and nearly stumbling with the inability to hold my own body weight. His hands move down my arms, grabbing my wrists and smiling as he waits for me to steady on my feet.

He loves this, too, watching me get frazzled because of him.

“You’re right. We don’t have time.” I scrunch my nose in frustration, sexual in nature, and he laughs. A hand moves, gently brushing over my neck and pushing my hair behind my shoulder. “Something’s missing,” he says. His thumb caresses the divot between my collarbones.

“It’s a statement,” I say, gesturing to the extravagant sweetheart neckline.

“Hold on,” he says then reaches into his pocket, grabbing for something.

A box.

A blue box tied in white ribbon.

“Christmas isn’t until two more days, Damien,” I say with a whisper.

“This isn’t a Christmas present, *naranja*,” he says, his voice just as low. He places the box into my hands, and I grasp it gently.

“Damien ...”

“I love to spoil you. Don’t ruin it for me,” he says, and I roll my eyes. Still, I move my hand to the box, tugging on the white ribbon.

It’s not a ring.

I know that.

We’ve agreed to four years—four years together, four years of dating and living together and enjoying this phase before we move to the next.

I’ve got one more year of enjoying being his girlfriend.

It’s not even the right size box for a ring, Abbie, I remind myself, because even though I know down to my soul this man will be my husband one day, I’d be a liar if I said I wasn’t interested in speeding up our four-year plan.

But all of that flies from my mind when I lift the lid and see a delicate silver chain. A delicate silver chain with a giant pink diamond right in the middle. The color is pale, a faint light pink, but still: it’s a pink diamond.

I gasp.

“Oh, my god, Damien,” I breathe, my hands shaking as I touch the platinum, afraid to touch the stone.

“Do you like it?” he asks, and his voice is tentative, like a little kid. Like he’s anxious I won’t love it.

“Damien ... it’s ... This is too much.”

“Do you like it?” he asks, his voice firmer.

“Of course I like it. Look at it. It’s ... pink. And sparkly and beautiful,” I say, and he laughs, tugging the box out of my hand, grabbing the necklace and tossing the box aside.

“Damien!”

“It’s a box.”

“It’s a Tiffany’s box! I was going to keep it!”

“I’ll buy you more, *rubia*,” he says in a low murmur, turning me until he’s to my back and I can see him behind me in the mirror.

He undoes the latch of the necklace, moving to drape it on my neck then, does the clasp behind me. Finally, he moves his hands to pull my hair from the chain before he pulls me in tight. Then we're both looking at the image before us in the mirror.

"Beautiful," he says, one hand on my waist, the other brushing the gem until it's center on my chest. "Fucking magnificent."

"It's so pretty, Damien. It's too much, but so pretty."

His hand moves to my chin, holding it in place. "I was talking about this. You, Abigail." A shiver runs through me. His hand moves to the diamond again. "Tonight, I'm going to fuck you wearing just this." My breath hitches and his eyes move down the line of my body in the reflection, settling on my shoes. "Two things, actually. Those shoes and this diamond." I smile at him.

"I knew you'd like those," I say.

"You know me better than anyone does, *naranja*." His lips press to my hair, and I take a mental snapshot of the reflection, wishing it were a real camera. "Let's go."

Hours later, we're sitting at a big table in the Rainbow Room with a pristine white table cloth, having just eaten an unbearably delicious dinner when there's a clinking of metal on glass.

It's time for Simon's yearly speech.

"Quiet down, quiet down!" he says from the front, holding a microphone borrowed from the DJ. "Thank you all for coming once again for this celebration of Schmidt and Martinez. It's been another incredible year of helping and serving justice, and I'm honored to have all of you by my side to do it." There are cheers and a wolf whistle from the crowd. "Every year, I stand up here and I do my thing, congratulating all of you in this big, eclectic family. And every year, I remind

you that I'm the one to take on this task because my partner, Damien, is not a fan of grandiose speeches and the like." I turn my head to my man, smiling at him in a teasing way, tossing an elbow in his direction.

He winks at me in return, his smile stunning as always.

"But this year is a little bit different," Simon says, and my eyes that are already on Damien narrow, confused.

And then he stands.

He stands and he adjusts his suit jacket, buttoning it in the middle, the light-pink bowtie at his neck.

And he walks up to Simon.

And he takes the microphone.

My boyfriend of three years is standing in front of a room of employees at his company Christmas party in the Rainbow Room on top of Rockefeller Center and he's holding a microphone.

"Thanks, Simon. Yeah, so, this isn't usually my thing, but we've got everyone here, and it's a gorgeous location, so I figured you guys wouldn't mind." My hands start to shake. "Abigail, *naranja*, can you come up here?"

My body begins to shake.

"Me?" I say, my voice a whisper, but he hears me. He hears me and lets out a laugh, the room echoing the sentiment.

This is going to happen, isn't it?

Holy shit.

"Yes, you. Come," he says, an arm out toward me.

I don't know how, but I stand, my heels clicking on the marble floor as I walk up until I'm standing next to Damien. He takes my hand in his, still holding that damn microphone, and I look in his eyes, but something behind him catches my attention.

I look, and my breath catches in my throat.

My sister stands there, against the wall, hidden in the shadows in a dark-green dress, her husband standing next to her with his hand on her waist.

My sister is here.

She's smiling huge, giving me a thumbs up.

I move my eyes back to Damien who moves the microphone away, his next words for me alone.

A comfort.

"Thought you'd want her here for this," he says in a low whisper. I breathe.

It's all I can do.

Shit, I'm going to cry and he's barely said anything.

"So a lot of you probably know, mostly because you were there, that Abigail and my meeting and starting to date was a mix of happenstance and ... chaos."

"REVENGE!" a voice yells from the back of the room, and though my head swivels in that direction, I don't need to.

I know that voice.

I would know that voice if I were in a Black Friday mob and she whispered my name.

Cam is standing in the back of the room, a gorgeous black dress highlighting her curves and Kat standing next to her in red, slapping her arm.

My best friends.

"Yeah, I thought you'd want them here, too," Damien says for my ears again. "So it wasn't traditional. But as soon as I met Abigail, I think part of me knew she was made for me." He turns to me, his hand tightening on mine. "You are kind and exciting and you make killer meatballs."

"They're Hannah's recipe," I say in a shocked whisper, and I hear Hunter choke out a laugh, but when my eyes move back to him, Hannah is slapping him.

When I move my eyes back to Damien, he's on one knee.

“They’re made by you. You take care of me—you take care of anyone who lets you, really. You think color can change the world and you prove it, one person at a time, every single day. You keep me grounded and you sing too loud at concerts, and honestly, there’s a tiny part of me that’s doing this today because I think if I don’t, you and your girls might craft some kind of plan that includes me walking into work covered in fine glitter or finding that all of my clothes are just a quarter inch tighter.” My eyes widen at his rare but not unheard of reference to my days of revenge and I hear a, “Hell yeah!” from the peanut gallery in the back.

Lord give me strength with my damn friends.

“You wanted something big,” he says, the mic to the side, not fully catching the words.

“No I didn’t!” I say in a hushed whisper.

“You’re a damn liar, Abigail Amelia Keller. You want big and you want sparkle and you want extravagance. Not in price, but in love and adoration. And right here, right now, I’m promising to spend the rest of my life giving you that. Say yes and I’ll make you feel loved and cherished and appreciated until my last breath. Say yes and I’ll help you paint the world pink. Say yes and we’ll forever be completely consumed by each other. We’ll be the cool aunt and uncle, and we’ll travel and explore, and you will be mine and mine alone. I am absolutely wild about you. You are my sun and my moon and I will be yours. You completely consume me.”

His words are so similar to those I whispered in a dark room in a tiny cottage in my hometown before we were even close to this.

But we were always this, weren’t we?

We were always the sun and the moon and all-consuming love.

“Say yes, Abbie,” he says, his hand squeezing mine, and I only now see the opened black box that he must have stashed somewhere holding a platinum band and a pink diamond.

Simple but fabulous.

All me.

“Yes,” is all I can get out of my throat that is inexplicably tightening.

It’s tears, of course.

Giant, girly, body-wracking tears, but those are going to ruin my makeup in front of an entire room full of powerful New York family law lawyers and I might be dramatic, but I’m not *that* dramatic.

But never to fear, Damien hears my word, stands quickly, and wraps me up in his arms, knowing how much I would hate everyone seeing that.

The man knows me down to my marrow.

“Thank you, *naranja*. You won’t regret it,” he says into my hair as if I’m doing him a favor.

And that’s what sets me off.

“I lied,” Damien whispers in my ear when we’re dancing, having spent the last hour accepting congratulations and squealing with my sister and best friends. Cami and Kat dragged me to the bathroom, having my makeup case already on hand to fix my face after my big cry fest into poor Damien’s tux, and I full-on slapped my sister on the arm for not telling me she would be here. And now we’re finally being given space and privacy as a soft Christmas song plays, and he’s holding me close as we sway.

“What?” I ask, and for a moment, my heart stops in panic.

But then I remember Damien would never make me question anything between us, not ever.

“I lied before about what I want you wearing tonight.”

My brow comes together, confused.

“Is the dress not—”

“The dress is spectacular. But tonight, when we’re home, I’m going to fuck you wearing that necklace, those shoes, and your ring.” I look down at my hand on his chest, nails tipped in pink, brand new ring twinkling in the lights.

“Deal,” I say with a smile.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I've never written one of these - they feel weird and I'm sure I'm going to forget a million people because that's what I do and then my anxiety gets the best of me, so I usually skip it.

But this book is my eighth written in just one year, published almost exactly one year after my very first book was published and while that first book was published with little fanfare and the support of only the few people who knew of it's existence, that's just not the case anymore. So here we go.

First and foremost, thank you Alex. I dedicate every single book to you because you're my own personal book boyfriend come to life. Thank you for believing in me eight years ago before I could even see my own dreams.

Next: Ryan, Owen, and Ella. I actually hope you never ever see this acknowledgment, but if you do, please, close this book and never speak of it. But thanks for letting me be your mom, for letting me live my dream.

Thank you Emily. Thank you for letting me text you pure chaos and not telling me it's chaos, instead, listening to my unhinged voice memos and forcing me to write whatever comes to mind. I'm forever grateful for you and can't wait to meet your little bean.

Thank you to Lindsey, the worlds's best PA who takes my psychotic texts and voice memos and makes them make sense and never tells me to shut up. You're a real one.

Thank you Norma Gambini for taking my typo filled mess and adding a million commas. You're an angel.

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Thank you to my sensitivity readers - Shani, Blanca, and Marissa - who helped me make sure I put this forth with kindness in mind.

Thank you to my beta ARC's who receive this story and point out typos without holding them against me.

Thank you to my ARC team, the true stars of any hint of success this book will receive. You accept my crazy stories, read them, and share them with the world. I can't thank you enough.

Thank you to Booktok - yes, the whole damn thing - because without you, this would all be a pipe dream. Thank you for enduring my cringeworthy videos, finding gems, liking and sharing and reading my books. It makes me cry if I think too long about how much you have changed my life.

But most of all: thank YOU, sweet reader. When I first started writing, it was a crazy, delusional dream at best. I had a story that stuck with me for years and, truly, I just needed to get it out of my head. Unfortunately (or fortunately) new characters and stories took its place, but I'm happy to be here, writing with you, for you.

So, yeah. Thank you. From the absolute bottom of my heart. I love you all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Morgan is a born and raised Jersey girl, living there with her two boys, toddler daughter, and mechanic husband. She's addicted to iced espresso, barbeque chips, and Starburst jellybeans. She usually has headphones on, listening to some spicy audiobook or Taylor Swift. There is rarely an in between.

Writing has been her calling for as long as she can remember. There's a framed 'page one' of a book she wrote at seven hanging in her childhood home to prove the point. Her entire life she's crafted stories in her mind, begging to be released but it wasn't until recently she finally gave them the reigns.

I'm so grateful you've agreed to take this journey with me.

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The last thing he needs is a distraction.

Hunter Hutchin's success is due to one thing, and one thing only: his unerring focus on Beaten Path, the outdoor recreation company he built from the ground up after his first business was an utter failure.

When his dad gets sick, Hunter is forced to go back to his hometown and prove once and for all that his father's belief in him wasn't for nothing. With illness looming, distractions are unacceptable.

Staying with his sister, he meets Hannah, the sexy nanny who has had his head in a frenzy since they met.

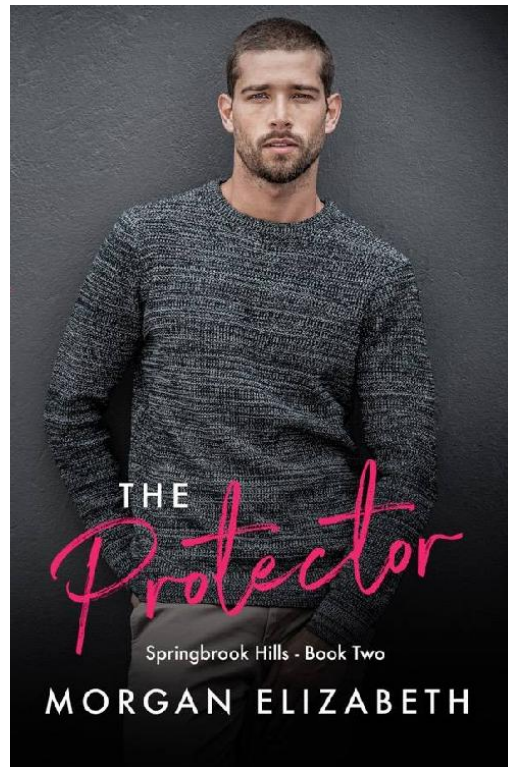
When Hunter's dad gets sick, he's forced to leave the city and move back into the small town he grew up in at his sister's house. Ever since he watched Hannah dance into his life, he's finding himself drifting from his goals and purpose - or is he drifting closer to them?

She refuses to make the same mistakes as her mother.

Hannah Keller grew up watching what happens when a family falls apart and lived through those consequences. When it's time, she won't make the same mistake by settling for anyone.

But when the uncle of the kids she nannies comes to stay for the summer, she can't help but find herself drawn to the handsome, standoffish man who is definitely not for her.

Can she get through the summer while protecting her heart? Or will he breakthrough and leave her broken?



[Out now in the Kindle Store and on Kindle Unlimited](#)

He was her first love.

Luna Davidson has been in love with Tony since she was ten years old. As her older brother's best friend, he was always off-limits, but that doesn't mean she didn't try. But years after he turned her down, she's found herself needing his help, whether she wants it or not.

She's his best friend's little sister.

When he learns that Luna has had someone stalking her for months, he's furious that she didn't tell anyone. As a detective on the Springbrook Hills PD, it's his job to serve and protect. But can he use this as an excuse to find out what really happened all those years ago?

Can Luna overcome her own insecurities to see what's right in front of her? Can Tony figure out who is stalking her before it goes too far?



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She was always the fill-in.

Jordan Daniels always knew she had a brother and sister her mom left behind. Heck, her mom never let her forget she didn't live up to their standards. But when she disappears from the limelight after her country star boyfriend proposes, the only place she knows to go to is to the town her mother fled and the family who doesn't know she exists.

He won't fall for another wild child.

Tanner Coleman was left in the dust once before when his high school sweetheart ran off to follow a rockstar around the world. He loves his roots, runs the family business, and will never leave Springbrook Hills. But when Jordan, with her lifetime spent traveling the world and mysterious history comes to work for him, he can't help but feel drawn to her.

Can Jordan open up to him about her past and stay in one place? Can Tanner trust his heart with her, or will she just hurt him like his ex?

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