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BEST SELLING AUTHOR

MARIAN TEE

TOO  
*wicked*  
FOR  
*love*

*A Greek Billionaire Romance*

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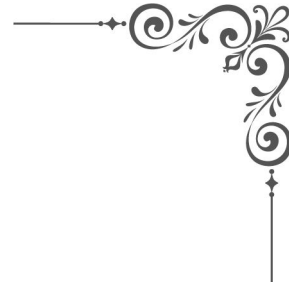
*Note: Previously published as Acheron's Woman*

***My boss is a billionaire, playboy, and former hardened criminal all rolled into one...***

...while my mother is notorious for being conned by rich handsome crooks.

I know things like 'heartbreak' and 'poor' taste in men aren't supposed to be hereditary, but the moment my wickedly dangerous boss says he wants a shy nerd like me—

We all know how this is going to end, don't we?



## About the Book

AS PIPPI PREPARED TO greet their unexpected guest, she heard her boss answer his phone and later exclaim, “*He’s here? What for?*”

*Mm.* The astonishment in her boss’ voice piqued her curiosity. It was so rare for anyone or anything to catch Mr. Collins off guard like that. She was still thinking about this as she opened the door, her gaze thoughtful and her voice soft as she murmured, “Good afternoon.” And seeing that she was only at eye level with someone’s breast pocket, Pippi lifted her gaze up - and consequently felt her jaw drop.

Dark eyes glittered down at her, and Pippi’s heart slammed against her chest.

*Acheron Simonides.*

He was dressed entirely in black (bespoke Dior, she recalled reading from the society pages once), and the way it molded to every sinewy inch of his body was positively decadent. It reminded her of the longest three seconds of her life - *her body on top of his* - and the instant she thought of it, her cheeks were a goner, lost in the blushing heat of mortification.

Something glinted in his eyes, and because the only encounters she had with the opposite sex were work-related, the meaning of it escaped her at first. *Why was he looking at her like he knew* -

Her eyes widened in realization.

*Lud!*

*That was it!*

He knew *exactly* what she had been thinking of.

Aghast with shock, her first instinct was to slam the door on his face, but then she heard Mr. Collins ask, “Who is it, Pippi?”

The words made her jerk involuntarily as common sense returned in a flash.

*You do not slam the door on the CEO's face, Pippilotta Jones!*

She took one last apprehensive look at him, hoping futilely that what she had imagined wasn't real - but it was.

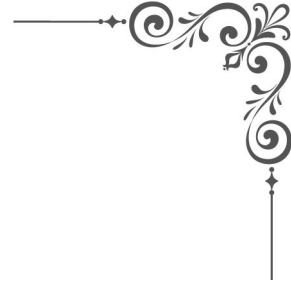
The smile playing on his lips said it all. It was as sexual as it was predatory, and it made her want to hide herself under the covers and mutter to herself, *'it's not real, it's not real.'*

BUT IT WAS.

After twenty-three years of fastidious living and doing what she could to lead a life of blessed singlehood, the nasty Fates had still ended up having their way.

The Jones' curse had struck again, and Pippilotta Jones, despite her greatest efforts, was now in a wealthy man's crosshairs -

And there was just no going back from there.



# **Too Wicked for Love**

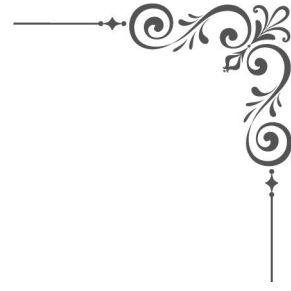
by Marian Tee

*Note: Previously published as Acheron's Woman*

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# Playlist

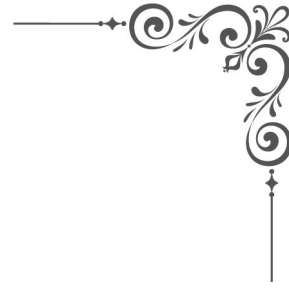
[We & Us by Moira dela Torre](#)

[Best Part by Daniel Caesar](#)

[Somewhere in Time](#)

[We Find Love by Thunk A Pella](#)





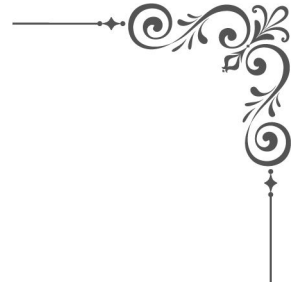
# Ms. Pippilotta Jones' Life Hack Guide for the Socially Inept

*If you find yourself in a situation where you're absolutely required to make small talk, listed below are the types of people you might encounter.*

- 1. **Babies.** You can coo them to death, and it wouldn't matter. Save yourself from social grief by volunteering to be their nanny for the day.*
- 2. **Old people.** You don't even have to talk. All you have to do is listen. Stick to them like glue if you can.*
- 3. **People who are full of themselves.** This type is easy to spot, and they'd be happier if you don't speak at all. Their talk might occasionally bore you to tears, but it's better than having to speak at all.*
- 4. **People with marriage or travel plans.** Ask about their plans, and say no more. They'll be more than happy to take up the slack.*
- 5. **Same age, same gender.** A self-deprecating approach to conversation is always ideal as this effectively establishes your lack of interest in competing with them.*
- 6. **Same age, opposite sex.** Underscoring your lack of viability ensures that they do not waste time drawing you out of your shell.*

*P.S. Above all else, avoid speaking to wildcards, i.e. smoldering hot Greek billionaires who think your silence is a challenge to their masculinity. If you spot this type, run away - as fast as you can, and never look back!*

*As the Filipino (viral) meme goes, “Kapag tumingin ka, akin ka.”*



# Prologue

*NINETEEN YEARS AGO*

Every gang had its own hierarchy, and in this dark and grimy corner of Athens, new recruits were fair game. Pests or pets, that was how they were called, and always, it could only be one or the other. Pests got beaten up every minute, and they were the lucky ones. They only needed to survive a thrashing until they toughened up enough to fight back.

Pets, however...

It was the faintest sound, a door carefully and stealthily being opened, but it was more than enough. The seventeen-year-old boy lying on the floor was awake in an instant, but even so his body remained motionless and his eyes closed, the pace of his breathing slow and deep.

*Go away. Please go away. Please.*

Even though the boy already knew it was hopeless to pray, he did so anyway in a desperate bid to stave off the inevitable.

Another sound penetrated the darkness, so much louder now, as if it were a blatant challenge for the boy to face his fears. His fingers tightened under the pillow, curling around the knife handle even as the sound made him sick with fear.

The boy knew he was too much of a survivalist to fight to the death if he found himself outnumbered, but he also knew it was not in him to submit passively. He could never be the type

---

And then it happened.

Too fast. Too sudden. Or perhaps it was just too terrifying that even though all the signs were there, the boy had made himself blind and deaf to all of them.

The knife was torn from his grasp as countless hands flipped him to his back. He tried to struggle. He tried to scream. But reality was as he had long feared, and there were just too damn many of them. In mere moments, the room reeked of the most depraved desires. It was all there - in the

way they looked at him, the way they laughed as they tore the clothes off his body.

Tears burned against his eyelids, and he knew that the moment to choose had come.

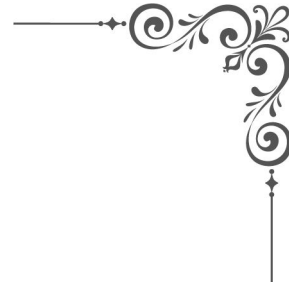
*Submit or fight.*

*Live or die.*

He opened his eyes as he felt callous fingers part the cheeks of his ass.

*THEO, SAVE ME!*

And that was when she came.



## One

“THESE PAPERS NEED TO be with Mr. Simonides  
A.S.A.P.”

“I’ll get someone from the mailroom—-”

Pippi’s boss glanced up with a frown. “No, you won’t.” Mr. Collins’ voice held an unusual note of reproach. “These papers are for our *CEO*, Ms. Jones. Do you truly think it’s a good idea to entrust such important paperwork to one of our messengers?”

*No, she did not*, Pippi thought. But what was *not* a good idea either was having her come into proximity with any rich man, which she considered herself allergic to. *And it did not help at all*, she pondered gloomily to herself, *that Acheron Simonides was a lot richer than probably ninety-nine percent of the global population.*

But an order was an order, and after apologizing for her (deliberate) lapse of judgment, she took the thick folder from her boss’ desk and excused herself from the room.

Pippi kept her head down as she made her way to the elevators, a gesture that was frequently misconstrued by her colleagues at work. Half of them thought it was a sign of aloofness. The other half believed it was only because Pippi was a workaholic.

All of them were wrong, though.

Dismay flared inside her when a discreet glance showed that the elevator was close to full when she stepped in and joined the others. No one looking at Pippi, however, would have guessed at her unease. The faintly distracted expression

on her face, combined with the speed in which her fingers moved as she typed on her smartphone, lent an impression of not-to-be-disturbed efficiency.

*If only they knew*, Pippi thought wryly. Appearing busy and avoiding eye contact discouraged other people from making small talk with her, and it was one of the many little tricks she had learned over the years to mask her shyness.

When Pippi reached the lobby, reception had already been given instructions by Mr. Collins, and a security officer was tasked to walk her to the penthouse-exclusive elevator. As far as the rumor mills were concerned, only the company's highest-ranking executives had the chance of visiting the CEO in his personal domain. The privilege was wasted on her, though, and when the elevator finally made it to the 38th floor, she stepped out with ill-disguised reluctance, thick folder clutched to her chest like a shield.

The brightly-lit entrance hall, albeit impressively designed with a mixture of gleaming white marble and antique bricks, was vast and empty.

*So this was the place*, she thought. A few months ago, a scandal had rocked the office, with executives chancing upon a female manager giving Mr. Simonides a blowjob in this very place. The woman had recently been given a promotion, but Pippi couldn't help wondering if the pay raise was worth the notoriety that came with it. While she wasn't exactly a social pariah - the woman was too beautiful and worldly to let herself be treated as such - she wasn't exactly welcomed in the company's most conservative circles either.

*Others would probably think the woman had it coming*, Pippi ruminated, but where she was concerned, it was always the rich men that were to blame. Her father, a Chicago-based millionaire, was a prime example of that, and so had been all the failed past loves of her great-aunts.

Thinking about the Jones curse had Pippi gnashing her teeth as always, and she found herself stomping down the rest of the hallway. In her vexed mood, the beautiful artworks that lined the marbled walls lost its power to entrance her, and she

might as well as be deaf to the musical magnificence of Franz Schubert's *Quartettsatz in C Minor*, which played softly in the background.

Upon reaching the double French doors at the end of the hallway, Pippi made sure to school her expression into one of impersonal efficiency. She could already feel a sea of shyness welling up inside of her, threatening to wash away her ability to be rational and coherent, but she managed to hold on to her control.

*Just play it cool like you always do, Pippi reminded herself. Don't give him the smallest opportunity to strike a conversation, and you'll be on your way out before you know it.*

Gazing at the doors' panes of frosted glass, she debated whether to knock or use the discreet-looking metal buzzer next to the door entry monitor. Or maybe she should call Reception

---

One of the doors suddenly opened, and she hastily put her professional smile on, thinking it would either be Mr. Simonides' housekeeper or butler.

But instead, she got...Acheron Simonides himself.

*"Mr. Simonides!"* His name flew out of her mouth in an unplanned and embarrassingly shrill fashion, with Pippi being caught off guard by the CEO's unexpected appearance.

It was her first time to see him up close, and Pippi struggled not to stare at him in dumbstruck silence. *Wow*. And because no better word came to mind, she found herself thinking again. *Wow*. Just...*wow*.

It was rare for Pippi to be so easily bowled over by a man's looks, but even she knew Acheron Simonides wasn't anyone's average kind of handsome. Silky black hair, chiseled features that seemed to have been carved from the same mold as Greek gods, and a ruggedly muscular body that no man who pencil-pushed almost 18 hours a day had any right to possess.

His looks were the type that smoldered, *literally*, considering how invisible flames now seemed to be tonguing



every inch of her skin.

*Wow*, she thought again, but this time with a helpless, sickening feeling in her stomach. She had the craziest urge to run, more so when she saw his impatient gaze raking over her as he snapped, “Are you just going to stand there like an idiot?”

“I...I...” His voice was deep and strong, so darn mesmerizing it made his insult sound like a compliment. It was a foolish sentiment, but it was also the truth, and Pippi’s unease turned into full-blown anxiety. That she was horribly ill equipped to handle a man like him in close quarters had never been more obvious, and she could already feel her heart giving out as shyness tied her tongue in knots.

*Don’t puke.*

The thought - half-warning, half-plea - flashed out of nowhere, and she clung to it for life. She always worked better with a goal, anyway, and with the thought giving her something to focus on, Pippi succeeded bit by bit in regaining her composure.

Clearing her throat, she said in a fairly steady voice, “I’m sorry for the unseemly reaction, Mr. Simonides.” *Smile. Don’t puke.* “I was told you wouldn’t be home.” She saw his lip curl in response, as if finding her words a complete waste of his time, and her temper - so rarely seen it might as well have been nonexistent - started to rise.

“Who the hell are you, anyway?”

Anger had her shyness receding, and she forgot all about being intimidated. All she wanted to do at that moment was throw the folder at his face. Teeth gnashing, she gave him her name and position in his company, adding somewhat icily afterwards, “Mr. Collins believes this should be given to you as soon as possible, sir.” She handed him the folder with both hands, but nothing happened.

*Okay.*

*Maybe...*

*He wanted her to deliver it straight to his study or something?*

Her gaze reluctantly went back up - and that was when she finally noticed it. This time, the sickly pallor underneath his bronze tan was impossible to miss, and was it just her - or did he seem to be swaying on his feet?

“M-Mr. Simonides?”

His face, already white, turned even whiter at the sound of her voice. “I’m fine.”

Oh, if only she could believe that. She really wished she could, but since she was a great believer of doing what Jesus would do in such circumstances—

“You don’t, umm, look like it, sir.”

*“I said I’m fine!”*

The fury in his voice stunned Pippi, making her take a wary step back. *What on earth was his problem?* Their gazes clashed, Pippi’s blue eyes filled with a mixture of hurt and indignation at his rudeness while his dark gaze was...

*Feverish?*

Nurturing reflexes - honed for decades in a household filled with love and laughter - kicked in, and she unthinkingly reached up, having to tiptoe a little just to touch his forehead. He yanked away with a curse, but it was too late.

“You’re burning up,” Pippi gasped.

Even more, it didn’t look like his fever was of the ordinary type, with Acheron Simonides suddenly bending down and throwing up what seemed like his last meal (salmon, seemed like it)...at her feet.

She nearly gagged, her face contorting with distaste and revulsion at the sight and smell of his vomit. *Don’t puke!* Pippi had to repeat the warning to herself, but this time for a different reason.

She saw him start to stagger, and Pippi knew she had to pull herself together. Where Acheron Simonides was

concerned, letting him fall face flat on his own puke was definitely grounds for termination.

“*G-Gotcha!*” She caught him just in time, her knees nearly buckling under his weight. The scent of his cologne was nice, but it was easily overpowered by the stench of puke. It caused Pippi to alternately gag and grit her teeth as she half-dragged, half-carried the CEO to the nearest couch. She tried to be gentle as she laid him down, but when she lost her footing on the edge of the rug, all Pippi could do was let out a little shriek

-

And then she was lying on top of him, her breasts squashed against the hard wall of Acheron Simonides’ chest, and the sensitive flesh between her legs pressing right on top of his crotch.

*Omigodomigodomigod!*

Embarrassment ate her alive as she scrambled off him as fast as she could. No more than three seconds had passed surely, but every moment of it seemed indelibly printed on her mind. She just could not forget how incredibly hard -

A low groan escaped the CEO, and she quickly shook off the shamefully lustful fantasies that were doing its best to corrupt her mind.

“Mr. Simonides?” She peered down at him, torn between worry over his health and awe at just how amazingly long his lashes were. Another groan, and worry turned into anxiety. “I think you’re seriously ill, sir. I’m going to call—”

“*No.*”

What did he mean ‘no’? Or maybe he was already delirious with fever? “Sir—”

“If...you call 911...you’re...*fired.*”

Hoarse as his voice was, it did not make his words any less coherent - or commanding, and Pippi could only gape, unable to believe what she was hearing. Was this man truly threatening to terminate her employment because she wanted to keep him alive?

“Just...call...*Wickham.*”

His eyes had closed before he even finished speaking, and by the end of it, he was already unconscious. The lines that marred his forehead gradually faded, the rigid tension easing from his handsome face. It made him look so much younger and approachable, almost like a black-haired angel -

*WHOA, Pippilotta Jones!*

She gave herself a little slap, thankful to have put the brakes on such thoughts before they could get even more dreadfully fanciful.

*Acheron Simonides is a rich man, and therefore off limits!*

Pippi took a deep breath.

*Now, focus!*

Recalling the CEO's last words, she gingerly bent down to take his iPhone from his pocket and felt like a thief as she used his finger to unlock the device. Wickham turned out to be the #1 on his speed dial, and it took only one ring before someone on the other end of the line answered.

” Mr. Wickham?”

“Who are you, and why do you have Mr. Simonides' phone?”

The voice was a menacing mix of low and heavy, and Pippi wondered if maybe she had ended up calling John Wick instead. Clearing her throat, she said, “I'm at his apartment. He's sick, but he told me to call you instead of - *hello? Hello?*”

Fifteen minutes later, and Wickham turned out to be a big, bad, bald man in his forties with the same aura as military veterans and ex-convicts. *In other words*, she thought absently, *someone who wouldn't think twice about killing if the situation called for it.*

Fortunately, the man turned out to be a lot nicer under his gruff and grizzly exterior, and upon making certain Pippi hadn't anything to do with his employer's condition, he had immediately turned into the soul of kindness.

He was a bit of the chatty type, too, or so Pippi mistakenly assumed, when Wickham revealed to her how “the boss” had picked up a virus after his secret trip to a remote location in Africa. Apparently, he was building a school there, one he didn’t want every Tom, Dick, and Harry to know about.

*If that were so, Pippi couldn’t help wondering, then why let her know?*

The answer to this was simple, although much time was to pass before she would learn of it. Wickham, as Pippi had correctly guessed, was very used to killing. A war veteran with a mercenary past, he had met Acheron Simonides while the latter was still in his teens and on the rise in Athens’ little-known underworld of crime and violence. Wickham had always been good at reading people; it was what had saved his life countless times in Iraq, and later on it was what had convinced him to work for Simonides.

*It was also the same reason, Wickham thought, he trusted Ms. Pippilotta Jones at first sight.* He had a good feeling about her, and an even better feeling when he thought of the woman and his boss together.

It was close to nine by the time Pippi made it home, and the slight trembling of her fingers made Pippi realize belatedly that it had been hours since her last meal. In her panic over the CEO’s condition, she had actually forgotten to have her dinner.

This revelation, shared with the rest of the family over the kitchen table, had everyone gasping with exaggerated surprise.

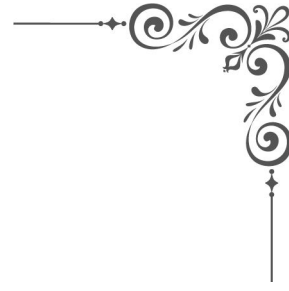
“But you always go to pieces when you do something out of schedule,” Vik, born one year after Pippi, protested with feigned confusion. “To do something so unheard of...is it possible you might have fallen for your—”

Pippi’s eyebrows shot up in warning. “Bite your tongue, missy!”

The rather old-fashioned expression had everyone laughing. It was one of the family’s long-standing jokes, with Pippi and her younger sisters having grown up listening to her great-aunts speak like extras rehearsing for a Downton Abbey

episode. The conversation then took different turns after this, with the matter of the eldest Jones daughter once rescuing a billionaire in distress all but forgotten.

Or at least it was so in the Jones' home.



## Two

BREAKFAST READING NORMALLY consisted of stock reports and feasibility studies, but today was different. Today, his enforced convalescence had come to an end - and he could finally make a decision about the mysterious Pippilotta Jones.

His gaze returned to the dossier before him, opened to his assistant's cover sheet for the girl's background report.

Age: 23

Address: *Bougainvillea Street, Isla de Flores*

Family: *Father, unlisted; mother, single without any prior marriages and self-employed by managing family-owned bed and breakfast; siblings, 3 (all female, younger, single); three other maternal great-aunts residing in the same domicile*

Education: *Undergraduate (Business Administration), took a leave of absence in her second year at the University of Miami*

Work History: *A teller at Banco de IDF (19 y/o), hired by Simonides Inc. as administrative assistant (20 y/o) and later promoted to executive secretary in the marketing department (21 y/o)*

Acheron flipped to the next page, which contained a full-length photo of the girl, taken for one of the company's newsletters. *Pippi Longstocking in person*, he mused. Perhaps her parents had foreseen their daughter's resemblance to the fictional character, hence her charming name?

She had an elfin face with the lightest smattering of freckles, clear blue eyes, and dimples. Her most arresting

feature was her hair - gold under the sunlight, and red in the night. She was neither beautiful nor unattractive. *Sensible-looking* was the best way to describe her, and he couldn't remember such a type ever capturing his interest.

Until now, of course.

Acheron caught sight of Wickham studying him with disapproving eyes from his usual position in the room, and his lips curved. Apparently, he wasn't the only one intrigued by Timothy Collins' top-notch secretary.

"Quit it, Wick. You're acting as if I'm about to steal your daughter's chastity."

"She's the decent type," Wickham muttered. "It's not right, your plans for seducing her."

"Who said anything about seducing her?"

"You don't have to," Wickham retorted. "I've heard from Charlie himself. You've gotten rid of your current mistress - and you only do so when you've already found a replacement."

Anyone else who dared speak out of line with him would have typically earned Acheron's wrath, but since he and Wickham went a long way back, he merely ignored the last bit, saying, "I just want to get to know her better."

Or so that was the plan, but Acheron ended up spending much of his morning in a state of frustration and impatience. He kept thinking that it was only a matter of time before the girl made up some excuse and found her way to his office. A billionaire was in her debt, after all, and now was her chance to cash in on it.

But the hours ticked by, and come lunchtime, Acheron was forced to concede he had underestimated little Pippilotta.

When Charlie informed him about the whole company being unaware of both his illness and the girl's involvement in his recovery, he had thought it was only because she had enough common sense to understand that his personal health had a reciprocal impact on the company's stock value.



When she had made no attempt to contact him in the two weeks he had been away from the office, he had thought she was being discreet.

*But now?*

Pippilotta Jones was obviously a hell of a lot smarter than he gave her credit for, having succeeded in making him cool his heels like some infatuated idiot, the way no other woman before had done so.

Picking up the intercom, he buzzed his PA in and asked Charlie to find out where the girl was having her lunch. Hopefully, it would be a restaurant with a private room. She intrigued him, and morsels like her were meant to be savored and indulged in private.

When Charlie came back, Acheron was more than ready to leave, only to hear the younger man report ruefully that Ms. Jones was having lunch at her desk.

*“She what?”* That had to be an act, surely? Millennial thinking had long gotten rid of that kind of dedication to work. She had to be faking this for some reason.

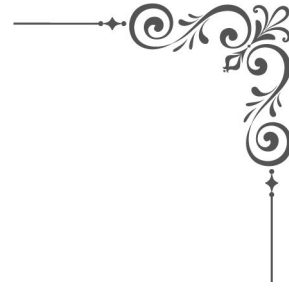
“I’ve gone to the CCTV room to have this verified, sir. I went as far back as a week, and I checked footage from random dates in the past few months. She always has her meals at her desk, Mr. Simonides.”

*Her desk*, which was the one place in the world Acheron hadn’t a hope in hell at having a private conversation with her. Had she known that perhaps, and this was simply her way of forcing him to exert more effort in wooing her?

Acheron was normally contemptuous of such games, but instead he found himself even more intrigued. She was becoming more and more of a challenge, and it had been a long time since he had last felt this way.

Years if he recalled correctly, and it was when he had Serenity Raleigh temporarily working for him as a secretary.

*You win then, Ms. Jones*, Acheron thought. *I’ll play your game...for now.*



## Three

PIPPI WAS IN ONE OF the toilet cubicles when she heard the door to the ladies' open, followed by the sound of chatter and heels clicking against the floor. In the act of leaving, she changed her mind and instead stepped back to lower the lid of the toilet.

*Life Hack #2 for the Socially Inept*, Pippi thought as she sat back down on the toilet. *Wait it out to avoid having to make small talk.*

“You’ve heard, haven’t you?” Pippi overheard one of the girls ask.

“About BILF coming back to work from the Amazon?”

Sheltered as she was, even Pippi knew that BILF stood for *Boss I’d Like to Fuck*. The latter part of the girl’s news, however, had her brows raising, more so when the conversation took the most outrageous turn.

*I heard someone say he’s got his eyes on being South America’s most powerful lumber baron.*

*I heard differently. They say he’s there to buy the skin of a 100-hundred-foot anaconda. He wants it in his living room...*

Listening to the girls speculate the most wildest things had Pippi rolling her eyes and longing to blurt out the truth.

*He had pneumonia, you guys! That’s all!*

Pippi waited for a full minute after hearing the door close behind the other girls before cautiously stepping out. *I should tell the others about that*, Pippi mused as she made her way back to Mr. Collins’ office. It would make a funny story to

share over dinner, and her family always did love having a good laugh.

It was a pleasant thought, but one she shelved by force of habit as soon as she returned to her desk. As the eldest child, she had always felt it was her role to be the responsible one, and this outlook had inevitably spilled over to her personality at work.

Her phone rang, and as she listened to the caller report about a crisis at one of the company's regional offices, it was business as usual, and any lingering thoughts about an Amazon trip that never happened faded for good.

Outside Mr. Collins' office, it was the same for the rest of those working at the 30th floor until the elevator doors slid open and a tall, powerful figure came out. Even to those who didn't recognize him by face, Acheron Simonides' commanding presence was such that he had everyone staring at him.

As he strode down the hallway, heads snapped so fast it was a wonder no necks were broken, with everyone wondering what possible reason the CEO could have to visit their floor. News of his presence quickly spread to the rest of the offices like wildfire, gossipy tongues setting fire all the way down to where the executives worked behind closed doors. Five seconds were all it took for everyone to know. Or at least everyone except Pippi.

A knock sounded on the door just as Mr. Collins' private phone rang.

"I'll take the call," her boss said and gestured to the door, adding, "You take care of that, and if it's a memo from Mrs. Gardiner, you know what to do."

"Have it framed and hang it on your wall?" she asked wide-eyed. The lady executive occupying one of the next-door offices was frequently likened to a female shark with an eye for rich widows like Mr. Collins.

"You just try," Pippi's grey-haired boss growled, and if looks could kill, the executive would've had her buried six feet

under already.

“I was just joking,” she said with a grin as she rose to her feet.

“You better.”

In the mood to tease him, she looked at her boss over her back, asking innocently, “Or was I?”

“*You...*” But with his phone still ringing shrilly, Mr. Collins could only shoot his secretary a threatening scowl as he reached for the receiver. *It was times like this he found himself wishing for the old Pippi back*, he grumbled to himself. When she had just started, she was such a shy little mouse, never daring to answer back. And while she still did act like one with other people, she had long stopped being unsure of herself with Timothy. Why, these days he would be lucky if he didn’t have her nagging about his diet, his health - on and on the list went.

As Pippi prepared to greet their unexpected guest, she heard her boss answer his phone and later exclaim, “*He’s here? What for?*”

*Mm.* The astonishment in her boss’ voice piqued her curiosity. It was so rare for anyone or anything to catch Mr. Collins off guard like that. She was still thinking about this as she opened the door, her gaze thoughtful and her voice soft as she murmured, “Good afternoon.” And seeing that she was only at eye level with someone’s breast pocket, Pippi lifted her gaze up - and consequently felt her jaw drop.

Dark eyes glittered down at her, and Pippi’s heart slammed against her chest.

*Acheron Simonides.*

He was dressed entirely in black (bespoke Dior, she recalled reading from the society pages once), and the way it molded to every sinewy inch of his body was positively decadent. It reminded her of the longest three seconds of her life - *her body on top of his* - and the instant she thought of it, her cheeks were a goner, lost in the blushing heat of mortification.

Something glinted in his eyes, and because the only encounters she had with the opposite sex were work-related, the meaning of it escaped her at first. *Why was he looking at her like he knew -*

Her eyes widened in realization.

*Lud!*

*That was it!*

He knew *exactly* what she had been thinking of.

Aghast with shock, her first instinct was to slam the door on his face, but then she heard Mr. Collins ask, “Who is it, Pippi?”

The words made her jerk involuntarily as common sense returned in a flash.

*You do not slam the door on the CEO's face, Pippilotta Jones!*

She took one last apprehensive look at him, hoping futilely that what she had imagined wasn't real - but it was.

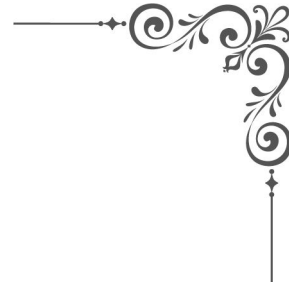
The smile playing on his lips said it all. It was as sexual as it was predatory, and it made her want to hide herself under the covers and mutter to herself, *'it's not real, it's not real.'*

BUT IT WAS.

After twenty-three years of fastidious living and doing what she could to lead a life of blessed singlehood, the nasty Fates had still ended up having their way.

The Jones' curse had struck again, and Pippilotta Jones, despite her greatest efforts, was now in a wealthy man's crosshairs -

And there was just no going back from there.



## Four

“IT’S MR. SIMONIDES, Mr. Collins.”

Discipline was the only reason Acheron’s face didn’t reveal his amusement as an unexpected scene unfolded before him, and a blank-faced Pippilotta Jones stepped back to let him inside Timothy Collins’ office.

She was the most reluctant little thing, with the way she avoided his gaze as she returned stiffly to her seat and focused her attention on her computer screen. It was only when her boss, known for his bluntness, asked Acheron for the reason of his visit that she became animated. He saw her suck in her breath, her body jerking in her seat just as her panicky blue eyes flew to him in horror.

*It would serve the girl right if he made her squirm,* Acheron contemplated. Looking back at Timothy, he murmured, “I wanted to speak with you in private about the Excalibur acquisition.” Fortunately - or unfortunately - for Ms. Jones, Acheron would rather punish her in far more pleasurable ways.

The girl relaxed visibly when her boss took his answer at face value, and he almost smirked. She was acting like he was the last person on earth she wanted to see, and the sheer novelty of it only made her more desirable in his eyes.

*Poor baby,* Acheron thought. If she had truly wanted to turn him off, she should’ve acted like other women and thrown herself at him the first chance she got.

For the next few minutes, Acheron discussed his concerns about the project, and afterwards the older man asked him

about his latest trip to the Amazon. He answered without missing a beat even as he worked to conceal his surprise.

He had not expected her to keep his illness a secret even from her own boss, but there were apparently no bounds to Ms. Jones' discretion.

Another minute passed before Acheron was able to put his plan in motion and he was able to get Collins out of the office on a made-up pretext. If his calculations were correct - and they always were - it would be a while before the executive would be able to return.

"I'll see to that myself," Mr. Collins decided. Standing up, he tossed an absent-minded look at his secretary, saying, "Please attend to Mr. Simonides while I'm away."

"Yes, sir." But inside herself, Pippi was dreadfully alarmed. *No! Don't go! Don't leave me alone with him!* She wanted to shriek for help, but reality forbade her to speak a single word of protest. All she could do was watch the older man leave, and with every step he took, her heart began to race faster and faster.

*Nooooooooo!*

Acheron's gaze gleamed with amusement at the way she jumped out of her seat the moment she saw him coming towards her. In spite of the apprehension that so clearly filled her eyes, there was also a proud tilt to her chin, making the girl appear like some resisting little prey determined to fight for her life.

*And what a wonderful fight it would be,* he thought lazily while watching her plant herself behind her high-backed chair. He saw her fingers curl over its top, almost as if intending to use it to run him over if needed be.

Her fierce, defensive stance made her resemble a wildcat in the making, and the thought brought Acheron immense pleasure. Ah, to tame one such as her...

*And she was all mine,* he thought possessively.

The Fates had bequeathed this girl to him, and he would damn well take it.

Pippi tried not to fidget as she felt Acheron's dark-as-night eyes run over her figure, leisurely and thoroughly, almost like he was having fun thinking of the many ways he could eat her. It had her body reacting with the oddest sensation - burning hot and freezing cold at the same time - and she would've crossed her arms over her chest if not for the knowledge that doing so would make her appear weak.

*Which was the one thing a woman couldn't ever afford to do,* Pippi thought nervously, *with the type of man Acheron Simonides was.*

"You didn't tell Collins anything." The tone was casual, but she had a feeling it was only to disarm her.

"It wasn't my place to do so." She prayed that would be the end of it, prayed that he would be satisfied with the answer and go away and never come back.

But it wasn't.

"Is that so?" This time, his voice had lowered into a velvety murmur, and she found herself gritting her teeth against the seductive temptation of his voice. *Don't fall for it! Just don't!*

His eyes narrowed, and it was almost like he could see all the way to her soul. "Is that also why you haven't come to see me since then?"

Oh, the way he so sinfully couched things, making it sound like she had a long-agreed assignation with him.

"You thought it wasn't your place to do so?"

There was that sensual purr in his voice again, threatening to entice Pippi out of all rational thinking. Thankfully, she had just enough sense left to stay silent. To answer him in any way would only invite more trouble in her life, and she just wanted this to be over with.

"Do you know that there's security footage of that night?"

The sudden change in topic threw her off, and she blinked at him in bemusement. "Security footage?" In the heart-



hammering, knee-buckling state Pippi was in, she was having a hard time grasping his meaning.

“Your ability to keep your wits about you even under pressure was quite commendable.”

Oh, so he was talking about *that night*.

There was a pause, and then the billionaire drawled, “I also couldn’t help but notice there was that part when you fell on top of me—”

*Omigodomigodomigodomigod!*

She had forgotten about that - *again!*

“I am so sorry!”

The strangled tone of her voice, combined with the guilt in her expression, had Acheron blinking. “Perhaps I’m reading this incorrectly, but are you apologizing because you feel you’ve...err...taken advantage of me?” He almost grinned at the tiny, shamefaced nod she gave him, and he said gravely, “You have done nothing inappropriate, Ms. Jones...*but I do wish you had.*”

It took a full second for the penny to drop, and when it finally did, the look of scandalized shock on her face was everything he had hoped for, and he smiled. “What an enchanting novelty you are, Ms. Jones.” Her stony silence in response was also what he expected, and his smile widened.

She really would be the best diversion he’d had in years.

Gazing at her with veiled lids, he murmured silkily, “If you’re free, I’d like to take you out for dinner tonight.”

He saw her face resume a blank expression at the invitation, and he instinctively knew that it was to hide the way the gears of her mind were working furiously to come up with a plausible excuse. If it had been any other woman, he would’ve thought of it as nothing but a devious, calculating ploy to have him crave for the unattainable.

But with the girl in front of him...

“I’m sorry,” Pippi said finally, “but I don’t think I’m your type, and it would hurt me to see you bored with my company after just a few minutes.” She had thought long and hard about the best way to refuse, and in the end she decided that the safest thing to do was to appeal to the man’s ego.

“I appreciate your attempt at tact—”

Pippi watched a smirk unfold over the billionaire’s lips and knew right away that he had completely seen through her.

“But I know when I’m being blown off.”

*Bollocks!*

Pippi frantically sought for another way out of her predicament. She thought of asking the most obvious thing (why was a man like him wasting time on a girl like her?), but no more than a second had passed when she realized how pointless that was. Why he deigned to notice her now was immaterial. The more important thing to do was finding a way to change his mind.

“I just want a simple life, Mr. Simonides.” Deciding she had nothing to lose, she simply stated the truth and laid all her cards on the table. “And getting involved with you - in any way - is just too much of a risk for me.”

The silence that followed was nerve-wracking, and Pippi found herself holding her breath. Acheron Simonides might be many things, but he had always been fair and honorable. Hopefully, those two traits would make themselves felt today and subsequently persuade him to act in her favor.

“Point taken, Ms. Jones.”

*Thank You, Lord!* She felt slightly dizzy with relief, but just as she allowed herself to breathe again, she heard him say decisively, “We’ll protect your privacy by having dinner at my place instead.”

*Dinner? With him? At his place?* Her mind became a complete blank. *That would...work, wouldn’t it?* But then she saw the way *he* was still smirking and shook the traitorous thoughts away. *Oh, for the love of God, Pippilotta Jones, stop acting like a shameless hussy where this man is concerned!*

Acheron saw the girl open her mouth, and knowing she only intended to refuse him, he said softly, “Don’t answer me with what you think you should say, Ms. Jones.”

And in a blink of an eye, the chair between them was suddenly out of the way, and Pippi suddenly found herself being backed against the wall as he advanced like an unstoppable force of power, heat, and seduction.

“Answer me with what you *want* to say.”

He looked down at her and her breath caught. With his too-gorgeous face filling her vision, it was easy to imagine how it would feel to have her life revolve around a man like him.

*Heaven and hell*, she thought helplessly, but more than that, it would mean losing complete control - and that scared her above most.

“I can’t,” she choked out.

“Why can’t you? We both know you want to.”

She shook her head. “I don’t—” His body moved an inch closer, and it made her wish she could melt into the wall. “Please, Mr. Simonides—”

Acheron relished the way his blood heated at the husky plea in her voice. “I like the sound of you begging, Ms. Jones.”

Pippi almost threw her hands up in despair. So on top of being the most seductively beautiful man alive, this man turned out to be a sadist as well? “I’m not—” She choked off when his hands slammed against the wall, and she found herself trapped in the most deliciously agonizing way possible.

*Lud, lud, lud, this could not be happening to her. It just couldn’t!*

His head started to lower, and she panicked, the words flying out of her mouth. “I’m scared!” It was a brainless, last-ditch effort to save herself from being consumed, and she squeezed her eyes shut, knowing how stupid and hopeless an attempt it was.

She waited with bated breath, dreading the inevitable, but the moments passed, and - *nothing?*

Pippi slowly opened her eyes.

A good three feet now separated them, and Acheron Simonides was staring at her with an unreadable expression.

“There’s nothing for you to be scared of,” he said in a clipped voice. “I give you my word.”

And then he was walking away without looking back, leaving a slightly stunned and thoroughly bewildered Pippi in his wake. *What just happened?*

Acheron’s mood grew increasingly black with every step he took.

*I’m scared!*

No girl had ever said such words to him before, and regardless of Ms. Jones’ true nature, he was experienced enough to know that the fear in her voice had been real.

He had scared her, and he probably was *still* scaring her.

The right thing to do at this point would be to forget she ever existed. It was clear that she wasn’t cut out to have an affair with him, just as it was equally clear that she didn’t have the strength to resist him all the way.

If he continued pursuing her, it was only a matter of time before she became his.

But at what cost?

Acheron had just stepped inside the elevator when he heard a husky, feminine voice say, “Hold please.” He stiffened, knowing exactly who it was, even before a familiar waft of perfume hit him as a woman joined him inside.

Was this coincidence or the heavens warning him from repeating the same mistakes?

As soon as the doors closed, he heard her speak again. “Hello, Acheron.”

“Hello, Millie.” His tone was pleasant, but his face was deliberately impassive as he met her gaze.

Millicent Longbourn was still as beautiful as he remembered her, and the black dress she wore was a feast for any man’s eyes, with its low-dipping neckline leaving little to the imagination. Although she no longer heated his blood the way it had in the first few days of their affair, it was still easy to recognize what it was about the sultry brunette that had once captivated his attention. There was a wantonness about her that made one imagine she would do anything asked of her in bed - for the right man.

*It was just too bad she had insisted, he thought, despite all his warnings from the start, on seeing him along those lines.*

“You don’t need to look at me like that, lover boy.”

“I was only admiring your beauty” was Acheron’s smoothly diplomatic reply, to which Millie only responded with a tinkling laugh.

“No, you weren’t.” She gazed at him with eyes that were merry and wise at the same time. “You were looking at me like you regretted ever having anything to do with me.”

Acheron’s lips tightened. Their affair hadn’t even lasted a month, and it had nearly ruined her life. He had seen how the other women - cruel, jealous bitches, the lot of them - had deliberately shunned her, and he had been fit to kill when he realized how the men had started leering openly at Millie, cracking vulgar jokes at her expense -

*And it was all because she had made the mistake of thinking she was in love with him, Acheron thought bitterly.*

Millie had no problems reading into Acheron’s silence, and she let out the tiniest of sighs. “For the last time - there is nothing for you to feel guilty about.” He had broken her heart, yes, but he had also more than made up for it. She had asked him for a promotion, which they both knew she had damn well deserved, and he had given it to her. She had asked him to sack the man she had been working for - the jerk had thought she was an easy lay just because she had been caught with

Acheron's dick in her mouth - and he had done that, too, labor disputes and potentially harmful conflicts of interest be damned.

He had been willing to give her anything really, almost everything except for what she had wanted the most.

“What are you doing here, anyway? I've never known you to use one of the public elevators.” When she saw him hesitate, everything suddenly became so clear it was almost as if she was meant to know...

Millie's lips parted in surprise. “You're seeing someone - and she's working for you. *Isn't she?*” The slight clenching of Acheron's jaw was all she needed to see. She *was* right, and equally obvious was how uncomfortable the billionaire was at having to discuss the matter with her in any way.

*Because he was a gentleman*, Millie thought. Acheron Simonides might have been born in the gutters and lived more than half his life with the poorest dregs of Athens, but it still didn't change the truth. He had more honor and nobility in him than most men who had been born with silver spoons in their mouths could ever earn in several lifetimes.

And yet...

“I hope she's smart enough to know how lucky she is to have you.” Her voice was light, but it also carried the faintest trace of wistful envy. She might have gotten over Acheron a long time ago, but it didn't make Millie any less vulnerable to having fanciful daydreams about having someone tall, dark, and handsome sweep her off her feet.

“Actually...” An odd smile had begun to play on Acheron's lips. “I rather think she feels the opposite.”

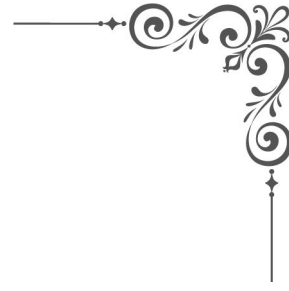
“Because you like playing up to the media's worst expectations?” Millie's voice was unintentionally tart. Whoever Acheron's new woman was, if she was that big of an idiot to buy the media's lies about her boss, then she didn't deserve the Greek billionaire at all.

“I couldn't care less of what strangers think of me—”

“And *that’s* the reason why all those women are quick to say the most outlandish stuff about you,” Millie retorted. “They get paid to lie, and you’re letting them get away with it.” She shot him an admonishing glance, saying, “I get that you grew up in a world where showing weakness would get you killed, but that part of your life is over. Don’t you think it’s time to show the world who you really are—”

“And that’s what exactly?” His voice was of cool amusement. “An ex-mob boss foolishly trying to turn over a new leaf as the long-lost heir of a Greek empire?”

Her lips curved, but her next words, albeit spoken lightly, held a meaningful undertone. “A man who gives a damn about the women he takes to bed, more than most men would.”



## Five

A TEXT FROM WICKHAM came at five in the afternoon, containing detailed instructions on how to make it to the CEO's private apartment without detection. Apparently, all of the public elevators actually had access to the penthouse. It just required someone from the inside to perform technology's equivalent to *Open Sesame*, and the doors would magically unlock like Alibaba's cave.

*How very much like a fairytale*, Pippi grumbled to herself, only the real-life version was more like a nightmare. In the Arabian Tales at least, the sultan had made no attempt to hide the number of princesses that had made their way to his tent. With Acheron Simonides, however - didn't this secret elevator access mean he had every chance to carry any number of affairs with his female employees...without anyone being the wiser?

Was it possible that Millicent Longbourn wasn't the only female employee he had taken to bed?

But even if that were the case...

*Why should it matter to her?*

The perplexing state of her emotions had her so distracted and conflicted that Pippi ended up literally jumping in fright when, upon exiting the elevator, a deep voice came out of nowhere to murmur, "Welcome back, Ms. Jones."

*Blimey!*

"Mr. S-Simonides." Her voice came out a croak, the sight of him causing her heartbeat to race as if it were practicing for a marathon.



She had always been too busy to care much about boys - or men, for that matter - but now she realized it was only because none of those she met had been able to affect her the way Acheron Simonides did.

The billionaire lounged before her in a picture of effortless elegance, with the silky ebony locks of his hair still slightly wet and his sculpted frame dressed in a black, buttoned-up shirt and a pair of loose cotton slacks.

He was so blasted mesmerizing it was a struggle not to stare. He just wasn't like all the rich men she had the misfortune to meet, but neither could he be described as ordinary. He was just...unique, a man so obviously comfortable in his own skin that his powerful presence was made more magnetic by a seamless blend of sophistication and grittiness.

He was all that and more, which only meant one thing.

He really was a Greek god, and that made him completely out of her league.

The thought was super unoriginal, but it was also super apt, and Pippi was equally resigned and chagrined to feel the way her entire body trembled at the mere nearness of him. *If only that night hadn't happened*, she thought despairingly. Then she would've still been safely ignorant of this man's hotness and he, in turn, would be similarly unaware of her existence.

If that night hadn't happened, the Jones' curse wouldn't have found its way into her life, and she'd never have a forbidden taste of the hardness of his body, which Acheron was now revealing more and more of, with his buttons being loosened one at a time -

WAIT!

WHAT?

Pippi let out a yelp when she realized she wasn't daydreaming.

Acheron truly was undressing himself in front of her!

“Stop that!” But another button went loose, and she let out another gasp. “*What do you think you’re doing?*”

“Was I wrong, *mikrí mou?*” A voice of sham innocence, belied by the way his blasted eyes glinted with wicked amusement. “You were staring so hard I thought you wanted to see more.”

*Omigodomigodomigod!*

“I w-was not,” she stammered even as her face flamed with guilt.

“You’re sure?” Another button popped free under his dexterous fingers, exposing more inches of the smooth hard wall of his chest.

*Oh my God, those abs!*

“S-stop undressing yourself.”

He almost laughed at the tone of her words. Was she even aware of how reluctant she sounded? Schooling his expression into one of casual inquiry, he asked, “Do you mean I’ll stop just for now?”

Lulled by his offhanded tone, she said, “Yes, just now—” And then she realized what she was saying, and Pippi gasped, appalled and dismayed at how he was so easily confusing her. “What I mean is you should, umm—” She finally managed to drag her gaze away from the tantalizing display of smooth hard skin. “You should just—” Words failed her, and she nearly wailed, “Oh, you know what I mean!”

Acheron had to allow himself a laugh. She was just too damn delightful, and while her uniquely charming mix of bashful innocence and proud strength was proving to be a huge turn on, he also knew that trait of her was what made it essential he tread carefully from here on.

“Relax, little blusher...” He kept his voice deliberately soothing, knowing he had to take things slow and easy or risk scaring her away for good. The ploy worked, and he saw the tension easing from her figure as soon as he started buttoning his shirt.

Pippi tried not to feel conscious at the way the billionaire was staring at her. “What is it?”

His lips twisted ever so slightly. “I’m certain you wouldn’t want to know the answer to that, Ms. Jones.”

She almost insisted on an answer but thought twice about it in the end. *The less you know, Pippi reminded herself, the better.*

Acheron nearly smiled at Pippi’s silence. He was beginning to understand how the little one’s mind worked and knew that she was deliberately distancing herself from him. *Ah, mikrí mou. How you love to yearn for the impossible.*

He was too experienced not to know chemistry when he saw it, and with him and Pippilotta Jones? It was so damn hot, they could burn the whole world down with them, and they’d still be too busy fucking each other to care.

Turning back to her, Acheron purposely assumed an air of casual friendship as he asked, “Shall we go in?”

She started to nod, hesitated, then blurted out, “I told my sister I was coming here.”

His lips twitched. “I’m sure that’s not the only thing you did. If I had to hazard a guess, you probably told her to text you every hour and to call the police if you didn’t answer within five minutes.” A pause. “Am I right?”

Pippi strove hard not to look guilty. *That was exactly what she had done!*

“There is no need to lie. It was a smart thing to do, and I do not mind at all.” He saw the dubious look she cast in his direction, and Acheron almost smiled. Most women would have willingly sold themselves to him. This girl, however, still didn’t look entirely convinced he wasn’t the type to pounce on an unwilling woman...

The thought amused and irritated him, but it also had him recalling Millie’s words. Ms. Jones never tried to hide the fact that she believed the worst of him, and shouldn’t that be enough proof that things would never work between them?

He should just do what she asked, leave, and let both of them forget that the other even existed.

Millie had accused him of regretting their time together, and it had been the truth. Hindsight made him wish he had never given her the time of the day, and while he had no power to rewrite his past with the other woman, he still had a chance to make things right with Pippilotta Jones.

Millie was no novice in the dating department, and yet he had still succeeded in fucking her life up for good.

With Ms. Jones, things were only likely to get much worse, and if he had any bit of conscience left, he would walk away from her now.

It was the right and sensible thing to do.

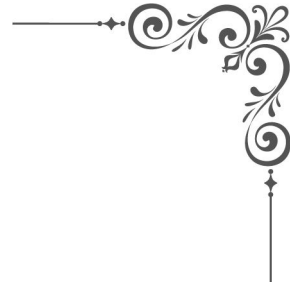
But for some fucking reason, he just couldn't.

She had made it clear multiple times that she wasn't interested in having an affair with him, and yet he still couldn't leave her alone. He had never wasted time going after a woman, but this girl already had him running in circles without saying a word. Virgins had always been fair game with him, but despite every chance to seduce her into submission, he hadn't been able to make himself claim her.

She had become both an enigma and obsession, someone like no other woman he had ever met.

She was...*different*.

And Acheron - the man whom Wall Street Journal had once described as an entrepreneur whose knowledge was almost prescient in his ability to size up situations with razor-sharp accuracy - had no fucking idea why that was so.



## Six

IT WAS A CONSTANT STRUGGLE for Pippi not to gawk like a hick at her surroundings, and she could only mentally shake her head in disbelief when Acheron led her to the beautifully set table at his balcony. It boasted of the most beautiful views from just about every side - the cityscape in front, his private cocktail lounge on the right, and his rooftop pool on the left.

*A pool, at several hundred feet off the ground!*

Whatever was she doing here, having dinner with a man who lived in a world so vastly different from hers?

Acheron had pulled out a chair for her, but somehow she couldn't make herself move an inch. This was wrong. This was just so -

Wickham came in then, bearing a tray laden with several familiar-looking boxes.

*Oh!*

A startled squeak escaped her, and Acheron's eyes gleamed at the adorable sound of it. Her eyes followed Wickham's every move, widening with every dish the older man unveiled. *Spring rolls. Baked pork buns. Prawn dumplings. Leaf-wrapped rice.* And when Wickham opened a box containing two orders of *xiao long bao*, Acheron swiftly pressed his lips together to contain his smile, having seen Pippi unconsciously lick her lips at the sight.

"I take it I've made the right choice?"

Pippi nodded, almost gushing ‘oh yes’ when a thought occurred to her, and she glanced at him suspiciously. Maybe she was thinking too much of this, but wasn’t it too great a coincidence for Wickham to serve Chinese cuisine, and everything happened to be her favorites, too?

Pippi cleared her throat.

Knowing what she was planning to ask, Acheron responded with an unrepentant grin, “I had my assistant stalk your foodstagram.”

*Oh. Okay.* At least...he hadn’t lied?

Acheron noticed the way she was still frowning. “It bothers you?”

“I’m just trying to make up my mind if you going to such lengths make you thoughtful...or manipulative.”

Acheron threw his head back with a laugh.

“And I really appreciate all this, but...do all your stay-at-home dates normally involve Chinese takeout?”

“Do you want an honest answer?”

“Umm, yes?” Why in the world would anyone want differently?

He named a place that she recognized as one of the city’s oldest fine dining restaurants, and she wasn’t surprised when he told her the establishment was on call to provide him with catered dinners at home.

“But I had a feeling doing so would only make you more uncomfortable with me.”

*And he was right,* Pippi thought, but the realization made her far from happy. Acheron Simonides seemed to find it too easy to read her mind, and that was not a good thing at all.

Seeing her forehead start to furrow anew, Acheron changed the subject to divert her attention, and because this was Pippi, he only knew of one thing that was certain to distract his eternally resisting prey.

“Have you read the report on Excalibur Park?”

Pippi relaxed. *This*, she had no trouble talking about. “I have, yes.” Work-related discussions were something she never had to feel self-conscious about, and it helped that Acheron appeared genuinely interested in her ideas about the project.

The combination of lovely food and shop talk had effectively loosened Pippi’s tongue even without her knowing it, and in between bites and sips of hot black tea, Acheron was able to subtly extricate information he had a feeling the ever-wary Ms. Jones would normally withhold.

*Weekends spent helping out at her mother’s bed and breakfast, vague dreams about retiring in her own beach house, and - most importantly of all - a romantic history that only involved a summer fling with a local boy back when she was in high school...*

“Does that mean what it means then?” he asked with studied casualness.

Pippi was genuinely confused. “Does what mean what?”

“Your charming story of first love, Ms. Jones. May I also take it as confirmation of your innocence?”

“Confirmation of...” And then she realized what exactly he was asking, and her horrified gaze flew to the man seated across her. “*Mr. Simonides!*”

Her blush proved to be as tremendously impactful as it had been in the past, and his cock juttied demandingly against his trousers. “Call me Acheron, *mikrī mou*.”

Pippi could only shake her head, no longer daring to speak. The sexy rasp in Acheron’s voice was like a wake-up call that had her realizing too late of the danger she had unwittingly placed herself in. It had finally dawned on her just how much she had revealed to him over the course of one stupid meal, and *omigodomigodomigod* - *how gullible could she get?*

She gazed at her glass of chilled mango *sago* with despair and longing. It was still half-full, but how could she let herself finish it now? Prudence dictated that she needed all her wits

about her, and Lord knew how this particular dessert always had a rather mellowing effect on her senses.

Her phone suddenly rang, making her jump in her seat, and Pippi nearly cringed when she saw the flicker of amusement in Acheron's gaze. *Blast it.* The man definitely knew now how nervous he made her.

Acheron gestured to her phone, saying politely, "You should answer that. I wouldn't want your sister to think you're in trouble."

"Oh. Um. Thank you." Pippi tried to hide her relief as she stood up and excused herself from the table. *Maybe she had it all wrong?* Maybe he was just a big flirt, maybe he was just having fun at her expense, but at the end of the day, he had realized that she simply wasn't his type?

The thought should've made her happy, but it didn't, and this caused Pippi to answer her sister's call in an unusually subdued tone. "Hey, Rue."

"First question," the twenty-year-old declared blithely. "Is your V-card still intact?"

"*Rue!*" What was it with people today that they were all concerned about her hymen?

The younger girl let out a disappointed sigh. "You're dating People's Sexiest Man Alive—"

"That was last year," Pippi muttered.

"You're deliberately missing the point..." Rue's voice became sly. "And it's not like you to beat around the bush, sister dear."

"You're imagining things." Standing next to the balcony's glass railings, she tried but failed to take pleasure at the panoramic view Acheron's penthouse afforded her. All she could think of was leaving, and the sooner the better.

"Are you still there, Pi?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Let's just—" She broke off, sensing someone approach from behind, and when she turned around, it was to find Acheron coming to a stop within kissing



distance, so blasted close the scent of his cologne was once again teasing her nostrils.

So close. Too close. Impossibly, painfully, agonizingly close.

“Pi?”

“Umm...” Her mind was a blank, with the heat blazing from Acheron’s eyes making her feel like a cornered rabbit. She knew she should move, but she couldn’t. She knew she should push him away, but she couldn’t. Oh, the many things she knew she should do, but couldn’t - because the truth was...

*She didn’t want to do any of them, Pippi realized sickly.*

“Pi?” This time, Rue’s voice was tinged with serious concern.

“S-Sorry.” Her voice came out unnaturally shrill, with Acheron having reached for one of her hands, and oh dear Lord, his touch was scorching, like electricity running through every vein of her body. “I was just thinking of...” Her voice faltered as Acheron raised her hand to his lips.

“Thinking of what?” Rue prompted.

And now, he was slipping one finger into his mouth.

*Omigodomigodomigodomigod!*

Her finger!

In his mouth!

HER FINGER!

IN HIS MOUTH!

She somehow managed to find her voice. “Fin...*findings*.”

Acheron’s eyes laughed at her, but when she tried to yank her hand out of his hold, he retaliated by sucking on her finger, and her knees immediately buckled.

*Bloody, bloody, bloody hell!*

“Findings about what?”

Pippi found herself clutching one of the balcony posts just to stay upright, her gaze helplessly drawn to the erotic sight of her finger in his mouth.

Oh God, the way his tongue swirled, the scrape of his teeth, and the way he sucked...

“Pippi?”

“It’s d-difficult to e-explain.” And it was. “I’ll call you again. O-Okay?” Her voice caught as Acheron sucked on her finger just a bit harder, enough to make her whole body shiver.

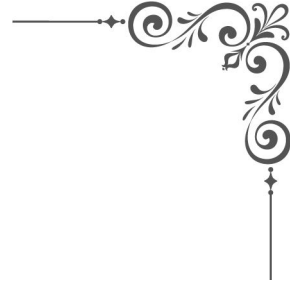
A moment later, she heard Rue whisper, “Oh my.”

*Oh no.*

“I’m so going to tell everyone.”

“Rue—-”

But the line was already dead, and a moment later, she, too, was dead, with Acheron lowering his head and releasing her finger so he could replace it with her mouth.



## Seven

PIPPI'S FIRST KISS was when she was fifteen. His name was Luke, and he had been a year older. He had been one of the most handsome boys in school, and she had felt like the luckiest girl alive when he asked her out.

They had seen each other almost every day that summer, and one night, she had snuck out of the house to meet with him. That was when they kissed, a clumsy but fervent meeting of lips under the moonlight that made their young bodies tremble against each other.

It was also her last kiss because the very next day, news had broken out about Luke and his family having left town, supposedly because of debts that Luke Sr. had been unable to pay.

Almost a decade had passed since then, but there were still nights when Pippi tossed and turned, thinking about that one kiss. There were times when she wondered, *what if he hadn't left? What if she had tried looking for him? What if?* There were times when she asked herself if perhaps she was still in love with Luke, just because she couldn't make herself forget his kiss.

Now, however, she knew.

Now, with Acheron's cool, firm lips expertly parting her own lips, it was just impossible for her not to know.

She remembered Luke's kiss because it was the only kiss she knew. But now, after this, that kiss would be nothing. Because, simply put, Acheron's kiss was everything and more that a woman could have ever dreamed of.

The thought of resisting didn't even enter her mind. There was no chance to. The moment his mouth took hers, the intoxicating taste of his lips incinerated every sensible thought in her mind. All that was left then was the purest of sensations, a helpless, heartless plea for the kiss to never, ever end.

Her toes curled inside her shoes as his lips teased and nibbled, every brush of his mouth wreaking havoc on her senses. And when his tongue finally delved in, and he was sucking her tongue the way he had sucked her finger, there was just nothing - oh God, there was nothing left of her that was not his.

She unthinkingly raised her arms, intending to hold on to Acheron as his kiss deepened. But the moment her fingers uncurled, her phone fell from her grip, and the loud, heavy thud it created as the phone hit the floor was akin to an inner fire alarm sounding off inside her head.

Acheron didn't make any move to stop Pippi from moving when she suddenly pushed away from him, the stricken look on her face explaining everything to him. It was too fast, too soon. He got it. Of course he got it, but *goddammit*. That kiss was fucking hot - hotter than anything he could remember tasting - and he wanted more.

*I don't know what came over me.* She almost blurted the words out but caught herself in time. That was a lie, and she hated lying. She knew exactly what came over her. It was called lust, and she had let it rule her head.

*"Pippi..."* It was the first time for him to say her name, and she almost closed her eyes in despair. This was no good. Just no good. And yet - why did it feel so wonderful to hear him say her name?

He studied her with a brooding frown, his body still rigid with the desire he was struggling to keep in check. She stood before him, pale and trembling, rosy-cheeked and silken limbed, and the way her breathless panting softly mirrored his own harsh breathing made Acheron clench his fists.

He wanted her so fucking bad, and it didn't make any sense at all. She was nothing special. *Nothing*. And yet...

“I want you.”

The abruptly spoken words made Pippi feel faint. She couldn't - she...just...she couldn't have heard him right. *Could she?*

“Did you hear what I said?” Acheron grated out. “I want you, Ms. Jones.”

*Oh Lord.*

She had heard him right.

Pippi's shoulders lifted in a hapless shrug. “W-What do you want me to say?”

“That you want me, too.”

She bit her lip. It was true, of course, but...

Acheron wasn't at all surprised at the way she shook her head. He had not only expected it, but in some perverse way, her refusal also pleased him. The more she challenged him, the more he desired her, and just imagining the many expressions she would show once he had her in his bed was enough to have him fully aroused.

*Ah, for that day to come...*

In the back of his mind, his conscience made a last-ditch attempt to sway him from the path he was about to take, but this time he was deaf to its concerns.

He wanted her, and he would have her.

Pippi tried not to feel nervous at the intense way in which Acheron Simonides was suddenly gazing at her. “W-What is it?”

*Tread carefully, Simonides.* With this girl, his money meant nothing. Worse, he had a feeling his wealth actually put him at a disadvantage, and any attempt to lure her to his bed with jewels and furs would only backfire.

The best way to solve this was to think of it as he would with a strategic takeover. Smaller companies never wanted to be absorbed by big, bad conglomerates. That was just the way

the world worked. But if the latter offered the former a face-saving compromise...

Something that would allow her to surrender to him without taking any of those risks she had once spoken of...

“Two months,” he murmured.

“Excuse me?” Pippi felt like she was hearing things, but when he repeated his words, she realized she had heard him right. Brows furrowing, she cocked her head absently to the side, asking blankly, “What about two months?”

“I’ll be the perfect boyfriend for two months,” Acheron drawled, “in exchange for the right to have you in my bed.”

Her jaw fell so hard a part of her was just waiting to hear it crash to the floor. “*Excuse me?*”

“You can give me a list if you wish, have all of it in writing in order to make things legal. I will be whoever and whatever you want me to be, Ms. Jones. You only have to say the word, and I will make it happen.”

Shock gave way to horror. *Did he really think...*

“I’ll also have a contract drawn as a guarantee that your job will not be affected in any way, regardless of what takes place during and after those two months.”

*This was insane.* And what would be more insane was if she allowed herself to hear another word about it. Taking an uneven step back, she shook her head at him, stammering, “I’m s-sorry, it’s just—”

“No one has to know either.” It was the ace Acheron had up his sleeve, and as soon as he had dealt it, the gamble immediately paid off. The words rendered Pippi motionless, and seeing this, he didn’t hesitate to press his advantage. “You can choose who to tell or not to tell about us.” His voice was soft and beguiling, Acheron taking every care not to make her feel pressured. “It will be entirely your call.” His gaze captured hers as he made his move and gradually closed the distance between them.

Pippi was trembling and dazed, unable to tear her eyes from the carnal temptation that made up every beautiful inch of Acheron Simonides' lean, hard build. His words swirled around her, painting the most sinful of promises that her aching body yearned to be tainted with.

It was almost as if Acheron Simonides had intimate knowledge of her every fear, and he not only knew how to vanquish them, he was even offering Pippi freedom from it on a silver platter.

*He wanted her, he had said, and he wished her to say she wanted him back.*

It was the one thing she would never have even considered doing. To be involved with someone like him was the definition of insanity, a disaster simply waiting to happen, a risk that was so foolish she'd have to be an idiot to even consider it.

And yet...

"You won't have to worry about people gossiping about us or treating you differently - whether for better or worse - just because you're involved with me."

It was like hearing the devil whisper her most forbidden fantasies to her ear, and yet - she just couldn't stop listening, couldn't stop *imagining* how darkly wondrous it could be.

*A secret, thrilling affair with one of the sexiest men in the world, and she'd never have to worry about being a target of gossip and online bullying?*

"People who don't have to know...won't know. But people who you trust and care about...you won't have to lie to them either."

Pippi found herself shaking her head in a literal attempt to shake off his hold on her, but it was impossible. It was almost as if he had put a curse on her, and she found his every word alluring!

"You can tell your family you're in a relationship with me, and it would be the truth. They'd have no reason to worry about you. That's important to you, isn't it?"

It was, dammit. She would never want to give her family any reason to worry. *Never*. But how was it that he knew of this, too? It left her feeling torn between glaring at him and bursting into tears, and before she knew it, the words had already flown out of her mouth. “*You’re like the devil in disguise.*” She meant it as a joke, but somehow the words ended up sounding half accusing.

Even so, this only made him laugh, and the sound itself was devilish as well, with the way it made her breasts swell and her thighs tremble.

*Bloody, bloody, bloody -*

“I’m glad to hear you’re finding it hard to resist me,” Acheron purred.

*Hell!*

Pippi choked back a slightly hysterical laugh. God help her, but the man’s gall was unbelievable. Squaring her shoulders, she told herself that all this crazy talk had gone on long enough, and it was time for her to come back to reality. Taking a deep breath, she said carefully, “Mr. Simonides—”

“Acheron,” he corrected her.

“Mr. Simonides,” she said stubbornly.

“Acheron.” His voice was very gentle. “Or...” His gaze slowly moved down to settle on her lips, the action silently spelling out his threat to kiss her if she persisted against his wishes.

She was frowning unhappily at him now, but Acheron only found this promising. Compared to the women whose obsession with his money made them sickeningly sycophantic, Pippi’s inability to pretend was a refreshing and welcome change. He only hoped two months wouldn’t prove long enough to have her turn out the same as the rest.

“I just don’t understand,” she said stiltedly. “I didn’t plan...I really don’t want to ask this, but...*why me?*”

“I don’t know,” he said simply. It was the truth, and he had only spoken it because she had been similarly truthful with



him. “All I know is that we want each other—” His dark gaze warned her from making any unnecessary protests that he would have no trouble disproving. “And I’m willing to pay any price for the right to fuck you.”

Pippi couldn’t help but wince. *Did he really have to be so graphic?* She should feel insulted, and yet her stupid body actually felt the opposite, with the way her nipples tightened with arousal.

Lifting her chin, she said haltingly, “There’s no price—”

“I’m afraid there always is,” he interrupted.

She stiffened. “Are you saying you can buy me?”

He met her offended gaze unflinchingly. “I’m saying I know what you need. A risk-free situation, in which you’ll be able to keep your ideals intact, your conscience clean, and your life uncomplicated...all the while indulging your wildest, most unspeakable fantasies—”

Acheron Simonides slowly looked down at her, his midnight-black eyes turning into a reflection of the darkest piece of her soul, and her body responded to it shamelessly and instantly. Her breasts swelling and curving, her nipples tightening, and moisture - so, so much moisture building between her thighs as visions flashed in her mind, exquisitely lurid premonitions of how the two months could turn out to be

—

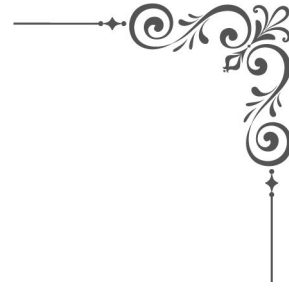
*Acheron undressing her...*

*Acheron lowering his body on top of her...*

*Acheron entering her...*

*Acheron, Acheron, Acheron...*

“Everything you’d ever want a man to do to you, I’d do it a thousand times better. You just have to become mine.”



## Eight

DAMEN LEVENTIS WAS incredulous. “Let me see if I got this straight: you offered to be her boyfriend, keep things private if she wished, and she still turned you down?” At his friend’s nod, he said admiringly, “Smart girl.”

“Fuck off.”

But it had no effect whatsoever as the other billionaire was already laughing his head off.

As the two billionaires continued their conversation in Greek, they remained oblivious to the chaos their unexpected presence at the play center was creating. Nannies had abandoned their young charges, single mothers had taken their eyes off their kids, and trophy girlfriends had left behind their sugar daddies, the result of which was pandemonium. It was one accident after another, with kids running loose, tables and chairs being overturned, and forgotten trays slipping out of people’s grasps and crashing to the floor.

*“We’re back!”*

Hearts broke as they saw a brunette heading towards one of the men, and their defeat was all but complete when they saw a tiny, dark-haired four-year-old barreling forward with her arms stretched out. “Papa, I want back up!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Damen answered promptly as he swung his daughter back up on the second-floor tunnel entrance into the three-level play structure. It offered all sorts of fun, the kind that even the most imaginative children wouldn’t find fault with: airplane cockpits and firefighter poles, hanging bridges

and climbing nets, and more slides and tunnels any young adventurer could ask for.

The women waited with bated breath for another woman to claim the other billionaire when none came, they simultaneously sighed in relief, thankful that there was still one left they could all pin their romantic hopes on.

Meanwhile, Damen Leventis' wife was doing her best not to have a heart attack as she watched their daughter fearlessly lunge for a vine-like rope before rappelling out of the kid-sized tower. After landing on both feet, Nala turned to her parents with a big smile. "I did it!"

"Yes, you did," Mairi said with a smile, "and you did fantastic."

"I need to be..." Nala's forehead creased in a frown of concentration. "Papa said I need to be on my feet."

Mairi bit back a grin. "You mean on your toes."

"Yes, that's it! Papa said I need to be on my toes because I need to protect the queen."

"The queen?"

"You're silly, Mama." Nala let out a giggle. "*You're* the queen."

Seeing his wife turn to him with raised eyebrows, Damen said piously, "You are our queen."

"Ha!" Rising to her feet, Mairi said with a grimace, "You two will never let me forget about the old woman, will you?"

Responding to Acheron's curious look, Damen explained dryly, "A con artist in disguise." Sliding an arm around his wife's waist, he continued, "The woman bumped into Mairi while she was at the hospital for Nala's checkup. She gave Mairi some sob story about not having enough money to pay her husband's medical bills, and my lovely wife had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker."

"But Nala didn't, I'm guessing?"

Nala gave her uncle a solemn shake of her head. “She was a bad lady. She lied to Mama.”

Hiding a smile at the little girl’s air of gravitas - Nala was fast becoming Damen’s mini-me through and through - he asked with equal solemnity, “And you knew that how?”

“The lady didn’t have a ring. Not like Mama and Papa.”

Acheron was more than impressed. “That’s amazing detective work, little one.” A crooked smile flitted over his lips as he met his friend’s gaze over Nala’s head. *You lucky bastard.* Damen definitely wouldn’t need to worry about any idiot turning his daughter’s head.

Damen’s smirk said it all. *She’s my child, after all.*

A group of kids came to invite Nala to join them in a different interactive zone - one where parents and kids partnered up as they went through an obstacle course. “You guys go ahead,” Acheron said swiftly. “I’ll, ah, sit this one out.” He had finally noticed the way some of the other women were looking at him, and it made him feel like he had a large-ass target on his back.

Retreating to the sidelines, he camped on one of the metal seats while watching Damen and his young family skip over old tires.

Years ago, Damen Leventis had been Europe’s most eligible bachelor, infamous for bedding only the most stunning women and throwing the wildest parties in the continent. But then an American schoolteacher entered Damen’s life, and everything had changed. There was an air of contentment about Leventis that Acheron once thought only belonged to middle-aged family men trapped in a continuous cycle of suburban mediocrity. Late-night outings were replaced with concocting bedtime stories as they tucked their daughter to sleep, and Friday evenings such as tonight were spent in play zones and kid-friendly restaurants.

*That was all well and good for married men like Damen Leventis, Acheron considered broodingly, but why the hell had he ended up starting his weekend in the same fucking manner?*

It was when the four of them got together again over dinner that Mairi noticed the frown that seemed permanently etched on Acheron's forehead. "Is everything okay? It's unlike you to look so troubled."

"He's traumatized," Damen quipped before Acheron could answer. "He's had his first taste of defeat in a woman's hands, and he's been losing sleep over it."

Acheron scowled. "*Fu—*" Mairi and Damen simultaneously shot him warning glares, and he hastily amended himself, saying awkwardly instead, "Fudge off."

Nala's eyes went wide. "That's Papa's favorite expression, too." And as if to demonstrate, she said in a voice distinctly resembling her billionaire's father when he was in a temper, "*Fudge off, Manolis. You're just as pudding-whipped as I am.*"

There were two full seconds of silence at their table, and then the adults were bursting into laughter while Nala beamed proudly at her handiwork. It always made the little girl feel good when she made other people smile and laugh.

After dinner, the couple invited Acheron for a nightcap at their place and he found himself agreeing without understanding why. He only had to check his phone's inbox, and there'd be scores of events to choose from, all of them promising the best and most salacious kind of entertainment that money could buy.

So why was it he was here again, playing third wheel while on his fifteenth day of involuntary celibacy?

After kissing his daughter good night, Damen checked his emails on his phone as he headed down to rejoin the others, and he ended up almost bumping into his wife at the foot of the stairs. "*What the—*" He automatically curved an arm around a sheepish-looking Mairi to keep her from falling.

"Sorry," she whispered. "I didn't think it was right to intrude on Acheron." She nodded towards the balcony, where the other billionaire stood alone, his clasped hands poised over the glass rails. "I could be wrong," she murmured, "but I think

I wouldn't be as much help as you'd be with whatever's bothering him."

Damen grimaced. "Are you saying you want us to have some kind of *Brokeback* moment?"

Mairi sent her husband a chiding glance. "Be serious, will you? Can't you see how troubled the man is?" She pushed him towards the balcony. "Now go and help him." There were things that men would only feel fit to confide to other men, and it was especially true with people like Acheron Simonides, whose rough childhood had kept him from being acquainted with the nurturing touch of the fairer sex.

The sound of footsteps had Acheron turning away from Miami's skyline, and to his surprise, he found Damen alone, holding two cans of beer. He murmured his thanks as the other man handed him one, and as he pulled the tab open, he asked, "Mairi?"

"She'll, err, join us in a bit."

Something about Damen's tone had Acheron arching a brow, and when his friend shrugged in response, it might as well be an admission that his hunch was right. "Do I appear so pathetic," he asked in a mutter of self-disgust, "that your wife thinks I'd need your manly shoulder to cry on?"

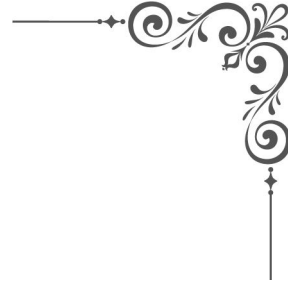
"She did express her concern in similar lines, *ne*." The acknowledgment had Acheron wincing, and Damen took a sip of his beer as he let a few moments pass for the words to set in. Finally, he said, "What you're experiencing right now - I've been there, you know. Hell, the whole world knows, and anyone else who doesn't can just pick up a book to read all about it."

Acheron didn't answer, but since he didn't say anything either, Damen supposed he could interpret that as his friend's willingness to listen.

"These things...they're usually a lot simpler than what we make them out to be. So if the girl turned you down, and you still want her..."

Acheron was irritated at the way the other man simply let the words hang. “Yes,” he practically growled. “I still want her, and I don’t even fucking understand why—” He cut himself off when Damen shook his head.

“If there’s one advice you’ll take from me,” Damen said quietly, “then let it be this. Forget the whys for now.” *Because you’re not ready to face that yet.* “And ask yourself this instead: what else can you give or give up to have her back in your life?”



## Nine

*IN THE SUDS*, Pippi thought to herself as she continued with her newest and most shameful habit, which was to cyberstalk the man that had been haunting her thoughts and dreams for the past two weeks.

‘In the suds’ meant to be in trouble in Regency slang, and it was the perfect way to describe her mental state ever since she turned down Acheron Simonides’ baffling offer to be her boyfriend for two months.

And until now, she wasn’t quite sure if she had done the right thing. All she knew was that the decision had changed her life for good, and she could no longer stop ~~yearning~~ thinking of him.

*In the suds*, she thought again, knowing that she was just torturing herself needlessly with all these fact-digging sessions over the web. She had read the comprehensive entry Wikipedia had on him more times than she could count, and every line of People’s article about last year’s Sexiest Man Alive was already committed to her memory. Whatever publicly available information about him there was she already knew, and this included details of his horrific childhood (which she needed to know more of) and dating timeline (which she needed to know less of).

In any case, the bottom line was simple: Acheron Simonides was too complicated by half, had seen and suffered too much to ever give her the kind of life she had always thought was best for her.



*Long story short, Pippilotta Jones, he's not for you, wasn't ever for you, and never will be.*

And she knew this, accepted this, so *why*, blast it?

Why did she still see his face the moment she closed her eyes? Why had the taste of his lips never left her, and why in the bloody hell couldn't her body stop aching for him?

*Why? Why? Why?*

The answer eluded and taunted Pippi as it always did, words that were so close to the edge of her mind, rolling to the tip of her tongue but never quite managing to tumble out.

Restlessness had her shifting in her armchair, causing just enough noise that heads turned toward her direction in askance. *Oops*. "It's nothing, sorry." Conscious of having more than a few concerned gazes still darting towards her now and then, Pippi made a show of becoming engrossed with the latest paperback she had bought.

While Mariposa House was fairly large, its equally large upkeep had everyone keen to save money where they could. To maximize the number of rooms available to guests, Astrid and her aunts shared the lone bedroom in the first floor while Pippi and her siblings resided in the attic. And during nights where all guests were out painting the town red, the family would convene in Mariposa House's kitchen-cum-living room; power consumption was likely to be less when they were all together in one place.

For families less close-knit than the Jones', the current setup might have eventually placed a strain in their relationships. But for Pippi and the others, spending time with each other had always been something to look forward to. The challenge was making the house's cozy but somewhat cramped common area work for all eight of them.

Eventually, the whole family had learned to carve each of their own little nook. Pippi's corner was the armchair next to the ancient bookshelf while Vik was usually curled with her latest cross-stitching project in the rocking chair. Rue and Mynt, who both loved to people watch, shared the cushioned

seat by the bay window while Astrid and her three great-aunts alternated between the couch and dining table.

The scene might struck other people as being both physically and emotionally claustrophobic, but Pippi wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. Her family was everything to her, and not even a short-lived affair with Acheron Simonides would be worth giving her loved ones any trouble.

Her thoughts drifted to the female employee who had been caught in a rather compromising position with the CEO, and Pippi couldn't help flinching at the thought of suffering the same things Ms. Longbourn had.

People these days had turned bullying into an art form, and while a sharply worded memo from Acheron himself protected the lady executive from any outright attack, there were just so many other ways to hurt a person.

Leers that made you feel like you were always just a second away from being raped, whispers that made you feel less than human...and the worst thing about it was how these subtly vicious attacks had eventually affected Ms. Longbourn's family as well. Neighbors had started talking about them behind their backs and invitations from the local parish had dwindled to nothing -

And it was all because their daughter had made the mistake of getting involved with Acheron Simonides.

The last Pippi heard, Ms. Longbourn's parents had moved to another state, far enough to start a new life where no one knew or cared who their daughter had an affair with.

*I will never let that happen to us, Pippi swore doggedly to herself. I just can't—*

Mingled gasps from Rue and Mynt interrupted her thoughts and had everyone sitting up in confusion.

“What is it?” Great-Aunt Bernadette asked.

“A police officer just parked his bike outside our house,” Mynt reported, her face still glued to the window.

They all looked at each other uneasily, not one of them able to think of any reason someone from law enforcement would need to speak with them.

“He’s coming up to our door now,” Rue whispered.

Pippi’s heart was beating so hard and fast she could barely hear her thoughts. “I’m sure it’s nothing.” She stood up, her sense of responsibility making her feel she should take charge of the situation. “You guys sit tight. I’ll answer the door.”

Astrid started to protest, and so did Vik, but Pippi’s frown had both women reluctantly settling down. Vague recollections of local crime reports assaulted her mind as she walked towards the door. *Wasn’t there recently news about a policeman who had gone berserk and started shooting down civilians for no reason?*

The thought caused her fingers to shake slightly as she turned the knob, and she barely managed to keep her voice from croaking when she saw how much taller and larger the officer on their front door was. “H-Hello.” She found herself staring straight at the name embroidered in big yellow letters over the cop’s breast pocket - *C. Ostume* - and this had her imagination going into overdrive for some reason.

What if he was a Japanese police officer sent to the United States as part of a secret joint operative program targeting a criminal mastermind who happened to be one of the guests checked in at—

She heard the officer cough, *politely*, and the sound made her realize that panic had her gaping at the cop for no apparent reason. “S-Sorry.” Pippi forced herself to look up, just in time to see the officer remove the dark glasses covering his gaze.

*He looked familiar*, she thought uneasily. Was that bad or good?

The glasses were tucked into an empty pocket before the officer turned black-as-midnight eyes on Pippi, and her jaw dropped.

*Bad!*

*This was definitely bad!*

She rubbed her eyes, but the vision didn't even waver. It really was Acheron, dressed in a police uniform, and God help her, he looked so ~~yummy-sexy-hot~~ wrong!

He looked wrong!

Absolutely wrong!

“Hello, Pippi.”

His voice was alluring as ever, but the sound of it was more than her heart could bear. Suddenly, everything - every darn little thing that had to do with him and her - came rushing back, and before she even realized what was happening, a lone tear was already trailing down her cheek, followed by another and another until it became an endless stream wetting her skin.

*No!*

*I don't want to cry in front of him!*

Acheron whitened at seeing Pippi cry. “*Pippi—*”

She let out the tiniest sound of pain, but it was more than enough to have her whole family rushing to her aid.

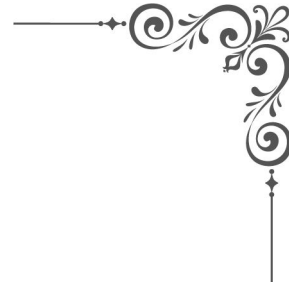
*“Pippi?”*

*“What's wrong?”*

*“Pi?”*

They careened into her all at once, and Pippi found herself falling as she inadvertently lost her balance.

*“Gotcha.”* She had fallen into the safety of his arms, and as Acheron slowly pulled her upright, she had a sinking feeling that this man had caught her...for good.



## Ten

“IF YOU NEED ANYTHING,” Astrid said, “we’re just downstairs.” Pippi’s mother pulled the door closed after giving her eldest daughter’s guest a friendly smile. Outside, she found herself the subject of several expectant looks, and it was obvious they were all wondering the same thing.

*What was a cosplaying Greek billionaire doing on their doorstep?*

Astrid flashed them an okay sign. *There’s nothing to worry about. A smug smile formed over her lips. Because I’m absolutely certain your big sister has the man smitten!*

Everyone celebrated...*silently*, with her daughters exchanging high-fives while Astrid’s aunts started smiling smugly. *Pippi had obviously inherited their good taste in men, and thank God for that!*

Inside the room, Acheron and Pippi were gazing at each other, both of them waiting for the sound of footsteps, but all they heard was silence.

When he raised a brow at her, she could practically hear him asking, *‘Do they truly believe we don’t know they have their ears to the door?’*

She lifted her shoulders in a shrug. *I guess.* Excitement was probably why her family was acting unusually dense.

A smile curved over his lips. *I don’t mind, though.*

Pippi lifted her chin. *Who says I care about what you - oh my God.* It finally dawned on her that both of them were communicating silently like some stupid, lovesick couple, and

dismay turned to mortification when she saw the gleam of amusement in his eyes.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” she muttered. “You’re just... you’re just easy to read.”

“If you say so, *mikrí mou*.”

She saw his gaze absently roaming his surroundings as he spoke, taking in every inch of the tiny bedroom she shared with her sisters, and Pippi couldn’t help feeling defensive. “I’m sorry if it’s not what you’re used to,” she said stiffly. No doubt, the combination of bunk beds and Spartan-style furniture would remind him of army barracks, and, if it did, well - so be it. She had nothing to be ashamed of—

“I’ve lived in far worse conditions.”

Pippi’s thoughts came to a halt at Acheron’s words.

“I’m sure you’ve read at least some of the rumors about my past, and suffice to say, not all of them was made up. My uncle - Yehor Kokinos - had offered my then-pregnant mother to disappear, and she was...the type that took kindly to bribes. Based on what I know of my uncle, I’m also fairly certain he meant for her to dispose of me—”

Hearing him speak of such things rendered Pippi speechless with horror. *His mom had been paid to kill him?*

“She probably would have if he had paid her more—”

“I’m so sorry.” She could no longer contain herself, and she had to dig her fingers deep into her palms to keep herself from throwing her arms around him. “I know it won’t make a difference, but I’m really sorry.”

Acheron’s broad shoulders moved in a dismissive shrug. “It taught me to be tough at the very least. Although I was already twelve when she died, I had learned to fend for myself years before that—” Seeing her pale in reaction, he said gravely, “I had the worst childhood you could ever imagine.”

Her heart broke for him. “I’m just so, so sorry—”

“Sorry enough to give me another chance?”

The words ‘of course’ almost slipped past her lips when Pippi realized in consternation she was being manipulated. “*Mr. Simo—*”

“No.” This time, there was no smile in his eyes, nothing except a look so intense she realized too late she had been better off when he wasn’t being serious.

“Call me by my name.”

His voice was low and forceful, and something in her ached to obey him. And maybe she would, if there were only herself to consider.

Oh, if only.

But she had her family to think of, and pain chipped at her heart as she heard herself say, “I can’t.” She saw his jaw clench, and the sight gave her the oddest feeling. It was almost as if she had hurt him...and she didn’t like it. She just...didn’t. She gazed at him helplessly, tormented by clashing emotions and unable to make sense of a single one of them.

Beautiful, like a Greek god.

And for some reason, this particular god had chosen to don a police uniform and ride a bike to her home because...

Because...

Because...

Acheron knew the exact moment the truth dawned on her, with the way her head jerked up, and her blue eyes - filled with confusion and disbelief - came to search for his.

She had always been honest with him.

*Getting involved with you - in any way - is just too much of a risk for me.*

*Which was why, Acheron knew, anything less than the truth would be a disservice to her.*

“I want you.” He deliberately repeated the same words he had used before, and by the way her eyes widened, Acheron knew she thought the same thing. “You once asked me why,

and I still have no answer to give you. I simply want you - but unlike before, I also know just how much I want you.”

Pippi’s heart was in her throat. The way he was looking at her was making her wish for the impossible, but what if she was wrong?

“I want you enough to have gone without sex ever since I kissed you.” Acheron’s voice was taut. “I just couldn’t make myself touch another woman.”

Pippi didn’t even have the chance to react. Her eavesdropping family had already done it for her, their loud gasps giving their presence away. She saw him wince, and she couldn’t blame him. “Sorry,” she whispered. “Just give me a moment and I’ll get rid—”

She had already started to turn away when his fingers curved around her elbow, and she froze.

*Oh God, how long had it been?*

And then he was spinning her to face him.

“It doesn’t matter.” He released her from his grasp, and a pang of emptiness struck her at the loss of his touch. “Neither of us will have anything to hide from them.”

Pippi found herself struggling anew to make sense of his words. “What do you mean?”

“I’m saying...I was wrong before.”

*He was?*

“At that time, all I let myself think of was what I wanted, and I thought, in my arrogance, I knew what you wanted, too.”

Despite the way his admissions still had her head reeling, Pippi could no longer keep silent. “You weren’t entirely wrong,” she forced herself to say. “I...I did want you to touch—”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.” His voice was gentle.

Her cheeks turned red. “Oh.”



“As much as it pains me to admit it, I realize now I was acting like a selfish bastard with you at that time. I thought I was hearing you just fine, but I wasn’t actually listening to you at all.”

“What exactly are you saying?” she whispered.

“I’m saying I had acted like an asshole before, and I hadn’t even known it.” His lips twisted in a humorless smile. “I was expecting you to be bowled over by the privilege of being my girlfriend for two months.”

She wanted to lie, but she just couldn’t. “I *was* bowled over—” She stopped speaking at the strained expression on his face.

“You’re too damn honest.”

Pippi stared at him, bewildered. “And you don’t like it?”

“It makes me feel like you’re too good for me, so *no*. I don’t fucking like it.”

“Oh.”

“But—” Acheron couldn’t help sounding defensive. “I’m a work in progress now, and I’m not the type to make the same mistakes.”

“I see.” Although, in truth, she no longer understood what he was getting to now.

“I know I cannot completely eliminate the risks being involved with me represents, but I promise you, *mikrí mou* - if you trust me, I will do everything in my power to protect you, starting with this—” He made a rather stiff gesture towards the ridiculous getup he had on. “If there is a need for us to meet in public, I will endeavor—” He heard something suspiciously like a giggle bubble past her lips, and he stopped with a scowl. “*If you fucking laugh—*”

“I’m n-not.”

Hell could’ve frozen at the look in his eyes, and his voice had turned deadly soft when he spoke again. “You make a terrible liar, Ms. Jones.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t sound like it.”

This time, she could no longer control herself, and a full-fledged laugh escaped her. “I’m sorry.” But she wasn’t, not really. How could she, when everything was so clear now, and it was making her all choked up and unable to breathe?

The way Pippi was looking at him now made Acheron want to haul her close, but he forced himself to keep still, a part of him unable to trust that what he wanted was truly his for the taking now.

And besides, there was still that *other* thing to talk about...

“Before you make a decision about us,” he said abruptly, “I wish to be completely truthful with you.”

The tone of his voice made Pippi’s heart slam against her chest, and she had to gulp past the sudden lump in her throat before she could speak. “Alright.”

“Asking you to agree to be my girlfriend for a specific period of time was just me being selfish in another way. It didn’t occur to me then, but I know...” His jaw clenched anew. “Having given myself sufficient time to analyze my actions, I am now aware that all I had been doing was forcing you to take all the risks.”

*Like he had with Ms. Longbourn,* Pippi couldn’t help thinking.

“I would have everything to gain - and you would have everything to lose.”

Every word he spoke was the truth, and hearing him speak it made Pippi finally understand what had made her turn his offer down. Even though what he had offered her was better than what Ms. Longbourn had enjoyed with him, it still hadn’t been enough - because what he had been offering her was a lie.

He had told her that she would be the one calling the shots, but that hadn’t been true at all. The mere fact that he had been the one to decide how long the relationship would last was

enough to make the whole relationship a lie, and that truth would have always made her feel insecure and on unequal footing with him.

It was a truth that her heart had subconsciously recognized even when her mind was still struggling against her growing need for his touch. It was a truth that had saved her from giving in, and it was a truth that she had never once imagined she would hear Acheron Simonides acknowledge.

And yet he had.

And now there was no forgetting it.

“You really were an arse back then,” she told him tremulously. “And I wish, if only for my sake, you had stayed that way.” She saw his gaze narrow demandingly at her, a silent command to explain herself plainly, and a smile wobbled its way to her lips. She instinctively knew that was just the start, a stolen glimpse of the days she would share with him—

*Me, Tarzan, you, Jane.*

But instead of filling Pippi with trepidation, the thought of having this domineering man command every second of her life simply made a sensual shiver run down her spine.

“You don’t get it, do you?”

The faint hint of laughter in her voice made Acheron feel like giving her bum a good, hard slap. “Just spell it out, dammit—”

“I’m saying I understand you want me...but you’re not in love with me.”

All hopes he had of having Pippilotta Jones in his life expired in an instant. “Pippi...” He raked a hand through his hair. What she was saying was the truth, but goddammit, hearing her say it worried him like hell. “I know I’m not exactly the most trustworthy man on the planet—”

“And I’m okay with that.”

“But before you make any rash decisions—” He broke off when Pippi’s last words finally hit him.

“What was that again?”

“If you had stayed an arse...” Pippi’s voice shook a little at the effort it took her to overcome her reticence and speak from the heart. “I would always have managed to keep my distance. But then you changed...” The smile that curved over her lips was the most beautiful thing Acheron had ever seen. “If you promise it will be just me—”

“You have my word.”

He had spoken the words so swiftly Pippi couldn’t help feeling just the tiniest bit...*giddy*, and the realization filled her with both terror and awe at the same time. *Am I doing the right thing here, God?*

Her gaze returned to Acheron, taking in the proud, beautiful lines of his face, and she felt even more overwhelmed.

Acheron saw hesitation flicker in her eyes, and he said fiercely, “*I’m not lying.*” He slowly reached for her, a part of him already expecting her to refuse his touch...but she didn’t, and his chest tightened as she let him pull her towards him. “You’re the only one for me, Pippilotta Jones.”

Their bodies touched, the contact making him suck in his breath, and Pippi gasped. But it was the naked truth in his eyes that made her whole being melt —

“Say you believe me, *mikrí mou.*”

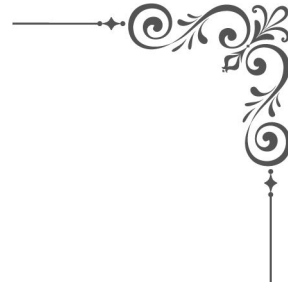
Her eyes stung at the enormity of what he was asking, but deep down inside her, she already knew that what he was asking for had already been his the moment he showed up dressed like a cop at her doorstep.

“I do.” Her smile was tremulous, but her soft, firm voice rang with sincerity. “I trust you, Acheron.”

The sound of his name on her lips was more potent than any aphrodisiac, and a shudder ran over Acheron’s powerful frame. “Goddammit, Pippi.” Sexual tension underlined the muttered words, and he couldn’t stop himself from tightening his hold on her waist. “Do you know what you’re doing to me?”

“Probably the same thing you’re doing to me,” she admitted with a smile that was half shy, half impish, and one hundred percent designed to drive him crazy with lust.

*Ah, fuck it.*



## Eleven

PIPPI WATCHED WIDE-eyed as Acheron slowly placed a finger over his lips. *Don't speak.*

She barely managed a nod when his fingers drove through the locks of her hair, pulling her head back just as his mouth lowered down to hers.

*Omigodomigodomigodomigod!*

She felt him pulling her lower lip between his teeth, and her eyes closed as he began to suck. Everything he did felt so good. *Everything!* There was something about his touch that made her knees go instantly weak but empowered her at the same time. In his arms, she was free from all fears and inhibitions, and when she felt him lift her up, she didn't even hesitate to lock her legs around his waist. His belt buckle scraped against the soft crotch of her slacks, and the friction had her inner folds slowly getting creamy with moisture. She unthinkingly pressed closer, her legs tightening, and Acheron growled against her mouth.

"Stop that," he warned her in a low, rough voice. The way she was grinding against his crotch as he carried her to the opposite end of the room was fast decimating his control.

"I d-don't think I can."

A soft, tremulous admission, accentuated by the continuous rubbing of her crotch against his hardness, destroyed all of his good intentions. *Fuck taking things slow.* Ignoring her gasp as he abruptly lowered her to her feet, he pushed her against the wall and drove his tongue deeper into her mouth.

She whimpered, but the sound was of longing rather than fear. Her mind shut down, leaving her to respond as her wanton body wanted, which was to submit fully to his touch. She felt his tongue trace the outline of her lips, and she exulted in the moist pleasure of it. She felt his fingers move down her back, and the shivery trail his touch left had Pippi feeling so lightheaded that by the time she realized why he had placed her hands behind her back, it was already too late.

One telltale click, followed by the slap of cold hard metal around her wrists, and it was only then that the truth hit home.

*He had cuffed her!*

Acheron smirked as Pippi gasped against his mouth, but even so he didn't think twice about taking advantage of her fully parted lips. His tongue slid in, and the kiss at once turned explosive. Her tongue mated with his, shyly at first and then with growing confidence, until it was his turn to gasp.

Knowing that to lose his head completely would be bad for both of them, he forced himself to jerk away, and the sound of her tiny mewl of protest at having the kiss end had Acheron squeezing his eyes shut as he strove for control.

Pippi's heart thundered against her chest as Acheron opened his eyes and she saw the blatant glitter of desire. He frightened and thrilled her at the same time, and the shackles around her wrists only served to heighten the situation. It seemed impossible to think that this was truly happening, and the lethally sexy figure he cut in his police uniform only added to the surreal, hallucinatory feel of the moment.

He saw the way she couldn't stop staring, and Acheron's lips curved ever so slightly. "Who would've thought...the prim and proper Miss Pippilotta Jones—" Her name, uttered in a sensual purr, had her shuddering, and his eyes gleamed. "Would have a fetish for men in uniform..."

She gasped. "I d-do not!" But the blush that swept over her cheeks gave her away, and Acheron smirked.

"You're a surprisingly bad girl, Ms. Jones."

“I’m n-not.” And yet her toes actually curled at the accusation, and she could only wonder dazedly if maybe it was what he had said, and she *was* a bad girl.

She watched him slowly come towards her, and her breath hitched.

“I’m afraid I can’t take your word for it, Ms. Jones.”

“W-What?”

“I’ll need to give you a thorough inspection, make sure you don’t have anything dangerous on you.”

Her eyes widened as the meaning of his words became clear. She started to protest, but by then he had already closed the distance between them, and the next thing she knew, it was truly happening, and Acheron Simonides was frisking her like she was America’s #1 Most Wanted.

*Blooooooooddy hell.*

Her body buckled as his fingers came into contact with her skin, and desire-darkened eyes held hers captive as strong hands ran down her sides ever so slowly.

Her body sagged against the wall.

Who knew frisking could ever be so shamefully pleasurable?

She bit her lip hard, her gaze helplessly clinging to Acheron’s uniformed figure as he crouched down while his hands continued its damnably leisurely pace, tracing the curve of her hips and all the way down to her ankles.

And then he started back up again, and she bit back a whimper at the thought of having to endure another whole cycle of his touch. It was maddening and addictive, and by the time he had risen to his full height, his fingers had paused at the undersides of her breasts, and it was all she could do not to scream.

“I’ll need to check if you’ve hidden anything inside your bra, Ms. Jones.”

*For the love of—*



His hands moved up, his palms more than enough to cover the full globes of her breasts, and the sensations that instantly assaulted her body were the most achingly sweet feeling.

*So, so good.*

And then he began to knead, and the ache became an unbearable agony, her breasts swelling under the mastery of his touch.

*Too, too good.*

His fingers closed over her flesh, moving to the peak until they were pinching her nipples - *hard*. Agony sharpened into acute need, unbearable and impossible to ignore, and her lips parted in a silent, helpless plea.

*Please.*

Acheron saw this, heard this, and he knew at that moment he would never forget this picture of Pippi, mindless with pleasure as she begged for his touch.

His control slipped anew, and his own actions became equally mindless. His head dipped down, his mouth roughly taking her nipple in. He didn't waste time on foreplay and started sucking outright. It turned out to be exactly what they both needed, with Pippi's body arching up against his in a voiceless demand for him to suck harder.

The feel of Acheron's mouth on her nipple was nothing she could ever imagine, and with every tug of her sensitive flesh, she could feel her body swelling and swelling until she seemed fit to burst. She so badly wanted to grip his head and hold it to her breast, but she couldn't. Her wrists could only shake powerlessly against its restraints, but even this only served to heighten her pleasure, so, so much so until she couldn't think of anything but him.

*God, it was so good.*

Her thoughts became a hopeless jumble.

*Please make this end.*

*Please don't make this end.*

*Oh God, please.*

She had a second's respite when his head lifted, but just as she tried to breathe normally instead of gasping like she had been doing the past minute, his head lowered again, his mouth closing over her other nipple, and oh God, it started all over again.

Her head tossed from side to side, her body only capable of buckling against his as over and over he worshipped her tightly wound bud with his tongue and teeth. A part of her was convinced that nothing else could feel any better than what he was currently doing, but then she felt his lips move down, Acheron kneeling on the floor as his fingers expertly unbuttoned her pants.

As soon as the soft fabric fell to the floor, his mouth latched to her lace-covered pussy, and it was that moment she realized how wrong she was.

THIS.

WAS.

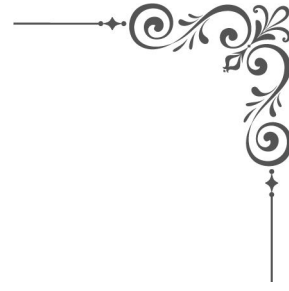
HEAVEN.

Her head fell back. Tears fell from her face. But still, it continued.

His mouth eating her pussy -

The tremors racking her body -

And finally, finally, *it* happened, and she shattered.



## Twelve

ACHERON'S HAND SETTLED possessively on the small of Pippi's back as they descended the stairs. Glancing at her, he saw the palest blush still coloring her cheeks. *It was a good thing*, he summarily reflected, *that her household was an all-women's domain*. That lovely flush of hers was an erotic sight, one bound to have any healthy man's imagination run rampant.

There was a noticeable buzz of frenetic energy that pulsed in the air when they rejoined the rest of Pippi's family. Everyone looked busy - *too busy*, Acheron thought, and this, for a man like him, spoke volumes.

Pippi, however, took just a few seconds longer to reach the same conclusions. Seeing the hallway empty of eavesdroppers had her breathing a sigh of relief, and she relaxed even more at the entirely normal scene that had greeted them below. Vik was cross-stitching in her corner, Rue and Mynt were chatting by the couch, and Astrid and the three old ladies were having tea at the dining table.

Clearing her throat, Pippi said with a determinedly bright smile, "We're back."

*Oh, hello.*

*Hey.*

*We didn't notice you.*

*Is everything good now?*

But this time, Pippi saw past the instant chorus of cheerful responses. It was all there, in the way they were quite unable

to meet her gaze while sporting knowing little smiles...

Pippi's horrified gaze flew to Acheron. "You said they wouldn't hear—"

"And we truly did not," Great-Aunt Agatha interrupted her from behind.

"Not a blessed thing for the past fifteen minutes," Great-Aunt Abigail emphasized.

"And that, my dear, said it for all for us," Great-Aunt Alice finished meaningfully.

Pippi let out a wail of embarrassment as she realized what the three were saying, and her color deepened when she heard Astrid and her sisters laugh.

Acheron was inclined to do the same, but the way Pippi suddenly turned to him with entreating blue eyes was too enchanting to resist. "There's nothing to be ashamed of, *mikri mou*," he said soothingly. "Pleasing you is one of my responsibilities as your boyfriend—" A chorus of oohs had Pippi looking like she was about to cry and turn into a tomato all at the same time, and Acheron's lips swiftly pressed together to contain his smile.

Rescuing damsels in distress, as opposed to wolfing them down, was an idea that he had always considered unappealing. But with Pippi, he found himself taking to it like a duck to water, and when she turned to him to hide her face against his chest, Acheron felt like he had just been knighted for the Round Table.

It did not make any fucking sense for him to feel this way, but because having Pippi seek comfort in his arms felt too damn good, Acheron decided it was best not to examine such things too closely.

He would cross that bridge when he had to, and not a fucking second too soon.

Another fifteen minutes had passed before Acheron finished saying his goodbyes to Pippi's family, and she walked him to the door. Even now, her body was still tingling in the aftermath of her first orgasm, and it was a constant struggle to

keep a blush off her cheeks. Questions plagued her mind, and she had no answer to a single one of them. It was a frightening thought, but what scared her even more was how little she cared.

As if sensing her mood, Acheron tipped her chin up the moment they were out of the house, his handsome face grave as she reluctantly lifted her gaze to his.

“As your boyfriend...”

She couldn't help smiling, thinking that he was getting a little too fond of those words.

“It's my job to keep you from worrying.” He paused. “But I can't do that if you won't tell me what's wrong.”

“It's nothing.”

“We both know that's a lie.”

“It's just the usual stuff.” She absently played with the button on his breast pocket, unable to control her sudden insatiable need to touch him. And that wasn't right. Was it?

“Pippi?”

She was about to make up some excuse when her gaze unintentionally drifted to the embroidered name on his uniform, and it hit her then.

A giggle escaped Pippi as she looked up at him. “I just realized...” She tapped the embroidered letters with a sheepish smile. “This means *Costume*, doesn't it?”

His gaze was quizzical. “You thought differently?”

She remembered how silly she had been, fretting over what excuse to give to “Officer C. Ostume”, and Pippi thought to herself, *I'll take this secret to my grave*. Out loud, she asked instead, “Did you buy this? Or is it a rental?”

“Neither. I borrowed it from a friend of mine.”

“Oh.” What kind of man would have a police uniform in his everyday closet? “You have an interesting friend.”

The way she made ‘interesting’ sound ‘weird as fuck’ had him coughing. “You’ll meet him one day.” But only after he made sure Damen Leventis was aware of Pippi’s first impressions of him.

“It suits you,” she said shyly.

Acheron’s lips twitched. “I thought you’d say that, considering your unexpected little fetish—”

This time, it was impossible for Pippi not to succumb to a blush. “I d-don’t h-have—” A quick hard kiss cut her words short, and then a softly whispered *good night* left Pippi touching her lips as she watched Acheron Simonides ride into the night.

Acheron’s regular routine took over the remainder of his evening. Half an hour spent addressing the pile of urgent paperwork waiting in his study, another half hour doing business calls with managers who lived in different time zones, and a fifteen-minute workout at his personal gym to cap off the night.

But throughout it, memories of Pippi climaxing on his mouth had shadowed his every thought, and they only became more vivid the moment he stepped under the shower. He had never been this enamored with a woman before, and he couldn’t help feeling a little unnerved by the intensity of his obsession with Pippi.

*You’ve put a spell on me, Pippilotta Jones.*

A humorless smile twisted his lips at the thought, but even so he sought to purge all memories of her as soon as he hit the bed. Part of his strictly enforced discipline was being able to sleep at will rather than wasting any precious seconds on pointless bedtime ruminations.

Tonight, however, was different, his mind replaying over and over the minutes Pippi had belonged to him, and before Acheron realized what was happening, he was already reaching for his cock and doing something he hadn’t done since he was a boy.

He imagined it were Pippi's fingers wrapping around his manhood, and the movements of his hand jerked faster. He thought of Pippi's lovely lips parting wide open to take him all the way down her throat, and he came with a guttural growl.

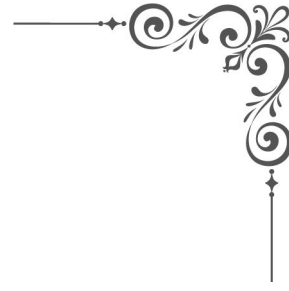
*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

Logic told him that time would make him eventually lose interest in her, but the thought didn't please him at all. If anything, it made Acheron feel inexplicably restless and dangerously unstable - two things that he had never been, even when all the fucking odds had been stacked against him.

Control was the only thing that had kept him alive in all those years. Control meant not letting emotions get to him. Control meant playing by the rules. Control meant never showing any sign of weakness.

He *needed* to be in control where Pippilotta Jones was concerned. That was a fact. But what was frustratingly becoming less clear to him was whether he *wanted* it as well, and Acheron found himself brooding over this even more when, upon reaching for his phone, he saw that he had missed a call from the only person in his past that had threatened his control.

*Amelia.*



## Thirteen

PIPPY HAD A HARD TIME sleeping and an even harder time getting rid of the giddy smile on her face. She turned to her side with care, not wanting to accidentally wake Vik, who was sleeping in the bunk below her.

Outside her window, a midnight sky of stars spread into the distance. Its beauty was beyond words, and it made foolish dreams easier to indulge in.

Before that fateful night of meeting him, Acheron Simonides had only been this vague figure of exacting authority to her. She had enough glimpses of his face on company newsletters to know what he looked like and grudgingly appreciate the sheer physical perfection of his features.

But that had been all.

He was a rich man, ergo someone she wasn't interested in.

*Which was probably why*, Pippi acknowledged to herself ruefully, seeing Acheron turn on the charm was as much a shock to her as it had been to her family.

*Rich men were bastards*. That had always been a given in the Jones' family. But somehow, Acheron had proved himself the exception, and he had been so genuinely nice that even hard-to-please Vik had been grudgingly bowled over. Within minutes, he had made everyone feel at ease, so much so they had forgotten to be self-conscious about entertaining a billionaire in their old, quaintly charming ramshackle of a house.



If Acheron had given her a house or a yacht, the pleasure of it wouldn't even been half of what Pippi had felt, seeing him help Rue with her homework and listen attentively to Aunt Agatha's concerns about her latest beau.

A low vibrating buzz from her iPhone made Pippi jerk in surprise, and she winced when below her she heard Vik mumble in protest.

"Sorry," she whispered even as she couldn't help reaching for her phone, hoping and dreading it turned out to be him.

*And Lord save her, but it was.*

*Acheron: Are you still thinking of me?*

*Pippi: Probably as much as you're thinking of me.*

*Acheron: You're bad for my ego.*

*And you're bad for my heart,* Pippi wanted to say but didn't quite dare to. Despite the intimacy they had shared, everything still felt new, and she knew it would take some time before she could fully let herself go around the billionaire.

*Besides...*

Pippi re-read Acheron's last message more carefully, knowing what the words spelled out in letters...and in something else.

*Pippi: Are you okay?*

*Pippi: I don't think it's your style to send text messages to any girl.*

*Acheron: No. It's not.*

*And with that,* Pippi thought, *the ball was back on her court.*

*Pippi: It goes both ways, you know.*

*Pippi: I can't help you if you don't tell me what's wrong.*

Pippi fell asleep waiting for Acheron to answer, and her dreams were those of the unspeakable and the forbidden. But just when it was getting to the hottest and wettest part, Pippi

dreamt of hands grasping her shoulders to shake her back into reality.

*“Wake up, Pi!”*

*“There’s a clown at the front door!”*

*A clown?* Pippi stubbornly kept her eyes closed. She was clearly dreaming something new, but she didn’t want it. She wanted the old dream back, and hopefully it would pick off exactly where they last left off, and she already had her shirt unbuttoned—

*“Pippi, will you just wake up?”*

Someone yanked the pillow under her head, and Pippi’s head bounced against the mattress. *“Owww!”* She forced her eyes to open and swallowed a yawn as she saw a trio of expectant faces grinning down at her. *“What?”* The grins widened, and she suppressed a groan. Were they serious? Why did they have to wake her up now, of all mornings, for a stupid prank?

Pushing herself up, she asked grouchily, *“What time is it anyway?”*

*“Six,”* Rue answered.

*“And there’s a clown waiting for you downstairs,”* Mynt added.

*A clown at their house at six in the morning?* Pippi shot her sisters a look that told them to drop dead, but this only had the three girls exchanging mischievous looks. *“Come on, guys. Don’t you think it’s too early for a prank?”*

Vik smirked. *“It’s not a prank.”*

Pippi snorted. *“Yeah right.”*

*“It really isn’t,”* Mynt insisted, *“and if you don’t want to believe us, come see for yourself.”*

And then the three were dragging Pippi out of her bed and down the stairs.

*“What - wait - come on!”*

The first thing Pippi saw in the kitchen were Astrid and Pippi's great-aunts having tea...*with a clown?*

Pippi rubbed her eyes, but the clown persisted in being real, and now Pennywise - no, It - *oh, get a grip of yourself, Pippilotta Jones!*

The clown in the kitchen had risen to his full height as he turned to look at her. He was the weirdest-looking clown, a walking, outlandish contradiction between his garishly painted face and an expensive, familiar-looking suit.

The clown started for Pippi, a deadly look in his eyes, and she vaguely heard her sisters laugh when she took an unconscious step back. *What if this was a nightmare?* She pinched herself hard, but nothing happened. "Will someone please tell me what I'm supposed to do?" The clown in a suit was coming closer and closer, and she was starting to feel more than a little nervous.

"You guys..."

The clown towered over her.

"Someone just please tell me——"

The clown bent his dark head, and just as her heart jumped out of her chest, his mouth moved dangerously close to her ear for a whisper. "*Kaliméra, Pippi.*"

Half an hour later, and a still-grumbling Pippi was being waved off by her family. Bloody traitorous family, to join forces with an outsider just to prank her.

As Acheron opened the door for Pippi, Rue rushed out to whisper impishly into her sister's ear, "Try not to lose your virginity until the third date."

Acheron's swift reflexes were the only thing that kept Pippi from losing her footing on the front steps, and when she looked up, the billionaire asked, "Everything okay?"

If it had been any other time, she would have cracked a joke about the irony of him asking such a thing. Shouldn't it be the other way around, since he was the one who had

showed up on her doorstep wearing clown makeup while dressed in a four-thousand-dollar suit?



IT WAS WHAT SHE TRULY intended to say...until she saw his face, and she remembered the last thing she had asked him the night before.

“You know...” She hesitated, worried about overstepping her bounds.

“What is it?”

Unable to muster enough courage to look at him, she instead focused her gaze on the knot of his tie as she mumbled, “You have the saddest eyes for a clown.”

There was a long moment of silence, and then she heard Acheron say, “I missed a call from an old friend last night.”

Pippi hadn’t expected Acheron to confide anything at all, and that he had made her feel like she had been entrusted with the care of the crown jewels. She took her time answering, trying harder to read between the lines.

“And you’re...bothered because you weren’t able to answer it?”

“I suppose.”

“Then...it’s never too late to return the call.”

“It’s more a problem of whether I should.”

*Which most likely meant his “old friend” had something to do with the darker side of his past,* Pippi interpreted. “If he hasn’t done you any harm in the past, then I don’t see why you can’t at least listen to him.”

A second later, and he was cupping her chin, and she had no choice but to look into his eyes.

“You’re very good at hiding it, but you’re actually very softhearted.”

Her first instinct was to deny this, but then she saw his clown face, and a truth suddenly struck her. This was Acheron

Simonides getting his face painted on just for the sake of taking her to work - *and she couldn't even admit to being softhearted where he was concerned?*

Teeth gnashing, she fought against the usual wave of shyness as she forced herself to say, "I'm only softhearted for people...I care about."

Seeing her practically choke on the words had Acheron realizing in amusement that Pippi was determined to be more expressive than usual.

Well, then, if that was truly what she wanted, far be it for him to stand in her way...

Pippi nearly lost her footing again when she felt Acheron casually slip an arm around her waist, with his fingers splaying possessively on her hips as he drew her close. Every inch of her was now plastered against his side, and she was all at once on fire and on edge.

All her life, she had steered clear of men like Acheron Simonides, and yet now she was letting him stake a claim on her body, and in full public view of their town's early risers no less.

Acheron chuckled when Pippi practically dove into the backseat of the car, and the sound had her making a face as soon as he joined her and pulled the door shut on her still-gawking neighbors.

The way the billionaire had held her might not have raised a single eyebrow in Miami, but with Isla de Flores being a sleepy town of less than 2,000 permanent residents, Pippi was glumly certain that Astrid would soon find herself besieged with questions about this morning's clownish visitor.

"I thought we were supposed to keep things under the radar," she muttered.

"Which we are," Acheron answered easily, "by hiding in plain sight."

"Plain isn't exactly the word that comes to mind when—" Pippi's body swayed slightly as the car made a right turn, and

she stopped speaking as she turned her anxious gaze towards the driver's seat.

“Good morning, ma'am.” Wickham's respectful gaze met Pippi's through the rearview mirror, and her shoulders sagged with relief even though Acheron's factotum looked even more menacing in daylight. However sinister Wickham appeared to be, she knew Acheron trusted him, which was enough for Pippi to trust the other man as well.

“I hope you find the vehicle sufficiently comfortable, Ms. Jones.”

“It's very comfortable.” And even if it wasn't, Pippi would still say otherwise. With Wickham reminding her of Voldemort on steroids and Acheron still in the process of getting rid of his clown makeup with a wet tissue, Pippi couldn't help feeling like she had tumbled into a *Purge*-inspired Wonderland.

*And one wrong word, she thought wryly, might just get her neck snapped.*

“...one of our strategies is to not use any vehicle owned by Mr. Simonides or the company when picking you up.”

It took more than a second for Pippi to realize Wickham was talking to her, and another second to understand what he was saying. “So this isn't your car then?”

Wickham named a ride-sharing company and explained after, “It should help shake off anyone that might be on your trail or Mr. Simonides.”

This made a lot of sense, but wasn't it just a little too much? She started to ask Acheron this herself, but hearing her phone sound out the ringtone she had assigned for the office had Pippi temporarily setting her concerns aside.

“Was that Collins?” Acheron asked when the call ended.

She nodded. “He wanted me to know beforehand that my temporary transfer had been approved.”

His gaze narrowed. “I haven't heard anything about this.”

“Which is only natural?” Considering the number of individuals Simonides Inc. employed, his desk would be

drowning with unnecessary paperwork if he had to be informed of every single transfer request in their workplace.

“It’s a project-based thing,” Pippi felt obliged to add with his silence, “and I’ll be under the direct supervision of the marketing VP...”

Acheron stiffened. “Do you mean Gareth Evans?”

“Umm, yes. Do you know—*Acheron!*” His name came out in startled protest as he pulled her across the backseat and she suddenly found herself straddling the billionaire. “What do you think you’re doing?” she hissed.

“Doing something more preferable to listening to you talk about another man.”

“I wasn’t—”

“*You are.*”

Oh God, it was that voice of his again.

“And I don’t like it.”

Rough, deep, and low, the sound so sexy Pippi was terrified of how easy it could have her do any of his bidding... *like now.*

He had taken hold of her hand, and she could only watch with helpless fascination as he slowly brought one finger to his lips.

And then *it* happened, his tongue circling her finger just before he started to suck, and her body melted.

“*Acheron.*” Her voice shook. “*P-Please.*” But he just kept doing it, and she just kept melting. “W-We’re not alone—”

“But we might as well be, and you know it.”

Yes, yes, she did. Oh, she so did. Wickham was Wickham, and he would always be the soul of discretion. But even so...

“Don’t you?”

Pippi’s breath caught at the devilish look in his eyes.

*Omigodomigodomigod.*

That look was just like before, too, and her toes curled, her insides turning into mush at the way Acheron made absolutely no attempt to hide the carnal nature of his thoughts. The blasted man was thinking of all the ways he could eat her —

*And you can let him do just that,* an insidious voice slithered in her ears to whisper, *because this time is different.*

This time, all the rules had been clearly laid out. This time, there were no risks, no reason for her conscience to balk. This time, she really could just let him...*eat her.*

“What is it going to be then, Ms. Jones?”

The question had Pippi unconsciously wetting her lips, not knowing that doing so would seal her fate. With her mind too busy wrestling for control, she missed the way the sight of her tongue tip tracing her lips had turned Acheron’s midnight gaze into black fire.

“I...” She was torn, and with her lips feeling too cracked and dry, she unthinkingly wetted them again.

“Too late,” he growled.

She looked up in confusion, unsure of what she had heard. “What did you s—” His mouth swooped down, Acheron taking the decision away from her, and she realized in a flash that this was what he meant.

*Too late.*

She could almost imagine hearing a sultry laugh playing out in her mind, coming from an inner nympho that she had never known she possessed until Acheron’s seductive touch had lured it to life.

As Acheron’s lips parted hers open, it was as if she was surrendering common sense the moment his tongue entered her mouth. All she could do was let her secret wild child half take over...and losing control had never felt so good.

She drowned in his kiss, her arms winding around his neck, and a shameful part of her reveled in her ability to do so. Her body arched close, craving for more of his hardness, and it was bliss to feel him needing her with just as much hunger. It



was in the way his mouth devoured hers, the way he seemed to want every inch of her mouth to memorize his taste.

Even though she knew it had only been mere hours since he had last kissed her, it honestly felt like an eternity had passed, and she had suffered the most awful sexual drought since then.

She wanted more, so much more, and she never wanted the kiss to end.

*“P-Please...”*

The sound of her innocent begging crushed what little control Acheron had left, and he found himself kissing her harder and deeper. He sucked her tongue hungrily, causing her to cry out in the most lusciously arousing way.

It was the fucking sexiest sound he had ever heard, and it had his hands moving down to curve over the cheeks of her ass even as their tongues continued to twine. Her pussy started grinding against his already rigidly throbbing cock, and it was the most exquisite form of torment.

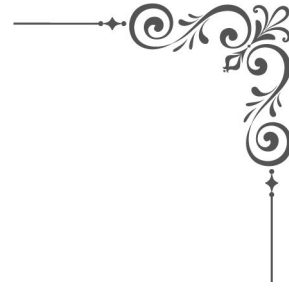
He squeezed her ass hard, and it consequently squeezed a lovely whimper out of her. He felt her fingers on his hair tightening its grip, and it made him think of how her virginal little pussy could do the same to his cock.

*Fuck control.*

Who needed it when you had the sexiest little thing in your arms?

He was going to take her to the nearest hotel—

“We’ve arrived, Mr. Simonides.”



## Fourteen

GARETH EVANS CAME OUT of the meeting room in time to see a fairly familiar outline heading down the hallway that led straight to his office. If he weren't mistaken, this woman was none other than the estimable Pippilotta Jones...*a.k.a.* the highly skilled secretary that a majority of Simonides Incorporated's executives would offer their year-end bonuses to steal under Timothy Collins' nose.

She was a slender little thing, with a conservative taste in clothing that seemed more suitable for women twice her age. Maybe even thrice, considering the rather popular trend for those in their forties and fifties to take the cougar route.

Her posture also made for interesting study: head dipped low, back ramrod straight, and hips that barely swayed. It hinted of pride and submissiveness, a subtle but infinitely heady combination that the average man would have easily overlooked. Gareth might've even gone as far as suspect the woman to be Mr. Collins' mistress if the old man's homosexuality wasn't one of those open secrets that the whole company knew about but didn't speak of.

*Thus begging the question,* Gareth thought idly.

After being known to turn down multiple promotions for undisclosed reasons, why had Pippilotta Jones accepted the temporary transfer at his request?

Pippi had barely taken her seat when the door behind her swung open again, and a tall, lean figure came striding in. Blond, blue-eyed, and deeply tanned, he looked like the grown-up, corporate version of Barbie's Ken, and the thought

somewhat helped her relax and even manage a brief smile as she rose to her feet and lifted her gaze to her new employer.

“Good morning, Mr. Evans.”

“Ms. Jones, isn’t it?” His voice was deeper than she had expected to be. “Sorry for being late.”

“Not at all, sir.”

He took a seat, but the girl remained standing. Well-trained of her, but he doubted it had anything to do with Collins’ tutelage.

“Please take a seat, Ms. Jones.”

“Thank you, Mr. Evans.”

He watched her do as asked and was amused at the way she resembled a headmistress, with her back barely touching the back of the chair and her hands resting delicately on her lap.

“Gareth, please.”

“Of course, sir.” Her voice was steady, but he didn’t miss the way her eyes flickered.

“You’re not comfortable with it, sir?”

“It’s only because of the things I’m used to with Mr. Collins.”

A perfect alibi meant to soothe any ruffled feathers, but he also noted the way she had managed to avoid calling Gareth by his name.

“May I be frank with you, Ms. Jones?” At her nod, he asked bluntly, “As you do not strike me as either the scheming or manipulative type, would you mind telling me what made you accept the temporary transfer to my office?”

Fifteen minutes later, and Pippi was able to breathe a sigh of relief the moment she came out of Gareth Evans’ office and headed back to Mr. Collins. Her phone rang then, and she answered it without looking to see who it was. “Hello?”

“Do I have any reason to fire my vice president, Ms. Jones?”

Pippi nearly dropped her iPhone in shock. “A—ah my God!”

“Remarkably quick-witted of you, Ms. Jones, but I’m afraid it doesn’t answer my question.”

“This is such a surprise.” Pippi knew she was babbling for no reason, but she couldn’t help it. She just felt so guilty and embarrassed at taking a personal call, never mind if he was also the CEO of the company that employed her.

“Yes or no, Ms. Jones.”

“No, of course not!” Her unusually shrill gasp had the other employees in the hallway glancing at her oddly, and Pippi felt like skulking away in shame.

“Then why do you look so guilty?”

“What—” It hit her then, and as soon as she turned her gaze upwards, her eyes unerringly spotted the CCTV camera mounted on the ceiling. Cupping a hand over her mouth to keep anyone from accidentally hearing her, she demanded in an incredulous whisper, “*Are you spying on me?*”

“I’m guarding what belongs to me, that’s all.” The words, uttered in a low, edgy tone, completely threw her off. On one hand, he was being unreasonably suspicious. But on the other hand - didn’t this mean he was being jealous...*over her?*

“A—” She stopped in time, but she was feeling doubly frustrated by her failure to keep the fact that she was on a first-name basis with Acheron Simonides a secret. And to think she was the one worried about Acheron slipping up!

“I read your file with HR.”

“*What?*” This time, Acheron’s words had her halting in her tracks, which consequently caused the person behind her to crash into Pippi’s back. Face flaming, Pippi stammered an apology and, no longer confident of her ability to function normally, hastened towards the nearest fire exit.

As soon as the heavy doors closed behind her, the words she had been holding back burst out of her in a beseeching rush. “Can we please talk after work?”

“We’re just talking.”

“But I’m at work.”

“And I’m your boyfriend as well as your boss—”

“Which no one’s supposed to know,” she pointed out helplessly.

“Then it’s time that should change.”

“*What? No!*”

“Why not?” Acheron’s tone was cutting. “Or should I even bother asking when the answer’s obvious?”

Pippi nearly threw her hands up in surrender. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Your file in HR said you’ve turned down three promotions in the past two years.”

“I did—”

“And yet you accepted the chance to work for Evans without a qualm.”

Pippi’s lips opened and closed. *Bollocks*. Only now did she realize that Acheron harbored the same suspicions Gareth Evans had expressed earlier on.

“Care to explain what makes the transfer to Evans’ office different from the rest?”

*Of course*, Pippi thought. 1,158 reasons in fact, which was also the exact amount she was required to pay next month if she wanted Vik to stay in medical school. She usually had enough set aside for the rainy days, but Great-Aunt Agatha’s stroke a few months ago had been a massive strain on everyone’s finances.

It was why, upon mustering the courage to approach Mr. Collins for an advance, the older man had suggested she accept a project-based transfer instead. It would mean an

immediate raise, and it would be more than enough to cover next month's expenses.

“Your silence isn't making you look good, *mikrí mou*.”

*I know*, Pippi thought, and she had the childish urge to cry. While she hadn't hesitated to speak the truth to Mr. Collins or even Mr. Evans, she just couldn't make herself confide her worries to Acheron.

If she did, she knew he was cunning enough to find a way to help her, and if that happened, then what would that make her?

*A gold-digger, that's what.*

The urge to cry grew stronger, and speaking coherently became a challenge.

Acheron's brooding gaze didn't stray from the monitor even as Charlie came into his office after knocking on his door.

“Whatever it is can wait.”

The younger man didn't miss a beat, saying, “Of course, sir.”

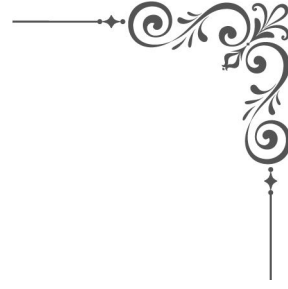
The door closed behind Charlie, and Acheron didn't even see the younger man leaving. The only thing he had eyes for was Pippi. The infernal woman looked so damn miserable on the screen, and that he could only think of one reason for it only made his mood worsen.

“You were supposed to be shy, dammit.” It had said so in her fucking file. *Subject states shyness as her main concern with regard to her ability to work in a different office.*

*I am.*” But the words sounded pathetically feeble even to her ears.

“Then tell me why,” Acheron couldn't help snapping, “you're willing to work for Evans now.”

Pippi slowly shook her head. “I c-can't.”



## Fifteen

THE FIRST TIME MR. Collins had informed Pippi of her transfer and its corresponding pay increase, the news had considerably fired her up, and she had told herself she would do her boss proud and make sure Mr. Evans would say she was worth every dollar added to her wages.

And in normal circumstances, everything would be as she planned. But ever since she had gotten involved with Acheron Simonides, so much in her life had changed that she couldn't even recognize her own face in the mirror.

The old Pippi had been thoroughly self-sufficient, the kind who defined romance in terms of love affairs with food, books, and other inanimate objects. The new Pippi she had somehow turned her into, however, was revoltingly weak, with her growing dependence on Acheron's presence.

She had never imagined there'd be a day she would find herself checking her phone every minute, waiting with bated breath for a man to remember she was alive.

*How pathetic can you get, Pippilotta Jones?*

It was seriously mortifying, but even so she found herself caving in and sending the first text.

Pippi: *May we please talk?*

But her phone remained still and silent, and come lunchtime, Pippi managed to convince herself this was because her message had been too *vague*. It might even have indicated unwillingness on her part to acknowledge there wasn't anything wrong with her refusal to explain about her transfer to Gareth Evans' office.

And while she was still determined not to tell him the truth, perhaps things could still be salvaged if she said something else?

Pippi: *If you had truly read HR's file on me, then you would know that I am not the type of person to like two men at the same time. Nothing could be further from the truth.*

After hitting *Enter*, Pippi stared at her iPhone, willing it to vibrate with a reply. But it didn't, and her heart sank. With only five minutes left of her break, she'd have no choice but to wait until five o' clock—

Her iPhone buzzed against her palm just as she was about to drop it back in her bag, and her heart nervously skipped a beat as she answered Acheron's call. "H-Hello?"

Acheron's jaw hardened at hearing the tremor in Pippi's voice. He didn't like knowing that he was the cause for her to sound this uncertain. It wasn't like her, wasn't like the delightfully proud Pippi he knew.

But even so, a part of him refused to bend and just let things go.

When the silence became too much to bear, Pippi asked unevenly, "Do you really think it's possible for me to cheat on you?"

"Right now, the only thing I know—" Acheron's voice was flat. "—is when someone's hiding something from me." He didn't expect her to deny this, but her expected silence gave him no pleasure at all. "At least tell me this, dammit. Whatever it is, at least tell me that Evans doesn't know either —"

"I..."

It was too fucking easy to read between the lines, and Acheron struggled with a mixture of disbelief and anger. "*The bastard knows then?*"

Pippi couldn't help flinching at Acheron's tone. "I know it looks bad," she appealed, "but it's truly not what you think —"



“How the hell would I know when you won’t say a goddamn thing?”

*“I like you.”* It took all of Pippi’s courage to say the words. “You, Acheron. Not him. *You.*”

But Acheron’s silence told her the words weren’t enough, and when he finally spoke, she realized why this was.

“I think it’s better if we give each other some space for now.” He knew how much it had cost her to say the words, but he also knew that with his temper starting to strain perilously past its leash, there was every chance for him to say things that were unnecessarily hurtful.

*He just needed some damn space, Acheron thought grimly, to work the jealous kinks out of his system.*

And for all intents and purposes, it was a good plan, if only it weren’t too easy to misconstrue. The words itself, made worse by the coldness of Acheron’s tone, had Pippi in shock. To her ears, it had sounded very much like he was asking for them to break up, and this devastated her. She had never imagined he could be so selfish and immature - so blasted unreasonably uncompromising that Pippi had an urge to throw up, realizing just what kind of man she had so willingly given liberties to her body.

“You know what?” Pippi found herself gripping her phone so tightly it was a wonder the device still hadn’t shattered. “You can have all the space you need,” she heard herself say, “and you don’t even have to get back to me after.”

Stunned at the way Pippi had suddenly hung up, it took Acheron several moments to realize how gravely she had misunderstood his words.

*FUCK.*

His anger evaporated in an instant, and all thoughts of making Pippi admit the truth were forgotten. At that moment, even having Pippi say ‘drop dead’ to his face would’ve been enough. All he wanted was the assurance that his foolish blunder hadn’t cost him the most important girl in his life.

Desperation nipped at his heels as he redialed Pippi's number, but when his call went straight to voice mail, Acheron knew she had already blocked him from contacting her. He had the ruinous urge to throw something against the wall, followed by an equally ill-advised urge to march straight into Evans' office and leave her no choice but to face him.

But if he did that, Pippi would only have more reason to despise him - and transfer her affections to someone else.

Pippi might insist on seeing Evans as harmless, but Acheron had seen the way the other man had looked at Pippi, following her like some stalker as she headed straight into the lion's den.

While Evans' track record with women might be a lot less tarnished than Acheron's, it didn't mean the man was a saint, and Acheron was damn certain the asshole wouldn't hesitate to pounce on Pippi the first chance he got.

*"Goddammit."*

The thought of any other man making a move on his woman had Acheron surging to his feet in a fit of impotent fury, and when his fist connected with the wall in one powerful blow, the frighteningly forceful sound echoed past the four corners of his office and had everyone outside jumping in their seats.

In all the years Acheron had taken up the company's reins as its CEO, this was the very first time for his employees to witness the more violent side of his nature, and they found themselves looking at each other with trepidation and not a small amount of fear.

While Acheron had never kept his checkered past a secret, his polished and impressively urbane demeanor had made it easy for everyone to forget the darker truths of his life.

This time, however, was different.

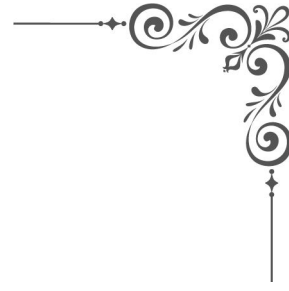
When the CEO came striding out of his office, the deadly look on his handsome face had everyone cowering, and it was only when he disappeared into his private elevator that the employees sighed in relief.

Wickham didn't bother hiding his surprise when Acheron came up to his penthouse apartment well before work hours were over.

*The last time this happened, Wickham thought, the boss had ended up hospitalized.* Then again, that was also because he had come straight from a remote region in Africa, and as far as he knew, the farthest Acheron had been to in the past few days was the picturesque beachside town of Isla de Flores.

Following Acheron inside, Wickham saw his employer yank his tie off in a rare gesture of edgy impatience, and his concern deepened into worry. "Anything I can help you with, sir?"

"Just keep everyone out of my way." He still had four hours to kill before Pippi was set to clock out, and until then, burning calories at the fucking treadmill was the only likely thing to keep him from going insane.



## Sixteen

*I THINK I'M STILL IN shock.* The words echoed endlessly in Pippi's mind while she went through the motions of acclimating herself with what would be her workplace for the next thirty days. The framed portrait of her family went to one corner while her wooden box of pens and highlighters went to another. She pulled her drawer open and started mechanically organizing the items that made up her survival kit at work. Her pad of sticky notes went to this side while her can of page tabs and metal clips went to the other. Her writing board went under this, and her dotted notebook went over that.

It was a mindless routine, which was unfortunate since this gave Pippi too much time to dwell on the four-minute conversation she had with Acheron. Even now, she had a hard time understanding how a day that had started so wonderfully could end in such a spectacularly dismal way. She had heard of relationships having its expected share of ups and downs, but surely this was too much?

Or maybe she had just been too blind and naive that she hadn't seen the trees for the forest, and Acheron really was a jerk, just like how all wealthy men—

"Everything alright there?" Her new boss had come up to her desk, a puzzled look on his good-looking face. "You don't seem yourself somehow..."

Pippi took a deep breath, preparing herself to make up some lie, but the next thing she knew, she had her boss sputtering as she burst into tears. If she hadn't been so miserable, she might even have managed a teary laugh at the stunned expression that crossed Gareth Evans' face.

*You're not alone*, Pippi wanted to say. Because she was honestly shocked at herself as well.

Pippi had been alone at home when Great-Aunt Agatha had suddenly keeled over in front of her. Terrified out of her wits, she constantly fought against the urge to go into hysterics as she called 911 and did first aid while waiting for the paramedics.

It was only after Great-Aunt Agatha had successfully undergone her operation that Pippi allowed herself the luxury of tears, and she had done so in the shower, to hide the sound of her sobs.

That was how tough...she used to be.

*Unlike now.*

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Evans," Pippi choked out. "This isn't like me at all."

"You don't say." Her boss' voice, albeit dry, held a trace of sympathy that only sent more tears trailing down her cheeks. *Oh God, to cry in public, and in front of Gareth Evans no less!*

Pippi angrily snatched a sheet of tissue to blot her tears and attend to her runny nose. *I hate you, Acheron Simonides.* But what was supposed to be a thought spurred by pain and betrayal ended up making her cry harder. She was just so *disappointed*, and when she thought of how her own family would feel even worse, since they'd be worrying about her, too

—

*Damn you, damn you, damn you.*

But most of all, she damned her heart for being so stupid.

Gareth had enough experience with women to know when they were crying over a man, which was surprisingly the case as well with his newly-hired secretary. *Will wonders never cease*, Gareth mused. He had initially thought her as someone either frigid or inexperienced, someone he would have to coax into blooming, but apparently another man had already beaten him to that.

Either way, it didn't make her any less desirable in his eyes, and these tears of hers could only work to his favor.

Seeing her sniff, he handed her a fresh sheet of tissue, intending merely to help but to his amusement, the gesture only had Pippi looking even more miserable.

And then she started apologizing again.

"I'm just so sorry, Mr. Evans. I know this is completely unprofessional of me, and I cannot apologize enough. There are just no words. It's beyond shame—"

"Relax, Ms. Jones." Gareth deliberately kept his voice light. "You're acting like you blew up the whole building when you've only blown your nose in my presence."

She let out a choking sound that also suspiciously resembled a giggle, and Gareth's lips twitched. "I hadn't pegged you to be the giggling kind."

Her boss' casual banter helped Pippi gradually regain her composure, and she could even feel the pain in her heart fading to a dull ache all the while her humor slowly restored itself. *No point in being self-conscious with him now*, Pippi thought, *after everything he's seen*.

And so she deliberately swallowed past the lump of shyness in her throat and made herself treat him like she would a member of her family. Giving him a tentative smile, she said, "I've been known to manage a chuckle here and then as well, sir."

Gareth's lips curved in appreciation of how Pippi was doing her best to overcome her reservations. "That's my girl." As expected, this had color bursting in her cheeks, and he murmured, "I'm glad to see I'm right."

Pippi wondered if she had missed something. "Right about what?"

"About your ability to blush."

*Bollocks.*

This time, the glint of sexual interest in Gareth's eyes was unmistakable, and Pippi didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Was this what it meant to jump from the pan and into the fire?  
Or maybe it was the other way around?

Either way, it was utterly insane, to have one wealthy man after another suddenly act like she was the most desirable thing within reach.

“Has Tim ever made you blush?”

“N-No.”

“Keep it that way.” He saw consternation flash in Pippi’s eyes, and he said lazily, “I like knowing that I’m the only one to have seen you blush.”

*But he wasn’t.* She almost said this out loud, too, until she realized that doing so would be pointless. They were over anyway. And so all she said was, “It’s just a blush.”

“Not when you’re the one doing it, Ms. Jones.”

Pippi bit her lip hard.

*Would it be possible to pretend that she didn’t notice him flirting—*

A low chuckle interrupted her thoughts.

“I can almost hear the gears in your mind working overtime, Ms. Jones.” A pause, then Gareth drawled, “Shall I make a guess? You were thinking if you could act like you’ve misread the situation—”

Pippi strove hard not to start blushing again, but it was impossible. *Was she really that embarrassingly easy to read?*

“For the record, Ms. Jones—” Gareth’s voice lowered to a husky caress. “You haven’t misread anything. I like you the way men have liked women - and vice versa - since the beginning of time.”

Pippi’s head reeled at how nonchalantly her new boss was admitting his attraction to her.

“You are, of course, free to respond however you wish. I’m certain you’re smart enough to know I’m not the type to force myself on women.” His gaze turned dark with promise. “But I think it’s only a matter of time—”

She started shaking her head before he had even finished speaking.

But Gareth only smiled, his self-assurance obviously unaffected by her silent rejection of his words. “We’ll see.”

“I’m not going to change my mind, Mr. Evans.”

“Because you’ve had your heart broken in a way you never expected.”

The words weren’t uttered in question, and it hurt, realizing how she had been unconsciously wearing her pain on her sleeve.

“You know what they say, Ms. Jones,” Gareth murmured. “There’s nothing like a new man to make you forget the old.”

*Not when the new one has too many similarities with the old,* Pippi thought.

If she ever trusted another man again, it would be someone so...so *poor* the only thing he owned were the clothes on his back.

Gareth’s gaze gleamed at the stubborn look on Pippi’s face. “It’s almost as if you’re daring me to prove you wrong, Ms. Jones.”

She looked at him with wide-eyed alarm, knowing how men like him tended to rise to the occasion during dares and challenges like their lives depended on it. “That is absolutely not true, sir.”

Gareth couldn’t help laughing. Never had a woman been so determined to prove her lack of interest in him, and not for the first time, he found himself wondering what kind of an idiot would give up a gem like Pippilotta Jones.

Ah, well.

It no longer mattered in any case.

The important thing now was to earn Pippi’s trust until she came to him, willingly, and preferably without clothes.

Looking back at her, he said mildly, “You should take the rest of the day off.”



Pippi immediately shook her head. “I don’t—”

He waved her protest off, saying, “I’m not doing this out of pity or for any ulterior motive. If you really want the truth, I’m doing this because I know you’re worth your weight in gold and I expect you to make efficient use of your free time.”

In other words, he was telling her that today was best forgotten, and tomorrow he expected the real Ms. Jones to show up at work - and impress the heck out of him.

“I see you get my meaning.”

“Yes, sir.” She rose to her feet. “And come tomorrow, I promise you won’t even know what hit you, Mr. Evans. You’ll just realize that you can’t even remember what your office life was like before you had me as your secretary.”

“And my lover hopefully,” he couldn’t help adding.

Pippi decided it was simply best to ignore this. Slung the straps of her bag over her shoulder, she looked at her new boss, and the usual wave of shyness struck her. But just as she had done a while ago, Pippi fought past it and even succeeded in summoning a smile that was the only slightest bit awkward.

“Thank you...for understanding.”

“What are lovers for?” But before Pippi could even think of what to say to this, he had already pointed to the door, saying, “I’ll see you tomorrow, Ms. Jones.”

Pippi couldn’t help rolling her eyes as she turned to leave. *How so like a man*, she thought wryly, *to always want to have the last word.*

The stamp on Pippi’s time card showed that she was getting off work two hours earlier than usual, and the sheer novelty of it helped further ease the ache in her heart. *Two hours*, she found herself marveling privately. Why, that was more than enough for her to indulge in watching a full-length movie in the cinemas if she wanted to.

She was so busy thinking of the ways she could best put her extra two hours to use that Pippi completely missed the

way the other secretaries exchanged sly glances among themselves as she walked past them.

That she was given a chance to leave early on her first day of work as Gareth Evans' secretary was too interesting by half, and in minutes, rumors about a possible affair between Pippi and her new boss were already spreading like wildfire.

At the lobby, Pippi had just swiped her ID to push past the metal arms of the turnstile when she noticed what seemed like an altercation between a pair of security officers and a gauntly thin woman with too-pale skin and dark circles under her eyes. Even so, the brunette had a fragile loveliness about her, and the overly loose dress she wore only added to her air of vulnerability.

Pippi hesitated, knowing that none of it was truly her concern.

*"Who the fuck do you think you are?"* the woman was screaming. *"You don't know who you're messing with. You'll regret this, I'm telling you!"*

More threats and expletives followed, and Pippi couldn't help wincing. Public relations might be her worst skill, but even she knew that swearing would never get anyone anywhere.

"We won't warn you again, ma'am. If you do not cease causing a disturbance—"

*"I am not a disturbance!"*

Pippi gnawed on her lip. This...might be too much for her to handle. And she might have left completely if not for taking one last worried look at the woman. The brunette wore a defiant expression on her face, but the way her lips trembled told a different story, and at the sight, the overly responsible side of Pippi simply took over.

In moments, she had crossed the length of the company's vast marbled lobby and introduced herself to the fierce-looking security personnel as Gareth Evans' secretary. It was name-dropping at its most shameless, but needs must, and Pippi's discomfort was slightly alleviated when the ploy

worked. The two men reluctantly stepped back and Pippi finally had a private moment to address the woman.

“Are you okay?”

“I’ve had worse.” The brunette was gingerly rubbing her wrists, and Pippi was aghast to see red circles marking the woman’s skin.

“I’m so sorry for this, Miss—”

“Amelia.”

*No last name*, Pippi couldn’t help thinking even as she gave the woman a reassuring smile. “Amelia then.” She chose her words with care afterwards, asking, “Would you mind telling me what you and security were arguing about?”

“That wasn’t arguing,” the woman retorted. “That was plain fucking bullying, and they’ll see, once they find out who I am—”

“Which is Amelia?” Pippi was starting to wonder if the woman might just be a wee bit unhinged.

“Yes, I’m that—” The woman’s tone was impatient. “But that’s not it.”

Pippi was having a hard time catching up. “You’re not Amelia?”

“I’m saying I’m Acheron Simonides’ girlfriend, and they don’t fucking believe me! They say he’s not receiving visitors, but I know—” Amelia lifted her chin, saying aggressively, “He’ll talk to me, okay? He just has to know it’s me.”

“I see.”

“Then can you get me in?”

“I...might.” Without letting herself think, Pippi pulled her phone out of her bag, all the while despising the way her fingers shook. Wickham had given her his number earlier, when everything was still...fine.

Wickham’s phone only rang once before his familiar gruff voice came down the line. “Good afternoon, Ms. Jones.”

“I’m here at the lobby with a woman named Amelia—”

“*Amy?*”

“And she says she’s Mr. Simonides’ girlfriend.”

“Ah...ah...”

The fluster in Wickham’s voice was all she needed to hear, and it felt like having the ground under her disappear. “She’s very distraught, Mr. Wickham, and she would like to see Mr. Simonides as soon as possible.”

“We’ll be right down, Ms. Jones. And—”

“Thank you, Mr. Wickham.” She ended the call, not wanting to hear any of the factotum’s no doubt well-meaning but pointless excuses.

“Was that Wick?” Amelia asked eagerly as soon as Pippi looked at her.

“It is.” And even as her world continued to crash around her, Pippi managed to say kindly, “Mr. Wickham says they’ll be right down with you.” And she needed to leave before that happened. “Is it alright if I leave you now?”

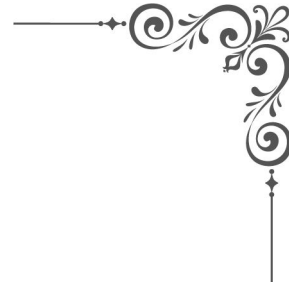
“I...guess. What’s your name again?”

Pippi pretended not to hear this, saying, “I’m just glad to be of help.” She turned to leave, but she had only managed several steps when she heard people gasping, and Pippi knew right away what it meant.

*Acheron.*

Her mind begged her to just keep walking, but she couldn’t help it. She turned, her heart beating faster and faster, and when her gaze finally found them, it was exactly what she expected, and pain once again started ripping her heart into pieces.

Amelia in his arms, sobbing against his chest, and not once did Acheron even realize that Pippi was watching them the entire time.



## Seventeen

ACHERON WAS NURSING a half-empty glass of room-temperature brandy in his hand when Wickham came out of the guest bedroom, followed by Dr. Alistair Mortensen, whose looks and build often had people asking him if he had Vikings in his family tree.

“What’s the prognosis?” Acheron asked as his long-time friend joined him at his private bar.

“Dehydration, and while I’ll need tests for actual confirmation, I suspect drug use in the past forty-eight hours.” Track marks - and their location - could say a lot about a person’s habits, when one knew what to look for.

Acheron knew a ‘but’ tone when he heard one, and his lips tightened. “There’s something else, isn’t it?”

“I also believe she’s a victim of physical abuse, most likely domestic.” Alistair paused. “But you and Wickham are already aware of this, aren’t you?”

“The three of us belonged to the same...family when we were young.”

“No need to pussyfoot on my account, Wick.” Glancing at his friend, Acheron said evenly, “She was already the big man’s mistress when Wick and I were recruited. Had been so since she was thirteen.”

Alistair bit out an expletive.

The Greek billionaire inclined his head. “My sentiments exactly.”

“If not for Amy’s interference,” Wick said heavily, “we might never have been able to leave the gang at all.”

“But she didn’t go with you,” Alistair surmised.

“*It’s too late for her.*” It was always the excuse Amelia gave Acheron every damn time he tried to convince her to start a new life, and his voice held a bitter edge as he repeated the words for his friend.

Listening to Acheron’s story, Alistair started remembering some of the oldest conversations he had with his friend, and he drew his breath when the truth eventually dawned on him. “It’s her, isn’t it?” he asked in surprise. “Amy is *Amelia*. The great love from your past that you used to talk about whenever you’re trusered.”

The all-too-British term had Acheron’s lips twisting in a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “She is an important person in my life, *ne*.”

Alistair’s puzzlement only grew. “Then shouldn’t you be happy she’s finally left the old life behind? That’s what she’s here for, isn’t it?”

“She also thinks we can resume our relationship,” Acheron revealed curtly, “and I have a feeling she’ll bolt the moment I tell her that ship’s long sailed.”

“Then just fake it until she’s strong enough to handle being on her own.” Alistair had always been a pragmatic man, and romantic feelings had never been of much importance to him.

Acheron downed the rest of his brandy in one gulp. “I can’t.”

Before Alistair could ask why, a suddenly uneasy-looking Wickham interrupted them then, saying tensely, “There’s something you should know, Mr. Simonides. Earlier, I was trying to tell you—”

“Ah, yes.” Acheron did recall Wickham making several attempts to call his attention to something, but in his concern to get Amelia away from prying eyes, he had told the other man to keep a lid on it until he had his ex-lover safely settled in his apartment. “What was it you wanted to say?”

“It’s Ms. Jones, sir.”

Acheron stiffened.

“Since I had left strict instructions that you were not to be disturbed, security had been intending to see Amy out when she started causing a disturbance. Ms. Jones witnessed their altercation——”

Acheron could feel the blood draining from his face. “*Are you saying Pippi’s seen Amelia?*”

“It’s more than that.” Wickham’s tone was heavy. “Ms. Jones chose to intervene on Amy’s behalf, and it was she who called me. She said...a woman who had introduced herself as your girlfriend——”

*FUCK.*

He excused himself from his friend, and he already had his phone out and was dialing Pippi’s number even before he reached his study. But it was as he feared, and his call went straight to voice mail once more.

GODDAMMIT.

The sickening feeling in his stomach was disturbingly familiar now, and cold sweat enveloped his skin as he thought of all the things he had to make up to Pippi. If she ended up asking for his head, he’d gladly serve it on a silver platter.

Right now, all he needed was to have her back.



IT WAS ALMOST EIGHT in the evening when Pippi got off the bus, feeling emptier than ever but thankfully dry-eyed, which was all she cared about. It hadn’t been the case when she left the office, and the hurt had just kept swelling inside of her that she had found herself running to the nearest alley.

And then she had bawled like a child.

*I should’ve known he was only messing with me.*

*I should’ve known.*

*I should’ve known.*

And with her tears showing no signs of stopping, she had decided to send Astrid a message and lied about having overtime. After that, she had walked aimlessly around town, walking and walking until she had run out of tears to cry.

*The only thing left to do now, she thought, was to make sure she could act like everything was okay.*

But when she went around the corner, Pippi realized there were other bigger things she had to worry about than keeping her family from realizing how heartbroken she was.

Things like...an ambulance blocking the main road leading to her house.

She rushed towards the paramedic standing next to the van's back doors, heart beating mad and mind racing with all sorts of heinous possibilities. She could see her home from here, and the lights peeking out of the edges of the bay window gave her a modicum of relief. That meant they were okay. That this ambulance hadn't anything to do with them. *Right?*

Pippi came up to the paramedic standing next to the ambulance. "Excuse me. Sir?" The man was tall and powerfully built, with his uniform emphasizing the impressive breadth of his shoulders. *Definitely a shoo-in for Sexiest Paramedic Alive*, Pippi thought absently.

When the paramedic finally turned to face her, Pippi had to crane her neck to look into his eyes, which were the only thing his surgical mask didn't cover. "Is anyone seriously hurt?"

The paramedic stepped close, and she had the strangest feeling that he seemed awfully familiar. His height, his build, his hair—

*Oh.*

Her eyes widened, and almost as if this had been the cue he was waiting for, the paramedic took another step closer, near enough for Pippi to hear him ask behind his mask, "Could we talk?"

Pippi shouldn't have been shocked, but she was, and it made the next few minutes a blur. Somehow, she ended up



following Acheron into the back of the ambulance and collapsing in the paramedic seat while Wickham shut the doors close before taking the wheel.

Even the sound of the engine running and seeing her house's window as the vehicle drove past, it felt like nothing but illusions. It was only when she saw Acheron, who of course looked at home in his paramedic uniform (*was there nothing in this world that didn't suit the man?*), crouching down in front of her that shock finally lost its paralytic grip on her body, and all the blasted memories came hurtling back in.

"No!" Pippi shrank back in instinctive protest the moment Acheron tried reaching for her hands. How could he even think she would let him touch her, after everything?

Acheron's jaw clenched at her show of rejection, but what hurt him even more was the look of fear and pain in her eyes. "I know I've fucked up more than once today, and I'm sorry for it."

Pippi fought against the sound of pain she heard in his voice. *He's lying. Lying. Lying!*

"I despise myself for it, and if I had known how things would turn out—"

"Like me finding out you have a girlfriend?" she cut in unevenly.

"Amelia isn't my girlfriend." His tone was harsh, and his hard gaze captured hers as if demanding Pippi to see the truth in them.

Her chest heaved, and she turned her head sharply away. *No more*, she thought doggedly. *I'm over trusting this guy.*

"I'm not lying, Pippi."

"I don't care. It's not my right to care—"

"It is, damn you." She looked so damn blank, but now he could see past it, and he knew just how much she was hurting...because of him. "Amelia—"

"Don't you call her 'Amy'?" she couldn't help asking with a masochistic sense of bitterness.

“Wickham and the others call her that,” he bit out. “But I never did.” His voice became level. “I’ve never been the one to use nicknames.”

*And yet he called her Pippi.*

The thought had her wanting to cry in sheer despair. *Stop fooling yourself. Stop trying to make excuses for him. Just stop!*

“I just need you to listen to me.”

The words were met with stoic silence, and he knew it was her way of shutting him out.

“Amelia and I go a long way back.”

Not a single flicker of emotion in her blank blue eyes, but he saw past this, too. The silence was to mask the pain, and because he knew he was the cause of it, Acheron forced himself to do the one thing that he had once sworn he would never admit.

“She saved me...from being...” He tried to say it. But he couldn’t. And when he heard her gasp, and saw her eyes starting to water, he realized that she already knew.

“I’m so sorry, Acheron.”

She was no longer silent, no longer blank, but even though this was what he wanted, a part of him already wanted to erase the words.

Just saying them out loud made Acheron want to throw up in remembered fear.

People who liked to play the victim card were the people who had never been one.

You only had to be a victim once, and you would never be able to forget how it was, no matter how much you tried.

You only had to feel powerless once, and you would never wish to speak it again.

Once was all it took.

Just once.

And even the vaguest memories of it would be enough to kill you—

“Please. Stop. It’s enough. Please.”

A whisper yanked him out of the darkness, and he heard himself gasp and open eyes that he hadn’t even remembered closing.

Pippi watched Acheron turn his gaze to hers, and the haunted look in them nearly destroyed her.

“Have I told you...everything?”

The controlled tightness of his voice said so, so much, and Pippi bit her lip hard. “You did.” Her tone shook, and her heart proved to be just as unwieldy, having lost so many pieces to Acheron’s pain that it could no longer remember the proper way to beat.

He remained kneeling before her, her very own beautiful Greek god, but for once she was blind to his perfection. For once, she couldn’t see him. Her mind was still drowning in the abyss of his past, and all she could see was a motherless fifteen-year-old boy, holding a knife under his pillow, because the monsters were real, and every night, there was that one chance they could get him for good.

“Don’t look at me like that.” Acheron’s tone was savage. “I don’t want your pity, dammit.”

“Good.” Pippi fought hard to keep her tone steady, knowing that anything less would be misconstrued. “Because you don’t have it.”

“I only needed you to understand why I can’t turn Amelia away.”

“I know.”

Relief had Acheron breathing hard.

“And I can’t thank her enough—”

His head jerked up, his stunned gaze flying to hers.

“Because if it hadn’t been for her, you w-wouldn’t be here, and I’d never be so lucky to m-meet—” Her voice caught.

*“You.”*

*Ah, God.*

She really was the loveliest little thing, but even knowing that she deserved better, even knowing he could only dirty someone like her -

He just couldn't let her go.



## Eighteen

“THIS IS SO WEIRD,” she couldn’t help remarking an hour later. The two of them sat next to each other on the stretcher while enjoying their drive-thru meal of burgers, fries, and shakes. She couldn’t remember feeling any happier. It was the best date ever, but it was also the strangest, since they *were* at the back of an ambulance van.

“Are you sure we’re not depriving anyone of medical assistance while we’re using this?”

Acheron gave her an odd look. “This is mine.”

*“You have your own ambulance?”*

“Only as of today,” he answered with a shrug. “I thought it would make a good investment, considering the current nature of our relationship.”

Pippi couldn’t stop her head from reeling. “Are you saying you bought this today just—?”

“I promised, didn’t I? No risks.”

A helpless laugh escaped her. “Oh, Acheron—ah!” Her words ended in a gasp as she suddenly found herself in a straddling position, and she, of course, was riding him.

“I love it when you say my name.” His mouth nuzzled the side of her neck as he spoke, and Pippi’s head fell back at the tantalizing sensation. “But I love it even more when I’m able to make you...”

His head moved up without warning, his tongue licking the curve of her ear, and she buckled against him.

“*Aaah!*”

“Scream.”

*Blast this man.*

She tried to pull away, but Acheron only released a lazy chuckle that had her spine tingling. “Let go—” They weren’t alone, for God’s sake, and it would be one time too many if Wickham were to witness her melting in his arms again. “Acheron, come on—” Pippi broke off as his lips reached the corner of her lips.

“Kiss me, *mikrī mou.*”

Oh dear God.

The command in his words was exquisitely undeniable, and instead of repelling her, it only had her toes curling, her already pliant flesh swelling. It was as if he knew exactly what to say and how to say it to make her bow to him, and even as she struggled to deny his power over her body—

“Now, woman.”

The rough steel in his voice was her undoing - it seemed to say, *you know better than to disobey the man who owns you* - and wrong or not, this blatant dominance demolished her control the way nothing else could.

With a whimper of surrender, she found herself falling forward, her arms locking around his neck just as their mouths fused. Instinct took over, and she found herself sucking hungrily on his tongue.

It had been so, so, so long!

With Pippi’s passionate and unconditional surrender threatening to erode Acheron’s own control, he managed to bang a hand against the thin wall that separated the van’s treatment area from the driver’s section. It was enough for Wickham, and he quickly made a turn towards the nearest parking lot.

As soon as Acheron heard Wickham’s door close, effectively leaving him alone with Pippi, the shackles were off, and he found a way to insert his hand between their bodies

without breaking their kiss. His fingers found the edge of her skirt, and he pushed them up until he encountered sweet, drenched silk.

*Finally.*

He reached the hem of her panties and dipped his fingers behind her underwear the way he would dip into the sweetest bowl of honey. The whimper he elicited from Pippi was aphrodisiac for his ears, and his fingers slowly trailed down. When he felt her flesh literally quiver under his touch, his own body clenched with need.

*Theo.*

She was so damn wonderfully sensitive.

He managed to find the strength to tear his mouth off her, and ignoring her mewl of protest, he captured her gaze, wanting and needing to see Pippi's face as he possessed her.

Acheron slowly thrust one finger in, and every inch he claimed had her face mirroring her every delectable thought

—

“*Oh...*” Her cheeks turning pink -

“*God...*” Her lips parting -

“*Acheron...*” And finally, as his finger sank knuckle-deep into her, he saw her blue eyes turn cloudy with need just as her head fell back and she began to pant.

It was the most beautifully erotic sight in the world, and Acheron wanted more of it.

He started thrusting his finger in and out, slowly at first, and as he felt her flesh gradually ease, he increased the pace. He listened to her breathing, using it as his cue, and only when she seemed to start relaxing did he slide another finger in, and it started all over again.

Her eyes rolling back, her body shuddering, her breathless panting—

And as his fingers moved faster and faster, her hips began to move as well, until she was clutching his shoulders as she

started to ride him.

*Ah God.*

He stared at her like a starved man would a feast, his balls tightening with desire as she started grinding her pussy harder against his crotch, as if willing his fingers to go deeper and deeper—

And then she screamed, her back arching as she came all over his still-thrusting fingers.

By the time Pippi came back to her senses, Wickham was already pulling over in front of his house, and she had become belatedly aware of one infinitely embarrassing thing. “*Oh my God.*” Her frantic gaze flew to his. “I can smell it, Acheron.”

“Is that so?” Acheron had a hard time keeping his face impassive. Even though lovemaking did always have its own scent, he had never had a woman say such a thing. *He should simply have expected that Pippi would be the first one to speak of it*, Acheron thought with amusement.

“Do you think Wickham would notice?” she asked worriedly as she saw Wickham go around the ambulance to open the back doors.

“Not at all,” Acheron lied without a qualm. “So stop worrying about it.”

“You promise?”

“He won’t even blink.” He pulled her close as the doors opened, and as he pressed a kiss to the top of her head, he met Wickham’s gaze with a warning glint in his eyes. *Don’t fucking react to anything.*

Wickham managed to nod even as he fought against the urge to snicker and smirk. *Ms. Jones had struck again*, he thought in amusement. It was only a matter of time before this woman had the boss on bended knee and swallowing every cynical, disparaging word he had uttered against holy matrimony.

Pippi couldn’t help peeking at Wickham’s face as Acheron helped her down, and she breathed a secret sigh of relief when



she saw the older man's benign expression. He definitely wouldn't look like that if he had noticed the musky scent tingeing the air inside the ambulance. *Right?*

As Acheron walked her to the door, Pippi made sure to keep her fingers around the straps of her bag, not wanting to accidentally risk touching him. There might not be anyone around at this time of the night, but who knew how many of her neighbors were spying on them from the safety of their living rooms?

Pippi's innate shyness kicked in as they made it to her doorstep, and even though she badly wanted to ask him in, the words seemed stuck in her throat. She cleared her throat. *Come on, Pippi.* She looked up at him. *Just ask if he wants to come in.* She took a deep breath.

“Sooooooooooooooooo...”

And that was it.

That was her honest best.

And now she wanted to face-palm herself to death.

*Really, Pippi, really?*

Acheron hadn't any trouble interpreting the play of expressions on Pippi's face, and he couldn't help smirking as her face contorted with a half-desperate, half-revolted grimace. She clearly wanted to invite him in, but just as clear was how her shyness wouldn't stand for it.

Taking pity on her, he said soothingly, “It's okay, *mikrī mou*. I'll talk to you later, alright?”

She could only nod, realizing how uncannily good the billionaire was at reading her every thought.

“One day,” Acheron murmured, “I'll earn the right to kiss you goodnight, and when I do, I'll make sure it's a sight your neighbors will never forget.”

*Err...what?*

But by the time she recovered from her shock, he had already turned away and was striding back into the ambulance.

In a blink of an eye, he was gone, but the heart-thumping, body-throbbing force of his presence lingered so that Pippi still found herself floating in cloud nine as she let herself in.

As she headed up the stairs, amative flashbacks started playing in her mind, so agonizingly vivid that by the time she made it to the shower, she was already blushing and her whole body was once again aching for his touch.

It was just so scary, how addictive lovemaking could be.

*And to think they actually hadn't had sex yet*, Pippi found herself fretting as the cold blast of water failed to douse the sexual heat licking all over her body. She didn't even want to imagine how much worse it would get, when - and not if - Acheron finally made her his.

Vik was waiting for her when Pippi came out of the shower. She had in her arms a fresh change of linen and towels, all of which she promptly dumped on her unsuspecting sister. "Monarch Room, please."

"Oh. Um. Okay." One of the unspoken rules of the house was that Pippi, being the one with the full-time job, was only expected to pitch in during weekends. "Does this mean we're fully booked on a Thursday?"

"For the entire week," Vik confirmed with a grin.

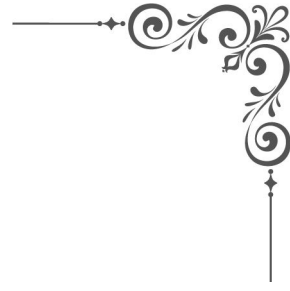
"That's great news!" Pippi's spirits immediately lifted. While her pay raise already had next month's loan installment covered, having additional savings never hurt, and she found herself beaming ear to ear as she made her way down to the Monarch Room.

It was the house's biggest and therefore most expensive room, with its en-suite bath having its own whirlpool bath. It had been one of their biggest investments, but since it had also become the key to having Mariposa House featured in last year's Top 10 B&Bs in Key West, Pippi considered the luxury installment money well spent.

Pausing before the door, she knocked politely before calling out, "Housekeeping." Hearing the approach of footsteps, she quickly pinned her professional smile in place.

The door opened.

Pippi's smile disappeared in the face of her shock.  
*"Acheron?"*



## Nineteen

“*Kalimera, mikrí mou.*” The words, whispered to her ear in a sexy, sleep-rough tone, jerked Pippi out of her dreams. It almost sounded like there was a man sleeping next to her, and the thought had her eyes flying open.

*Oh. My. God.*

There *was* a man lying next to her. He was beautiful and completely naked. He was also smirking at her, and it was this that had her sitting up in shock, her head whipping to this side and that as she struggled to comprehend what she had woken up to. This couldn’t be real, could it?

She looked around her again and found her answer in the faded colors of butterfly wing patterns on the wallpaper. They were lovely and familiar, a charming trademark of the Monarch Room, but more than that, it also meant all of this was...*real.*

Almost on cue, one tanned, strong hand curved around her nape to pull her close. Pippi had the quickest glimpse of a bare-chested Acheron, the sheets having fallen to his waist, and then his lips were covering hers, and there wasn’t any time to think again.

His tongue demanded entry, and her lips immediately gave way. It was an intensely possessive kiss, the kind that left no space for her to think. All she could do was submit, and when he finally lifted his head, she was only able to gaze up at him dazedly, a part of her still reeling from the hard, beautiful reality of having Acheron next to her in bed.

She couldn’t be...she couldn’t have...she couldn’t...

But then memories, made undeniable by their utter vividness, began crowding her mind, and Pippi cringed.

*Oh no.*

Everything was coming back to her now, and oh, how innocent it had started.

*I've leased the whole place,* he had told her so very casually, like it was normal for people to rent entire B&Bs on a whim.

*If everyone's already in bed as you say they are, he had cajoled, then can you not sleep in my arms tonight?*

*And she had said actually said yes,* Pippi recalled with another cringe. When she should've said no and run away as fast as she could, she had instead said yes to spending the night with him, and after that, it had been just one shock after another.

*Is it alright with you that I prefer to sleep naked?*

*WHAT?*

But by then it had been too late. Acheron had already stepped out of the shower and was in the process of unwrapping the teensy weensy white towel around his hips. And when the fluffy piece of fabric had fallen to the ground, her jaw had fallen along with it.

While she was no saint and had seen her fair share of porn, Pippi had never seen any man naked in person...and when she had blurted out as much to Acheron, she had been doubly amazed to see his already-huge cock grow even larger and longer.

*'That's monstrous.'* She had whispered the words unthinkingly, and her face had flamed as soon as she realized she had spoken her thought out loud. She had started to apologize, but the words had died in her throat the moment she saw the look in his eyes.

It had been that look again, only it had been so much wilder. He hadn't just wanted to eat her. Last night, it had

seemed like he had wanted to devour her, but as much as the realization terrified her, it had excited her, too—

And Acheron had known it.

*'Come here.'* An arrogant crook of his fingers that should've incensed her, but it had only made Pippi feel light-headed as a creamy rush of moisture had her silk panties soaking wet in seconds.

Her every step had been a struggle, her heart hammering so hard she had barely heard anything over it. *Naked. Alone. Room.* The words had made her feel dizzy, and she had felt like she was walking on a tightrope. By the time she finally reached Acheron, she was a trembling, wet mess, and when she felt his hands on her shoulders, gently pushing her down in a silent command to make her kneel—

She had done so without a qualm, her breasts actually swelling with shameless anticipation at what could happen now that she was on her knees.

*'Would you like to learn how to pleasure this monster, mikri mou?'*

If anyone else had uttered the words, it would have sounded ludicrous and cartoonish. But because it had been Acheron Simonides saying them - *to her* - the words had only made Pippi's nipples tighten with burning need.

*Answer me, Pippi.*

*Do you want my cock in your mouth?*

Looking up into his black-as-midnight eyes, she had only been able to whisper, *'Yes'*.

Yes, she had wanted to learn how to pleasure him.

Yes, she had wanted his cock in her mouth.

*Yes, yes, yes!*

And so his cock had gone into her mouth, and it had been nothing like she imagined. Velvet and steel, salt and earth, raw and masculine - all the splendid things that made one a man. With every drop of his pre-cum flavoring her tongue, she had

felt her head spinning faster and faster, her control slipping further and further until all her thoughts were gone, and the only thing left was the soft, rough feel of his manhood sliding back and forth against her lips——

*STOP!*

Pippi hastily reined her thoughts in the moment she felt telltale wetness pooling between her thighs. Oh dear Lord, to be aroused by mere memories——

“Reliving last night, *mikrī mou?*” Acheron asked silkily, having detected the sudden flush in her cheeks.

“*L-Last night?*” The shrillness of her voice made Pippi cringe anew. “What do you mean? There’s nothing about last night to relive——”

“Is that so?” Acheron drawled. “Then perhaps I need to refresh your memory...”

She saw him leaning towards her and panicked. “Actually, I do remember after all, and they’re all sufficiently shameless and lewd, thank you very much.”

Acheron threw his head back with a laugh.

“It’s not funny,” she muttered. “I don’t even know how I’ll ever be able to look at myself in the mirror——”

“We didn’t do anything wrong, baby,” he cut her off gently.

“But I *slept* with you.”

“Slept being the operative word.”

“And you were *nude!*”

“Which isn’t a crime,” he countered.

“*Even so!*”

He rubbed his jaw, saying, “I guess that means you’re not amenable to sharing the shower——” She was out of the room in a flash, and just as the door closed, he caught a glimpse of her accidentally bumping into a groggy-looking Rue.

A moment later, he heard Pippi moan, followed by the unmistakable sound of Rue's voice saying very loudly, *OH MY GOD, PIPPI JUST CAME OUT OF ACHERON'S ROOM!*

This had him heading to the shower with a grin, and when Acheron came down to join the Jones family for breakfast, he was further amused to see the others weren't done ribbing their big sister. Even Astrid had joined in the fun, with the older woman asking Pippi so very innocently, "Would you like some sausages, dear - or have you already had your fill?"

*"Oh my God, MOM!"*

It had everyone in tears, but what truly had the whole family nearly falling off their seats was when Acheron joined the conversation. His handsome face grave, he turned to Astrid, saying, "You have my word that your daughter shall never go hungry for, err, sausages—"

*"Acheron, my God!"*

The look on Pippi's face was priceless, and as there was nothing like a common enemy - or, in this case, a common person to torment - to create strong bonds, by the time Acheron and Pippi had to leave for work, it was as if he was already one of them.

Rue made him promise to help her with schoolwork, Astrid insisted on giving him a packed lunch similar to Pippi's, and even her impudent trio of aunts had their moment, with Acheron given a list of what they wanted for tonight's dinner.

*It was, all in all, a good way to start the day,* Acheron reflected as he followed Pippi out of the house. Even her neighbors were a rather nice bunch, with the widow living across the street understandably giving him the evil eye the moment she saw him place his hand on the small of Pippi's back.

"Your neighbor looks like she's just one scowl away from calling 911 and reporting an abduction," he murmured.

"Well, you *did* choose a rather disreputable-looking disguise." A smile tugged at her lips as she looked at him. Fake, greasy, shoulder-length grey hair and a Jesus Christ



beard, a metal choker and ripped jeans - he definitely didn't look anything like his usual self. "What exactly are you supposed to be anyway?" she couldn't help asking. "Mel Gibson turns aging rockstar?"

"Good description," he acknowledged, "but as it's also better to keep things simple, just think of me as Mr. William Harney, a struggling writer hoping to find inspiration in Isla de Flores."

"That's your idea of a writer?" The sound of Pippi's laughter trailed after her as she stepped inside Wickham's car rental for the day, a ten-year-old Toyota with peeling faux leather seats and a Care Bears sticker on its rear windshield.

As Wickham turned the car around, Acheron saw one of Pippi's aunts coming out and waving at the suspicious-looking neighbor, effectively distracting the latter.

Smart of her, but more importantly, it also spoke volumes of how natural it was for Pippi's family to protect each other... unlike his own flesh and blood.

Pippi was startled when Acheron suddenly drew her close and felt his lips touch the top of her head. When she looked up at him in askance, he said rather gruffly, "I like your family a lot, *mikrī mou*."

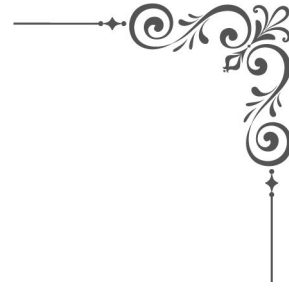
Acheron felt a mixture of emotions at seeing Pippi's whole face light up at his words. The sight unintentionally reminded him of the many times his former lovers had looked him the same way, but they had only done so because he had gifted them with something extravagant.

But Pippi was different.

She had always been different, but whether that was a good thing or not...

*Allá ti ēi moi taùta perí drun ē perí pétrēn*, Acheron thought. It was a Greek saying similar to the English proverb that spoke of people making mountains out of molehills, and right now that was exactly what he intended to stop doing.

For now, it was best to take things one fucking day at a time.



## Twenty

PIPPI HAD FACED A GREAT many challenges in her career, but as it turned out, none of them proved as problematic as going to work with a secret. *Especially since that secret happened to be a six-foot-plus Greek billionaire that went by the name of Acheron Simonides.*

She had never really noticed it before, but his name and face seemed plastered everywhere in the building, and every time she saw either, her heart would stupidly skip a beat, and her guilt levels would shoot up like a rocket. It just didn't seem right, to feel so deliciously alive simply because she had seen her boyfriend's name printed on company letterheads.

But that was how it was, and every time she thought about it - Acheron Simonides was now her *boyfriend* - even her cheeks would fail her, turning as pink as carnations at the drop of a hat. In fact, the same thing had happened just a few minutes ago. She had been waiting in line to get her free coffee from the espresso machine, quietly minding her own business, when her gaze had absently encountered the company newsletter the man in front of her had tucked under his arm. It had been carelessly rolled up, but even so, there was just enough of the headline for her to read—

*CEO Acheron Simonides Awarded...*

And that was it.

Her cheeks had turned pink, her heart had skipped a beat, and she had been so flustered at how silly she was acting that she didn't realize her inordinate reaction had all the other guys around her reacting rather foolishly as well. A blushing Ms.

Pippilotta Jones proved to be too much of an irresistible sight, and the men around her only had one thought in mind. *Am I the one making her blush?*

The way her long, slender fingers shook a little hadn't escaped their notice either, and it only reinforced the men's opinions that it could only be one of them responsible for making the normally unflappable Ms. Jones appear, well, *flappable*.

By the time she left, news had already spread throughout Simonides Inc. about Ms. Jones having fallen in love, and it could be one of the eight men that happened to be in the 30th floor hallway while she was getting a cup of coffee.

But Pippi being Pippi, she remained clueless to the rumors flying all around her, and while she did notice the odd, speculative glance that Mr. Evans had subjected her to upon returning to the office, she simply put this down to being one of her new boss' quirks and chucked it out of her mind right after.

There was much work to do, and more importantly, there was that *talk* she knew she had to have with Acheron as soon as possible. If the past few days had taught her anything, it was how crucial it was that they be open with each other.

*No matter what.*

"*Incredible.*" Mr. Evans' disbelieving murmur broke into her thoughts, and Pippi glanced up in time to see her boss reach for the remote control to switch the overhead TV on. But instead of flipping to the business news channel like he always did, Mr. Evans surfed his way to...*Society Gossip?*

Pippi hadn't even known such a channel existed.

"Have you heard about this?"

"About what, sir?" Her gaze went back to the TV, and her eyes widened when she realized the paparazzi was actually crowding the entrance to their building. They hadn't been there earlier, but clearly something had happened to change this.

“The girl you helped yesterday,” Gareth supplied. “Her name is Amelia Martinez. She used to be the mistress of a rather-infamous gang leader.”

Pippi started feeling nauseated for some reason. “Used to be?”

“He’s dead now. His body was found just an hour ago, but they say he’s been dead for days - murdered, actually. His second-in-command, who also happens to be the prime suspect, has since taken command of the family business.”

A breaking news update had both of them returning their attention to the TV, and Pippi jerked involuntarily when the program suddenly flashed an honest-to-goodness mug shot of Amelia on the screen.

*Girlfriend of the late Anthony Nolasco since her early teens...*

*Escaped the gang at least a week ago...*

*Police believes she was not involved in the plot to oust Nolasco.*

*No statement so far from Martinez, who is believed to be currently hiding in the penthouse of Greek billionaire Acheron Simonides. The tycoon’s involvement with the gang in his teenage years is common knowledge and took place well before his identity as the true heir to the Simonides fortune was verified by court documents and DNA tests.*

*Old friends of the two insist that Ms. Martinez and Mr. Simonides had a relationship in their younger years, and speculations now turn to the possibility of a rekindling of their romance.*

Gareth switched the TV off as soon as the program went on a commercial break. “That is the girl you helped, isn’t she?”

Pippi nodded.

“I heard she supposedly referred to herself as Simonides’ girlfriend.”

“She did, yes.” It was strangely painful to say the words, but Pippi managed to get them out in a neutral voice. “Mr. Simonides also personally came down to meet with her.” The added statement only made the hurt worsen, but she found herself actually relishing the pain like some masochist. Stupid or not, it made her feel strong.

*Just face the pain like a big girl, and remember that it's you in Acheron's life now.*

Gareth waited for the usual gushing to commence, as it always did where women and Acheron Simonides were concerned, but instead he saw his secretary return to work like her brief encounter with the enigmatic CEO didn't matter at all.

It had him blinking and considering what he earlier thought was impossible. Could the rumors be true then? He had initially dismissed this morning's rumors about Pippi crushing on one of the sales managers working on the same floor. Young, cocky, selfish, spoiled brats - all of them had been typical of today's younger generation, and neither he nor Simonides certainly had anything in common with them.

It would be somewhat disappointing if Ms. Jones' taste in men ended up running along those lines, but perhaps it was also for the best, considering the proposal he had yet to bring up with her.

“Ms. Jones?”

Pippi immediately straightened in her seat. “Yes, sir?”

“There's been some delays with Excalibur Park, and I may have a need for your services longer than expected...”



“UN-FUCKING-BELIEVABLE.” Acheron scowled at the real-time footage coming from their CCTV cameras, which showed paparazzi still clamoring for a chance to interview Amelia about Anthony Nolasco's murder. “Didn't you tell me our legal team was on top of this already?” They were supposed to keep Amelia's name out of the press, dammit.

“They were, sir.” Charlie’s voice was strained. While it wasn’t the first time for the billionaire to lose his temper in Charlie’s presence, it still had him quaking in his boots and looking for the nearest exit in case things went south. “The leak about his death came straight from the police. A reporter was able to sweet talk the information out of a first responder...”

“Fuck.”

Wickham saw Charlie literally jump in his boots and, taking pity on the boy, he nodded the secretary’s dismissal and waited until they were alone before speaking again. “Amy still doesn’t have any access to the TV or Internet, and even if she were to look outside the window and see them, we can simply say it’s because news about her being your girlfriend—”

“No.” Acheron’s tone was clipped. “It can’t be that. Have P.R. spin something else - anything but that.”

Wickham’s eyes twinkled momentarily in amusement. “Afraid of little Ms. Jones’ reaction?”

“After what happened yesterday?” Acheron didn’t even bother hiding the truth. “*Hell, yes.*”

“As you should be,” Wickham murmured, “considering what everyone’s been talking about...”

While Acheron had been cooped up inside his office, rumors of Pippilotta Jones’ presently unfolding romance had also made its way to the 37th floor. The first to get wind of it were the ladies working at reception, and after them were the secretaries, who of course shared the interesting bit of news with the executives they reported to.

Wickham had gone to Acheron’s office to inform the younger man of this, only to be sidetracked when he learned of the press’ sudden and intense interest in Amy.

“She’s been asking for you, by the way,” Wickham said gruffly.

Acheron’s face turned inscrutable. “I expected as much.”

“She knows you’re avoiding her.”

“I’ll speak to her soon,” Acheron said finally. “But until then...”

Wickham nodded in understanding at the silent command. He would keep Amelia off the boss’ back while making sure to keep the press away from Amelia as well.

“How is she, by the way?”

“Going cold turkey - especially when it’s being forced on you - is never easy.” He saw pain flicker in Acheron’s eyes, and Wickham frowned. “Stop blaming yourself. She made her own choices, and now she’s paying the price for them.” While Wickham still thought of Amelia as a dear old friend, he wasn’t blind to the woman’s faults like Acheron was. She might have helped save their lives, but an angel she was absolutely not.

Seeing the billionaire still looking grim, Wickham decided it was time to spice things up a little. “There’s been a rumor going around about Ms. Jones,” he drawled. The effect was instantaneous, with Acheron bristling. *Good*. That was much healthier than having the boy mope about because of old flames.

Wickham handed his phone to the CEO. “It’s a screenshot of one of your employees’ chat groups. See for yourself.”

Several seconds passed, and then Acheron started cursing up a storm. Wickham burst into laughter.

*“What the fuck?”*

The whole company thought Pippi was in love with one of those idiots?

The billionaire’s first instinct was to have Charlie issue a company-wide memorandum.

*To: All male employees of Simonides Incorporated*

*Re: Pippilotta Jones*

*Subject above is property of the CEO.*

*So fuck off.*

If Acheron weren't so damn sure such a letter would also cause Pippi to break up with him, he would already have Charlie print it for his signature.

Wickham's amusement grew at the billionaire's visible frustration. *Good for you, Ms. Jones. Keep this one on his toes so he wouldn't have any time left for the other girl.*

Acheron waited until the older man had left his office before taking his phone out to send Pippi a message.

Acheron: *Do you have time to meet for lunch, mikri mou?*

Pippi: *No.*

*Fuck.* Pippi becoming monosyllabic was never a good sign, and his fingers paused mid-air as he considered the best way to broach the topic about Amelia.

Acheron: *Have you watched the news lately?*

Pippi: *Is that your way of asking whether I know about Amelia?*

Acheron: *It's my way of reminding you that the press makes money from spinning lies.*

Pippi: *They think you're getting back with your ex.*

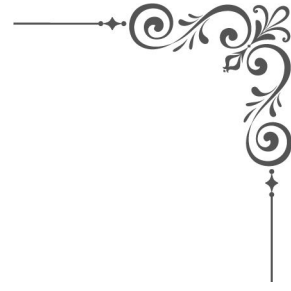
Acheron: *I'm not. And they're only saying that because they don't know about us.*

Pippi: ...

Acheron: *You are my woman now, Pippilotta Jones.*

A full minute passed, and yet his phone remained frustratingly silent.





## Twenty-One

“*KALIMERA, MIKRÍ MOU.*”

Acheron’s husky voice as he woke her, the toe-curling kiss that followed right after, and even the way his strong arms clasped her body as he rolled Pippi on her back...

It had only been *four* days since she had started sleeping in Acheron’s bed, but everything was so devastatingly familiar now. *Four days*, Pippi thought drowsily just before succumbing to the billionaire’s passion, and yet so much of her life - so much of *herself* even - had changed.

As the movement of Acheron’s lips started moving with unconcealed urgency, the thought of pretending she had the ability to resist him didn’t even cross her mind. His tongue entering her mouth was all it took these days for her body to respond, and the moment his hands roamed over her, the possessive dominance of his touch made her flesh all too submitting, her breasts swelling to fit his palms and her nipples puckering for his kiss.

Every night, he would teach her to make love, and she would listen and learn, over and over, the master educating his eager pupil until all inhibitions had been shed and her own hands exulted in their right to touch him.

Acheron had pretty much made sure of that, with the way he held nothing back every time Pippi mustered the courage to pleasure him. The look on his face, the sound of his groans, the feel of his big, hard body jerking at a mere brush of her fingers - all of it went to her head until there was no space left for doubts or fears.

Acheron Simonides hungered for her.

And this time, there was nothing to keep her from indulging him.

*“Theo, Pippi.”* Acheron’s voice turned hoarse as Pippi pushed him to his back. She climbed up to him until she was straddling his hips, and her lips curved in a *Mona Lisa* smile at the way his dark gaze intently followed the sway of her breasts under her nightshirt.

“You’re getting too damn good at this,” he muttered.

“And you’re complaining?” she asked teasingly.

“Hell, no.” His guttural tone had her laughing, and Acheron shuddered at the sound. “Even your laugh turns me on—” He stopped speaking when he saw Pippi slithering down his body. *“Fuck.”* And then he felt it, her mouth taking the entire length of his manhood. “FUCK.”

He strove to control his pleasure, but the way she sucked and stroked his dick already had Acheron’s balls tightening in mere minutes. His beautiful Pippi was blowing him like making him cum was one of the top to-dos in her checklist, and all the blood in his body rushed to his head at the delicious thought.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck!*

He could already feel it coming...

*“You gotta let go now, baby...”*

But this only made her suck harder on the head of his cock.

*“FUCK.”*

He managed to raise himself on his elbows just as a massive shudder racked his body, and as he watched her swallow every drop as if she couldn’t get enough of his cum - it was just too fucking much.

Acheron found himself gripping her head as he shoved his cock all the way down to her throat, over and over until he was all spent and unable to remember feeling anything but the moist warmth of Pippi’s mouth.

Minutes that felt like years must have passed when he felt his still-erect manhood slowly slip out of her mouth, and Acheron pried his eyes open.

Pippi had risen to her knees, strawberry-blond locks cascading down her shoulders and her shapely breasts threatening to spill out of her loose nightshirt. He saw her lick her lips, as if savoring the taste of his cum—

*Now that, he thought, was just plain fucking hot.*

“I’ve just been thinking and reflecting...” Pippi’s openly laughing gaze was in direct contrast to the natural sultriness of her kiss-swollen lips, and the contradiction beguiled him beyond words.

“You know you’ve 100% corrupted me, don’t you?”

“Have I?”

Acheron deliberately feigned skepticism, and his lips twitched when Pippi shot him a droll look at his words.

“Like there’s any possibility you could still have doubts... when I can do this...” Pippi gently pressed her index finger against the still-wet slit on the head of his cock, and the billionaire groaned with renewed need.

Having his shy little Ms. Jones turn into a sassy siren in bed was something Acheron could never get enough of, and knowing that she only showed this side to him...

*The whole world would have to go to hell first before he allowed another man to see Pippi this way, Acheron thought savagely.*

“I think you’ve turned me into a slut, Mr. Simonides.” The words, uttered in a throaty murmur, had him yanking her close, but this only had mischief dancing in her bright blue eyes even as she tumbled down on him, palms landing on his naked chest in an effort to keep herself upright.

“You’re driving me crazy, woman,” he growled.

*“Am I?”*

It was her turn to sound skeptical, and the irony wasn't lost on him. "Well played, Ms. Jones." Acheron's tone was pleasant, but the gleam in his eyes promised retribution.

*Uh oh*, Pippi thought, but like all idiots were, she was more excited than frightened.

"And so to reward you, it would only be fitting to return the favor..."

His fingers found its way under her shirt as he spoke, and Pippi stiffened.

*Oh dear Looooooooooooord....*

It was Pippi's turn to lose her mind as his fingers found the creamy slit between her folds. "Oh God. Oh God, *Acheron*. It's so—*ah!*" Two of his fingers had thrust deep into her without warning, and she couldn't help arching her back even as her knees sank down on the bed.

"Ride me," he rasped.

"*Yeeees.*" She practically scrambled to do his bidding, riding the billionaire as he so explicitly commanded her. Her every thought was focused on obeying him...and her man knew this. He knew, and the knowledge threatened to mess with Acheron's head all over again.

*Theo*, but he loved how biddable she was in bed, loved how she responded so freely. He loved just about everything she did - the way she bounced on his fingers, the way she sobbed and begged while her hips moved wildly in a desperate attempt to get his fingers to break past her hymen—

*Acheron, please.*

*Please.*

*I just want it so bad!*

But his grip on her hips didn't ease, and because she was no match for either his strength or the expert movement of his fingers, she was soon crying out, her whole world turning upside down at the acute, ardent force of her climax.

Minutes, the exact number of which completely escaped Pippi, must have passed by the time Pippi gradually reclaimed her senses. She heard the sound of the shower running and knew she should be doing the same. If she didn't get moving now, there was every chance they would be late for—

“Your panties are on the floor, Pip.”

“*AAAH!*” Pippi sat up with a cry of shock, and she was aghast to see Mynt and Rue's nosy heads poking into the room from the doorway. “Y-you...” But words failed her, and Pippi simply ended up glaring at her sisters. “Privacy please!”

But the two only ignored this and came traipsing in.

“Here you go,” Rue said oh so helpfully as she picked up Pippi's underwear from the floor.

Pippi could feel her face turning red even as she snatched the offending garment from her baby sister's hands. “Thank you.” She shot them a pointed look. “Now, can you go?”

But these words were also ignored, with a sly-looking Mynt asking with great interest, “You do it a lot, don't you?”

“*Oh my God, guys!*”

It was at this point that Acheron came out of the shower, and to his credit, the billionaire simply took everything literally in stride. His hair wet and his body naked save for the towel wrapped around his hips, he crossed the room to stand next to Pippi and greeted her sisters like it was normal for them to show up in his bedroom. “Morning, ladies.”

“Morning, Acheron,” the two simultaneously chirped with cheerful smiles.

“Anything I can do before I kick you two out of my room?”

“Yes, there is,” Rue said without hesitation. “Do you think I can intern in your company this summer?”

Pippi was aghast. “No, you cannot!”

Rue grinned. “Good thing I was just joking then.”

As Acheron held the door open for Rue, he turned to Pippi's other sister in askance. "Mynt?"

"Just one question," was the rather earnest reply.

"Fire away."

"Is it true Pippi's still a virgin?"

"*Ne*," Acheron answered. "But if it were up to your sister earlier, I might have to answer in the neg—" A dainty foot slamming extra hard on his toes had the billionaire halting mid-sentence with a wince.

Pippi relished the pained expression on Acheron's handsome face. *Good!* But because she also wasn't the type to take any chances, she quickly turned to Mynt with a determined smile, saying, "We've both overstayed our welcome, don't you think?"

Mynt suddenly found herself being dragged out of the Monarch Room. "B-But—"

"Shut up or you won't have an allowance for an entire month," Pippi threatened under her breath.

"Pippi's right, Acheron," Mynt declared without missing a beat. "We *have* overstayed our welcome. Sorry about that!"

She even managed to put on a forlorn look, but as soon as Pippi pulled the door shut on an amused-looking Acheron, Mynt couldn't help grinning. "You do realize I'm old enough to get what he said, right?"

"Get what?" Pippi tried to bluff her way out as she marched past Mynt.

"Oh, come on." After sprinting to beat her sister to the stairs, Mynt started climbing the steps backwards so she could continue teasing Pippi. It was just so fun to see her eternally pragmatic sister act like the most lovable ninny where Acheron Simonides was concerned.

"Just admit it, Pip." Mynt's tone was sly. "You're *obsessed* with the man."

"Am not!"

“Yes, you are, and there’s nothing wrong about feeling that way. You’re a girl, he’s a boy, and that’s how virginities are lost—”

Having reached their room, Pippi threw a pillow at her sister, but a giggling Mynt was able to duck in time.

“Fine, fine. Just admit this at least - he’s *fantastic* in bed, isn’t he?”

“*Oh, for the love of...*”

“Okay, okay, another question then.”

Mynt was still smiling, but this time Pippi detected a faint trace of worry in her sister’s gaze.

“He makes you happy, right?”

*Oh.*

“I know he’s an impossibly good catch, but then...you’re a Jones, and it’s in our blood to attract the most desirable men —”

“Who, more often than not, also happen to be the least trustworthy,” Pippi finished with a grimace.

Mynt’s expression turned anxious. “Is that your way of saying Acheron’s a jerk like the rest?”

“Of course not!” Seeing her sister breathe a sigh of relief made Pippi realize rather guiltily just how much her happiness meant to Mynt and the others. *Which was something she should have known from the start*, Pippi thought with a mental wince, *only she had been too busy making out with Acheron to notice.*

“It’s that Amelia woman, isn’t it?” Rue grumbled. “I’ve been following the news, and I know that woman’s still leeching off him, living in his apartment—”

“*Rue.*” Pippi felt obliged to give her sister an admonishing look. “The woman’s been through a lot, and more than that, she was instrumental in helping Acheron leave the gang... *alive.*”

“So?” Rue’s tone was challenging. “Doesn’t mean he has to pay her back for the rest of his life, does he?”

“It’s complicated, okay?” And even more complicated was the fact that she had, despite all of Acheron’s constant overtures, refused to let him talk about Amelia with her. *The other woman needed him*. She got that loud and clear already, so what else was there to talk about?

“At least tell us you’re happy,” Mynt said. “Swear it.”

Choosing her words with care, Pippi said slowly, “This is going to sound totally clichéd, but...” Pippi met Mynt’s gaze with a wry smile, adding, “Seeing Acheron get along with you guys is the one thing that’s guaranteed to make me happy. So you tell me. Am I happy?”

Mynt’s face broke into a wide smile. “Beyond reason.”

*All’s well that ends well*, Pippi tried to convince herself later on as she stood under the shower, the memory of Mynt cheerfully telling her to hurry up and join them for breakfast still on her mind.

On one hand, what she had told her sister was no lie. Nothing made her happier than seeing Acheron and her family treat each other with wonderful familiarity.

But on the other hand...

A frisson of fear crawled down Pippi’s spine, and she found herself shivering despite the blast of hot water jetting down her body.

There had been too many unspoken truths between them lately. Acheron was keen to talk about Amelia, but she wasn’t letting him. Pippi knew she should tell the billionaire about her decision to accept an extended post with Gareth Evans, but she had neglected to do so.

With her sense of foreboding only growing worse with every day that passed, Pippi couldn’t help thinking it was only a matter of time before trouble started brewing.

And she was right.



When Pippi finally came down for breakfast, she was about to join everyone in the dining room when she heard Acheron excuse himself from the table to take a call. Instinct, or perhaps more accurately, it was that special sense of intuition women were all born with - whatever it may be was enough for Pippi to halt at the foot of the steps, silent and still as she watched Acheron open the front door.

As he stepped out of the house, she heard him say, "*Amelia...*"

Just that.

Another woman's name.

But oh, the way he said it.

He had never used such a voice with her before.

So much tenderness.

Just so damn much...that her heart broke under its weight, and pain made everything crystal clear.

*I love him*, Pippi realized with shock.

*I love him.*

*Acheron.*

*I love him.*

*I've always loved him.*

Acheron came back to the house and was startled to find Pippi standing at the foot of the steps, a blank expression on her face. "Pippi?"

"H-Hey."

"Do you mind if we just have breakfast on the way?"

*Why*, Pippi wanted to ask. *Is it because you're in a hurry to go to Amelia?* She badly wanted to ask the question out loud, but she bit them back, not out of shyness but because she was scared he would say 'yes.'

Acheron was relieved to see Pippi nod, and he tried not to be too visibly hasty as the two of them bid goodbye to her family. He thought he had done a rather good job at it, too, and

he was right. But even so, Pippi's family still knew something had changed - something had gone so horribly wrong - and it was all because of the dreadfully blank look on Pippi's face.

Her sisters looked at each other, all of them waiting for just one to speak, to find the courage to say what they all felt and feared.

But none of them could.

Inside the car, the billionaire became preoccupied texting instructions to Charlie. Amelia had sounded too hysterical over the phone, and he was afraid she would seriously injure herself this time. He needed his secretary to find the best rehabilitation clinic, one preferably close by and unfailingly discreet.

They were only a few blocks away from the office when Acheron realized something was different.

Rather, *Pippi* was different, and he became guiltily aware of how he had unintentionally ended up ignoring her for almost the entire ride. "Pippi?"

"Mm?"

She was unusually stiff, her blue eyes unreadable, her silence reminding him of how she used to distance herself with silence and sought safety behind the absence of words.

But for that to happen now...

*It didn't make sense*, Acheron thought.

Because that would mean she was trying to protect herself from something, and he couldn't think of anything in her life right now that could hurt her.

"Is something the matter?" he asked finally.

Pippi could only gaze at him mutely. There was so much to say. *So much*. But she wasn't certain at all that this was the right time and place to say them, wasn't even sure if she *should* say them. Because what was the point if he didn't love her?

Acheron frowned at her continued silence. “Say something, *mikrí mou*.”

Oh, how she wished she could.

*I love you, Acheron.*

But would he believe her, since the words would seem as if they were coming out of the blue when in truth they had been there all along, and she had just deliberately turned a deaf ear to them?

*I love you so much.*

But what if saying it would only pressure him to lie about his own feelings?

*I love you.*

Oh God.

Who could’ve ever predicted this day would come, and she would be near tears just because she wasn’t able to say the words?

Acheron reached for her hand and was stunned to find it cold. “Something’s obviously wrong,” he said grimly. “Is it your family? Has something happened?”

Pippi managed to shake her head. “N-No.”

*Monosyllabic Pippi was back*, Acheron thought, and his frown deepened. “Something’s clearly wrong,” he said gently, “but I can’t help if you don’t tell me about it.”

But by then, the car had already reached the basement, and before he could ask Wickham to give them a moment alone, Pippi was already reaching for the door handle while she mumbled her thanks to the other man. She thanked Acheron as well, but he didn’t miss the way she studiously avoided his gaze.

Pippi turned to watch the car drive out of the basement. *Please don’t leave. Please. Please. Please.* But these words she also swallowed back, not wanting to force him to stay.

The sudden change in her behavior still nagged at Acheron, but his phone had started to buzz, and all thoughts of

Pippi had to be set aside when he saw it was Wickham calling him.

“What is it?”

“She knows about Pippi.”

Acheron stiffened. “What do you mean?” But even as he spoke, a part of him already knew.

“I’m not sure how. I’ve never let her leave the apartment, and she hasn’t had any chance to get on the computer or hold a phone. But she knows.”

Acheron remembered how hysterical Amelia had sounded over the phone earlier, demanding that he come to her now and even threatening to kill herself if he didn’t show up. She hadn’t mentioned anything about Pippi then, but that was just like her, with the way she always ignored what she didn’t want to see. Physical pain she had learned to handle, never flinching or crying out, barely even blinking no matter how much the old man had beaten her.

But when it came to facing the truth, she became fragile and vulnerable, throwing tantrums or wallowing in self-pity to get her way, and when neither worked, she would numb herself with drugs until she felt nothing.

No matter how much he had begged her - *fight for us, leave him and come away with me* -

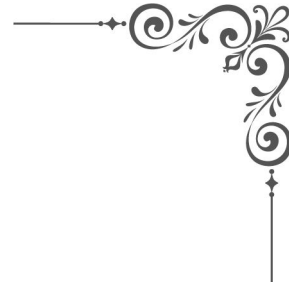
She had always said no.

*I’m sorry.*

*I can’t.*

*It’s too late.*

Even when time and time again other people would end up failing her, she would rather believe in everyone else but him.



## Twenty-Two

THE FIRST TIME AMELIA came to him, she had literally set fire to his library, sobbing hysterically as she told him that looking at all those books made her feel stupid. That it was like he himself had made her want to feel stupid.

The last time she came to him, she had thrashed his study, shredding contracts that had nearly cost him millions of dollars.

And that had been, what, seven or eight months ago?

Even now, Acheron's mind instinctively sought to distance itself from the memories, and all he could remember was the tears running down her pale face and the stark emptiness that kept growing and growing inside of him.

It had made no fucking sense to him then, and it still didn't. Amelia had known what she was doing, had fucking known she could have cost him his entire business, and yet she had still fucking gone ahead and dumped all the contracts into the shredder.

*Why the fuck are you doing this? WHY?*

He had never yelled at her before, but at that time, it had been just too fucking much. That time, the tears that used to destroy him had only left him cold.

*Please don't shout at me. Please, Acheron, please, don't be like this, please.*

He had once thought that he could never be like Anthony, the pedophile that had been so obsessed with thirteen-year-old Amelia that he had made her his mistress. Anthony liked

making Amelia beg to keep her under his power, and as the years had progressed, Anthony had made sure they always had an audience for it.

*Beg or...*

The threats varied, but they had one common denominator. They had all targeted Amelia's soft heart for the underdogs, and Anthony had known it.

And because Acheron had been one of those underdogs, Amelia had begged for him, too.

She had gone on her knees for him, more times than he could count, and while he had always strove to make it up to her, what she had done at his study had been the last straw, and Acheron had lost it.

*Is it your turn now? You want me on my knees? Because that's what it looks like. You want me to be your bitch the way*

—

She had slapped him, and it hadn't made a difference.

*Anthony made you his bitch?*

She had slapped him again and again, begging him to take the words back, but he had not.

And that was the last time they had seen each other...until now.

A heavy, numbing sensation filled Acheron's chest as he entered Amelia's room and saw what she had made of it. What could be torn had been ripped into shreds, what could be overturned had been overturned. Paintings that had once hung on the wall, curtains that had once covered the windows, and the expensive tea set that used to grace the console - all of it was on the floor now.

Broken bits and pieces everywhere, but not all of them were tangible.

Each time, the strokes of her madness were different, but they all painted the same devastating mess.

*"Acheron."*

She had finally noticed him, and his chest tightened as she came flying to him. He wrapped his arms about her, knowing to do anything else would kill her, and his chest tightened even more.

The silky feel of her hair, the paleness of her skin, and even the sound of her sobs - all of it were terribly, hurtfully familiar.

But there were also things that had changed.

She used to carry the scent of strawberries all the time, but now she smelled of sweat. She had always been the type to take pride in her appearance, but now she looked all dried up, her thinness dangerously beyond what was fashionable.

The changes did not disgust him at all, but it did make him sad.

This was not the Amelia he remembered, and it was for this reason that he could not and would not leave her.

“I only wanted a little,” she whispered against his shirt.

“I know.”

“Wickham wouldn’t give me any.”

“I’d fire him if he had.”

“Yeah. You would.” Her head slowly lifted, and there was fear in her eyes as she gazed up at him. “I couldn’t help it. I just got so...angry.” Her lip started trembling anew. “I picked the lock to your study.”

*Ah.*

He had a dossier on Pippi on his desk, and Amelia would’ve been too curious not to leaf through it.

“I suppose that’s how you learned about Pippi.”

Amelia could feel herself turning pale. Acheron didn’t do nicknames. He had never called her ‘Amy’, not even when they were alone. And yet he called the other girl *Pippi*.

Desperation filled her. She had always known that the day would come that she would lose him, but now that it finally

happened, it was so much worse than she feared. Socialites and heiresses were no threat to her. They would always be too shallow for Acheron. But a do-gooder like Pippilotta Jones?

“That girl...” It was a challenge to speak in a level voice when she was so tempted to cry. “She was the one who helped me that day. Wasn’t she?”

A clipped nod, but if Acheron thought that wasn’t going to reveal anything, he was sadly mistaken. She knew him well, after all, and that one nod said everything. He might not have realized it yet, but that girl already owned his heart.

“You care for her.”

“Amelia—”

“Don’t bother lying.” Her voice shook. “*I know*, just by looking at you.” Her lips curved in a smile that didn’t reach her eyes, and the sight damn near broke his heart.

*You made this happen*, he wanted to snarl. *You kept pushing me away. You did everything to drive me away. So stop fucking looking at me like I betrayed you.*

“It doesn’t have to change anything,” he said curtly. “She knows you’re here, and she’s okay with it.”

“I’m glad.” But it was a lie. Even knowing that she owed him so much that the least she could do was be happy for him, she just couldn’t do it. After everything they had gone through, they were supposed to be together. They were *destined* to be with each other. Why couldn’t he see that? Why?

Acheron started talking to her about doctors and rehabilitation programs, and Amelia pretended to listen even as more and more insidious thoughts filled her mind. There was no question about Ms. Jones being a nice girl, but that was exactly the reason why she would never be a good fit for Acheron.

Acheron stayed with her for the rest of the day, leaving only when they had finished having dinner in her room and she had already showered and tucked herself into bed. Just as



he was about to reach for the door, she made her move, whispering his name in a frail voice.

She saw concern flicker in his gaze as he turned to her, and her heart swelled with hope. *I knew it.* That girl had only temporarily turned his head, but in the end, no woman could ever come between them.

“Pippi...she’s a nice girl, isn’t she?”

Acheron slowly nodded.

“You were a nice boy once, too.” She turned to her side as she pulled the covers up to her chin. “And look what I turned you into.” Amelia let her eyes slowly drift close, and her voice deliberately took on a sleepy tone as she mumbled, “Don’t make the same mistakes I did.”

He didn’t answer, but the sound of his sharply drawn breath was all she needed.

Her words had taken root, and if everything fell into place, he would realize the truth.

Men like him would only ruin nice girls like Pippi.

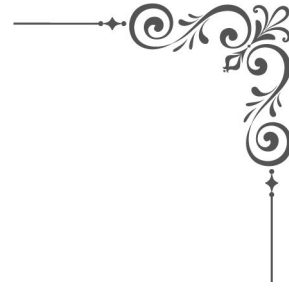


BACK IN ISLA DE FLORES, the grandfather clock in the living room chimed out a heavy, melancholic tune. It was one of the few Jones heirlooms the family had left, and growing up, Pippi had always been just a little fearful of it. At ten foot tall and made of heavy oak, the clock had seemed like an ominously omniscient figure, one that seemed to portend bad tidings every time its hand struck twelve.

But that was then, and this was now. She was no longer a child but a grown-up woman of twenty-three years. She should know better already, and yet a part of her wanted to cry the moment she heard the clock’s haunting melody play in the air.

*One o’clock,* Pippi thought.

And he still wasn’t home.



## Twenty-Three

*“AND THAT WAS IT?”* Mairi Tanner-Leventis exclaimed incredulously. “You told him Gareth Evans wants you to work for him for six more months, and he just said *yes?*”

Pippi gave her a small nod, and Mairi’s astonishment turned to disbelief. Even she knew who Gareth was. The man was one of Miami’s most infamous womanizers, and for Acheron Simonides to simply say yes to such an arrangement...

If Damen had been in Acheron’s position, her own Greek billionaire husband would’ve thrown a fit. She had expected Acheron to do the same since both men were made of the same mold, but perhaps she had misjudged the other man incorrectly this whole time?

Pippi uneasily stirred her juice at the older woman’s worrying reaction. “I guess he’s being understanding?”

“I...suppose.” Mairi did her best to sound convinced but knew she had failed when she saw the way Pippi winced ever so slightly. She was about to say something reassuring - anything, really, to stop the girl from worrying - when her phone suddenly rang, and she had to excuse herself from the table.

Pippi watched the men in the restaurant gaze admiringly at Damen Leventis’ wife as she walked away. It didn’t make her feel a single bit of envy, but it did make her wonder rather wistfully if she could ever inspire Acheron to feel jealous about other men’s attention.

She used to think she could, but he had just grown so distant these days they might as well be back to being CEO and lowly secretary.

Weeks had passed since the day she had accidentally heard Acheron speak to Amelia on the phone, and so much had changed since then.

For one thing, he had stopped sleeping at Mariposa House and had instead checked into a hotel next to Excalibur Park's construction site. It would've been a reasonable move...if he had done the same thing to all the other properties Simonides Inc. had previously developed. Moreover, Excalibur Park was neither the company's biggest nor most expensive real estate project to date.

Knowing this, she couldn't help thinking that he was deliberately avoiding spending time with her.

But if he was - *why?*

"I'm back," Mairi said as she returned to their table, but her smile faded when she saw Pippi's strained expression. "Oh, Pip."

"Could you—" Just thinking of what she was about to ask made Pippi's hands perspire and she found herself looking away, not wanting to see Mairi's eyes as she heard herself say, "I just need you to be honest."

Mairi bit her lip hard, the woman part of her knowing right away what it was the girl was trying to find the courage to ask, and that same part of her was already crying.

"I don't think he's having an affair with his ex," Mairi said softly.

But even if Acheron wasn't, it wasn't right that Pippi felt the need to even ask such a thing.

The pain in Pippi's heart eased a little at Mairi's words. Maybe she was being willfully blind, but she truly believed the older woman was saying the truth.

*So that was one worry taken care of, which only left about 999 more...*

The thought made her want to laugh and cry.

*Oh, Acheron.*

Look what you've turned me into.

"You know...he once thought I had feelings for Mr. Evans," Pippi surprised herself by confiding.

Mairi's brows shot up. "Are you saying he thinks you're the type to cheat?"

"It was the circumstances," Pippi said, feeling defensive on Acheron's behalf. "I used to refuse all offers of transfers, you see, but a month ago, I had this...this school loan to pay off so when the offer to transfer to Mr. Evans' department came up, and it included a hefty pay raise, I had to say yes."

Comprehension dawned, and Mairi sighed. "I get it."

"You do?" Pippi was rather skeptical.

"You didn't want to tell him about the loan."

Pippi nodded. "He would've insisted on settling the loan, and I didn't want that."

"Because it would make you seem like a gold-digger," the older woman concluded.

"*Exactly.*" Pippi was relieved that Mairi readily understood her sentiments. "We had a huge row over it, too."

"Have you told him the truth since then?"

"Well, that's the thing..." Pippi looked down and started stirring her juice again. "When things became weird between us, I thought I should clear the air - get rid of all the lies and be open about our feelings."

"That's a good plan," Mairi murmured.

"You would think so, right?" The girl's smile was pained. "But when I tried to tell him the truth, he said *it didn't matter.*" Blue eyes filled with innocent entreaty turned to Mairi. "What do you think he meant by that?"

Mairi's lips parted, but no sound came out. Pippi's question might seem simple and straightforward to anyone

hearing it, but they both knew that what the girl was asking for without the words was something entirely.

*Help me believe there's still hope.*

*Please.*

*Please.*

The silence stretched between them, ruthless and unbroken, and Pippi could feel herself cracking under its weight.

It seemed anything could break her these days.

She felt her hands start to tremble and quickly hid them under the table. She tried to smile but stopped when she felt her face start to crack as well. In the end, all she could do was look at Mairi.

*Please say something. Please. Please. Please.*

Mairi's eyes started to sting, and when she saw Pippi's own eyes begin to shine, it became harder to hold back her own tears.

Her silence was her answer, and Pippi heard it loud and clear.

"I'm sorry," Mairi whispered.

Pippi shook her head. "It's not your fault."

It was no one's fault.

Not even Acheron's.

Because all he promised was that he would keep her from taking any risks.

And he had kept his word.

But he never promised not to hurt her.



SHE WAS CALLING HIM.

The world had turned upside down in recent days, and things were no longer how they used to be. These days, it was

Pippi calling him first now, Pippi seeking his company, Pippi saying that she *missed* him.

And he missed her, too, goddammit, but how could he be with her, knowing that its inevitable end was to see her ruined?

His phone had gone silent, but only a few moments had passed before it started ringing again.

It was Pippi, not giving up on him when she should never even have given him the time of the day.

Amelia's words that night had never left him, and every time he closed his eyes, the nightmares that came to him were one and the same. He would dream of the times Amelia had played him like a fool, and somehow the scene would change, and it would be Acheron making a fool of Pippi. He would dream of Millicent Longbourn, alone and broken because of him, and somehow Millicent, too, would transform into Pippi.

Maybe it was just paranoia, but what if it wasn't?

He had seen how being with him had made such a fucking mess of Millie's life, and he had never forgiven himself for it.

His phone started ringing for the third time, and Acheron drove his fist into the wall in a futile attempt to distract himself with the pain.

Why had he made himself forget about what happened to Millie?

Why had he convinced himself that things would be different with Pippi?

The phone rang for the fourth time, and Acheron could no longer help himself.

*"Pippi."*

Pippi nearly collapsed in relief even as the hollow tone of his voice made her feel cold. "Are you at the hotel?"

*"Ne." Yes.*

"Can I...can I come over?" She was expecting either a 'yes' or 'no', but instead she heard him curse under his breath,

and it hurt. It just hurt so much she could barely think, and somehow all the words came tumbling out.

“It’s Amelia, isn’t it? She t-told you something.”

“*Pippi—*”

“She likes you, can’t you see that? And that’s why she’s going to say whatever it takes—-”

“*Stop it,*” Acheron cut in furiously. “You don’t know anything about her, so don’t speak as if you do.” Amelia had been batting for her, dammit, and here she was, accusing Amelia of sabotaging their relationship.

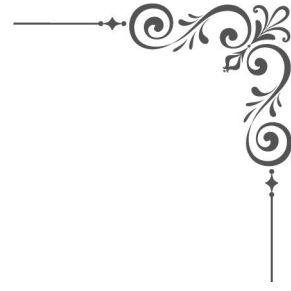
Pippi breathed hard, doing her best not to cry. “Acheron, please.” She wasn’t exactly sure what she was begging him for, but when she heard him speak -

“*I’m sorry,*” Acheron said tautly.

It seemed he knew, and now that she heard his words, she realized what it was she had been asking.

*Please love me.*

And he might as well have said he couldn’t.



## Twenty-Four

*SHE HAD BEEN WORKING* like she was on auto-pilot for several days now, Gareth mused. And while as an employer, he had no cause for complaint - her work remained as flawless as always - he couldn't help feeling slightly concerned at the way she seemed to be pushing herself a little too hard.

It was as if she was running away from something, and work had become her panacea. That was no doubt good news for the company, but if she continued as she were, Ms. Jones would eventually run herself ragged and end up in the E.R. sometime soon.

A while later, he saw her rise from her seat and start swaying on her feet -

Gareth made up his mind at that.

"Ms. Jones?"

She snapped to attention, her back automatically straightening. "Yes, Mr. Evans?" Blank blue eyes gazed back at him.

"What the fuck happened to you?"

Pippi blinked. "I'm sorry, Mr. Evans. I'm afraid I don't quite understand." But she was lying, and they both knew it. The truth was, she was still in shock, but it wasn't like she could tell him that. He would ask why if she did, and what was there to say?

*I'm in shock because I think Acheron Simonides had low-key dumped me over the phone?* She hadn't even realized that kind of breakup could exist until she had personally



experienced it, and even now a part of her remained reeling. Things couldn't be over between them. It just couldn't. *Right?*

*"That's it."*

Pippi jerked in shock at her boss' curt tone, and her cheeks colored when his frowning gaze made her realize she had spaced out on him. "I'm s-sorry, Mr. Evans—" The impatient shake of Gareth's head silenced her even as Pippi's embarrassment grew. *Lud, lud, lud.* Why did she always end up acting unprofessional in this man's presence?

"You're not yourself," Gareth stated calmly. "That much is obvious—" He saw her start to protest and shut her up with a warning look. "Don't bother denying it, Ms. Jones. Right now, the only thing I've to figure out is *why.*" His gaze turned thoughtful as he considered her pale face and the dark circles under her eyes. "You had a fight with your boyfriend perhaps?"

*Ex,* Pippi thought numbly. *Make that ex-boyfriend, Mr. Evans.*

Gareth's gaze narrowed. "Did he dump you?" The flash of pain in Pippi's blue eyes was answer enough, and he winced, realizing he could've afforded to be a bit more tactful. "I apologize, Ms. Jones. I know I could've worded that better."

Pippi managed to pull up a smile for her boss' sake. "There's nothing to be sorry for, sir. A better phrasing won't change reality."

"If it's any consolation, I think he's an idiot to have dumped you." A pause. "And you know what they say about getting over heartbreak..."

Pippi blinked. "Actually, I don't."

"The best way to get over an old flame is to find a new one," Gareth murmured.

*Oh.*

"So if you ever require my assistance in that sense..."

The words threw her off, and Pippi choked.

Gareth's lips curved at the sound. "That's better. Laughter suits you more, Ms. Jones." His voice turned brisk. "That said, you're dismissed for the day."

"*Mr. Evans!*" Pippi's lips twitched even as she felt torn between amusement and exasperation. "Giving me time off isn't always the answer, you know."

"Why can't it?" Gareth's broad shoulders lifted in a shrug. "It worked the first time, didn't it?"

"But—"

"Do you know," he mused out loud, "you're the only employee I know who actually complains about getting more downtime from work."

The words made her realize just how silly she was acting, and a rueful smile touched her lips. "I'm sorry. I know I'm acting like an ungrateful witch..."

Gareth's eyes laughed at her. "You're an adult now, Ms. Jones. I doubt anyone would freak out if you said the word 'bitch' out loud."

Her lips pursed, and she couldn't help sounding defensive as she said, "I just don't like saying it."

That she truly meant it and wasn't faking being prim and proper made Ms. Jones all the more attractive to his eyes, and Gareth had to mentally shake his head, thinking once again that only an idiot would let go of such a prize.

"May I give you some unsolicited advice, Ms. Jones?"

"Of course, sir." But the way her lovely face had turned blank told him that a part of her already knew what he was about to say.

*No matter*, Gareth thought. People had a tendency to ignore what wasn't being said, and this unfortunately appeared true in Pippi's case.

"I'm not sure what happened to make you forget the truth," he said quietly, "but you're much stronger than this. You've never struck me as the type to mope and let things happen, and I don't like being proven wrong."

A shaky smile made its way to Pippi's lips at her boss' words. "So what you're basically saying is...I should either move on or make things happen...*for your sake?*"

Gareth released a mock sigh of relief. "Thank God you're done acting like an idiot."

Pippi was still shaking her head in rueful amusement as she boarded the half-crowded elevator. As it sped down, she lifted her gaze absently, taking note of the other passengers. Most of them were wives of the company's board members, and she vaguely remembered about a luncheon on the same day that was exclusive to Simonides Incorporated's higher-ups.

The elevator paused on the 24th floor, and Pippi tried to keep her face blank when she saw Millicent Longbourn step in, followed by an older woman.

As the doors closed, Pippi couldn't help noticing the way the other women began exchanging looks as their lips curled in patronizing contempt.

Pippi slowly lowered her head even as shame engulfed her. It wasn't her place to interfere, and yet...

"Don't you think it's started to smell?" one of the women asked loudly.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

Her teeth gnashed.

*Don't interfere. Just don't.*

"Now that you've mentioned it," another woman drawled, "it does seem like it."

"And if I'm not mistaken," the third woman in the group added snidely, "It's a rather whorish smell..."

*Millicent is a big girl*, Pippi tried to convince herself. *And a really tough girl, too*, she added desperately in her mind as the insults continued and Acheron's former lover refused to answer back for some reason.

“I truly feel for you, Mrs. Longbourn, to have been forced to move out of town—”

Pippi’s head jerked up, and this time everything became awfully clear. The older woman who had followed Ms. Longbourn inside was none other than Millicent’s own mother, and the way she was looking at her daughter made Pippi realize why Millicent wasn’t saying a thing.

*Don’t let get them to you.*

And the plea seemed to have done its job, with the way Millicent was visibly struggling to control herself.

*Good for them for taking the higher road, Pippi thought, and if she were smart, that was exactly what she should do, too. Just let this one go, and find another subtle and discreet way to help Millicent Longbourn.*

Pippi began chanting the words in her mind.

*Let it go.*

*Let it go.*

*Let it go.*

But when she lifted her gaze anew and saw how Millicent’s own eyes were smarting with tears of anger and pain, something in Pippi just snapped. Maybe it was the combination of stress and heartbreak, maybe it was her needing to let out steam after so many days of lying and pretending to her family that everything was still okay between Acheron and her, but she just couldn’t take it anymore.

“So people saw her blowing the man she loved,” Pippi heard herself yell all of a sudden. “What’s so shameful about that? Or is it that you’re really all just secretly envious because none of you are married to men you want to blow every night?”

Gasps filled the elevator, and not all of them were from the set of catty, spoiled wives presently turning purple with rage.

“What are you staring at?” Pippi snarled.

*Shut up, oh my God, just shut up!*

But her mouth continued to run away from her.

“Did you really think people would keep giving you all free passes just because your husbands have ‘director’ added to their names? Well, guess what?”

*Shuuuuut up, Pippilotta Jones!*

“You’re so fucking wrong.”

*OH MY GOD.*

*“And by the way, you’re the ones who smell. You all smell like women whose vaginas haven’t seen a dick since World War II!”*

The elevator made it to the lobby just as she spewed the words out, and when Pippi turned towards the doors, she realized too late that everyone outside had heard every single thing.

A moment later, and she heard someone worse. It was someone sniggering from the back of the crowd, and even though the sound was abruptly cut off, it was too late. The others had also started sniggering even as they did their best to hide this, and soon everyone was looking away as their shoulders betrayed themselves with a telltale rock.

*“You bitch.”* This was from Wife #1.

*“You’re going to pay for this.”* This was from Wife #2.

*“You—”*

*“Should shut up,”* Millicent finished for Wife #3 in a fierce tone, “since your wrinkled pussy’s rotting by the second, and I’m having a—” Her words ended in an unceremonious yelp as the other woman shoved past her so hard it almost sent Millicent flying.

As Pippi watched the three women walk away, reality was beginning to sink in, and she could feel herself starting to lose color.

*Omigodomigodomigodomigod.*

Gareth Evans had told her to make things happen, but she had a feeling getting into a fight with the wives of the company's board members wasn't what he meant.

"Thank you so much!"

Pippi suddenly found herself engulfed in a tearful embrace, and it took her a moment to realize it was Millicent's mother trying to choke the life out of her.

"Let her breathe, Mom." After drawing her sniffing mother away, Millicent gave the younger woman a wry look of inquiry. "Are you okay?"

"I...uh..."

Omigodomigodomigodomigod.

It was still the only thing Pippi was capable of thinking.

Realizing that she was the only one able to function normally at the moment, Millicent quickly took charge and ushered both women away. The crowd around them was noisy as ever, and the looks on their faces made them seem like they were on a high.

*Losers*, Millicent thought without rancor.

They were only on her side because someone else had done the right thing for them, and when the proverbial axe inevitably fell, that someone else would also be the only one to suffer.

Both her mother and the younger woman - *Pippi Jones*, Millicent finally recalled - still seemed to be in shock, with neither protesting as Millicent bundled the two in the backseat of her car. It was only when she had driven them to a cafe and they were cozily ensconced in a booth that reality once again started setting in.

Mrs. Longbourn was the first to recover, and Millicent's heart felt fit to burst with joy when she saw the older woman's face break into a smile.

"That was *glorious*."

Millicent couldn't help smiling back. "I told you, didn't I?"

"I always thought being decent was the right thing to do..."

"Only with decent people like you. But those three were *assholes*—"

Mrs. Longbourn started to protest but thought better about it and nodded instead. Her daughter was right. They *were* assholes, may God forgive them.

Millicent turned to their unexpected savior, whose face was beginning to regain color. "It's you, isn't it?" she asked candidly.

"Excuse me?"

"The woman Acheron's secretly dating."

*Oh.*

Pippi quickly got rid of any expression on her face. "I'm afraid you're quite mistaken."

But this only had the other woman smirking. "You can't fool me, hon, and while the thought of dear beautiful Acheron belonging to someone else makes me jealous as hell..." Her shoulders moved in a philosophical shrug. "Better you than some undeserving bitch, and after today, I can certainly see why he'd fall for you."

"I'm really not what you think I am," Pippi asserted doggedly.

"How very reliably tactful of you," Millie commented with genuine admiration. "In any case, thank you for being my knight in a blue dress, and I do hope you'll remember to invite me to your wedding."

"I'm afraid you're quite mistaken, Ms. Longbourn. I'm truly no one to Mr. Simonides." Or at least she used to be someone to him. But things had changed.

This time, Millicent didn't miss the way Pippi's lips trembled, and her lips pursed in a mixture of surprise and

regret. *Oh, Acheron. What have you done?*



PIPPY'S DECISION TO come to Millicent Longbourn's defense had once again turned her into a hot topic among the employees of Simonides, Inc. and the news eventually found its way to the dining room at Acheron's penthouse, where the billionaire was having lunch with Wickham and Amelia.

"Do you see now," Amelia murmured sadly. "People who love us only end up getting hurt—"

"Ms. Jones came to someone else's rescue," Wickham couldn't help pointing out irritably. "How does that constitute her being hurt?"

"Because there's always a fallout when things like this happen," Amelia answered complacently. Turning to Acheron, she said softly, "It's the truth. You know it is. Don't you?"

The billionaire didn't answer, but Amelia was unperturbed. The way Acheron's face had hardened was enough to tell Amelia her words had hit its mark.

Back in his hotel, Acheron lay on his back, staring unseeingly in the dark.

*People who love us only end up getting hurt.*

And even though a part of him didn't want to fucking acknowledge it, he knew that Amelia's words had been the truth. It wasn't in Pippi's nature to interfere in such a way - his little blusher was usually a lot subtler than that - but whatever her reason was, he was damn certain it had something to do with him.

And because of him, she was going to get hurt.

Because he had liked playing fast and loose, Pippi was going to get hurt.

Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but eventually.

It was only a matter of time - unless he took matters into his own hands and cut her out of his life for good.



The thought of putting a permanent end between them made him feel sick. He didn't want to lose her. He wasn't ready to be free of her. And yet - weren't his actions in the past few weeks already tantamount to breaking up with her?

He had stopped sleeping at her place, stopped calling or talking to her. He had, in not so many words, made it clear that they were over -

*And that was how it should be,* Acheron told himself savagely.

It was better this way. Having him hurt her would be nothing compared to how the others could and would attack her - and he had a feeling it would be even worse than what Millicent had suffered.

If he really wanted what was best for her, he should simply make a quick, clean break of it.

He should simply tell her it was over.

It was the only thing to do.

And yet—

*Soon,* he thought.

He would do the right thing soon.

Not now, not just yet, but soon.

Because even if he no longer let himself see her, no longer let himself hear her, the thought - the sheer possibility that Pippi might still think of herself as his...

It was the only thing that kept him going these days, and he needed it like he needed air to breathe.

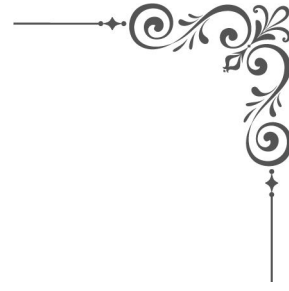
So soon...but not just yet.

Soon.

He just wanted, needed a little bit more time, even if it only meant having the right to remember how things used to be.

*Soon.*

But life refused to cooperate, and the end came sooner than Acheron expected, and it was so much worse than he could have ever foreseen.



## Twenty-Five

THE ANATOMY OF VIRAL posts on social media always started with a fork in the road - those that were meant to inspire positive feelings...and those that weren't. The happy ones: anything from cat videos to stories of Good Samaritans and the proverbial prodigal son - these almost always had an organic reach while the not-so-happy ones generated likes through paid boosts and advertising behind the scenes. The ones that inspire rarely had a quantifiable objective in mind while the other type almost always had a target.

The one thing both types of viral posts had in common was how it caused people to inevitably expose their true colors. Good or bad, posts were shared by people because it made them feel.

Some posts inspired people to become better, and they wanted others to become better, too.

Some posts made people feel envy, and misery always loved company.

And then there was that last kind of post.

Posts that were meant to hurt, to humiliate, and ruin other people's lives.

People shared these posts, too.

Even if they didn't have to, even if they had to lie to themselves and conceal their trails through private messages -

Sometimes, people couldn't just help themselves.



IT STARTED AS A FAIRLY ordinary Sunday morning for the Joneses. While the continued absence of Acheron in their household was hard to miss and had long cast an unshakable pall over the whole family, everyone still did their best to find a reason to smile. Their family was no stranger to hardships, and no matter how things would eventually turn out between Acheron and Pippi they all knew they would be able to survive it.

What mattered was that they were together, and together they were unbeatable.

“Are you really going to wear *that* to church?” Rue asked with a wrinkle of her nose.

Pippi rechecked her appearance on the mirror with a frown. “What’s wrong with it?” She just had on her usual loose blouse and slacks, and they seemed imminently presentable to her.

*It screams ‘I’m so heartbroken I don’t care how I look anymore’,* Pippi’s youngest sister thought. But because even she knew it was just too soon to say such a thing, she cleared her throat and tried to be diplomatic instead. “We’re going to the beach after, remember?”

*Oh. Right.* A strained smile flitted over Pippi’s lips at the thought of being surrounded with azure skies, clear waters, and soft white sand. Isla de Flores’ postcard-perfect beaches might be a balm for the soul for others, but right now the mere thought of immersing in herself with such beauty made Pippi feel sick.

The mood she was in, she wanted her surroundings to reflect the emptiness in her, wanted to just curl up in a ball under the covers and pretend that everything was still okay between her and Acheron.

Having this huge, incomprehensible distance between them hurt so much that her mind had deliberately shied away from counting the days that had passed since she last saw him. Maybe, if a part of her had expected things to go downhill this soon and this drastically - maybe losing him wouldn’t hurt as much.

But because the sudden change in Acheron's attitude had completely blindsided her, Pippi found herself lost and grasping for an explanation - *any* explanation was fine. Anything, that is, except what was right under her nose, demanding to be acknowledged.

*Could he have really left her just like that, like nothing they shared meant a thing to him?*

And all because he had spent one second too long in Amelia's company and realized the other woman was and would always be the love of her life?

*Why, Acheron? Why?*

Why act like he could give Pippi his heart when he had never gotten it back in the first place?

Just the thought of it was near enough to cripple her, and Pippi unconsciously reached for the bedpost, fearing she would fall if she didn't hold on to it for dear life. She turned to Rue, her gaze just a little blurred, and her voice just a little hoarse as she asked clumsily, "Do you think Mom would mind if I skipped..."

Rue quickly turned away and lowered her head as she began rummaging through her bag like she was looking for something. "I don't think she'd mind at all," she mumbled. "But it would make everyone worry." While speaking, she kept her gaze fixed on her bag the whole time, knowing that if she ever saw Pippi's tears start to fall, it would be the end of her, too.

"I...see."

Rue heard Pippi's voice crack, and she bit her lip hard. *I can't cry. I mustn't. I can't ever cry when I know Pippi's hurting more.*

Her head still down, she blindly groped for her sister's hand and giving it a tight, hard squeeze, she said fiercely, "You'll get through this, Pi. But we have to do it together."

"I absolutely agree," a voice that wasn't Pippi murmured, "especially since it's my hand you're holding and not Pi's."

Rue looked up at that, and that was when she saw herself holding Vik's hand and Pippi doing her best not to laugh.

“What - how?”

“You tell me,” Vik said dryly. “I just came back to get my phone when you suddenly grabbed my—” She didn't bother finishing her sentence, with Pippi and Rue having already lost the battle to keep a straight face. The sound of their giggles was infectious, and soon Vik had joined in the laughter as well.

*Rue was right*, Pippi thought as she followed her sisters down the stairs. At the end of the day, she still had her family, and together they could get past anything.

*Together.*

A simple word, a powerful word, and as the day unfolded, it also became a word Pippi would find herself clinging to as her life came crashing down.



PIPPI'S FIRST INKLING that something was wrong came as soon as she and the rest of the family stepped out of front door, and they saw Mrs. Mullan from across the street watching them from her living room window.

“Morning, Mrs. M,” Mynt chirped with a wave.

The widow waved back even as a sad smile slowly formed over her lips.

“Is it Mr. M's death anniversary today?” Pippi asked under her breath even as she smiled and waved at the older woman as well.

“Nope,” Great-Aunt Alice answered. “That was last month.”

*Then why did Mrs. M look so sad*, Pippi wondered as they started walking. She was still mulling this over and wondering if it would be a good idea to invite the old lady to join them for a day at the beach when they made it to the church...and found most everyone acting oddly.

The faces around them were familiar, all of them locals just like the Joneses, and yet...

Pippi tried to catch the eye of a former high school classmate of hers, but the other girl deliberately avoided her gaze. Most others were doing the same while there were a few who were downright glaring at her.

What in the world was wrong with everyone?

She looked at her sisters and saw that they, too, along with Astrid and her three great-aunts were all wearing the same perplexed expressions on their faces.

It was only when they were about to take their usual place at the last pew in the rightmost aisle that the puzzle pieces started falling into place. Mrs. Richards, a wealthy woman who took exceptional pride in the fact that her great-great-grandfather was one of the town's founding members, was suddenly blocking their way.

"I'm so very sorry," the woman murmured.

*And yet she didn't sound sorry at all*, Pippi couldn't help noting.

"But don't you think this is highly inappropriate, considering the circumstances?" Mrs. Richards' meaningful gaze fell on Astrid when she spoke, which left Pippi's mother frowning in genuine confusion.

"If you have to say," Great-Aunt Alice said imperiously, "then just say it."

Mrs. Richards struggled to keep her smile in place. "That would be rather crass, but if you insist, perhaps I should..." She took her phone out of her bag. "If you really think this is necessary?"

Pippi's gaze narrowed at the malice that glittered in the older woman's eyes. *She was savoring this moment*, Pippi realized. She was looking forward to something...but what?

"Is AirDrop okay?" Mrs. Richards asked in a dulcet tone.

They all said yes, and a moment later, Pippi and her sisters' phones started vibrating, and that was when it

happened: the beginning of the end, and no one had seen it coming.

Astrid shook her bag in a fit of frustration, but its contents remained the same and she bit back a resigned sigh when she realized she had left her phone in her bedroom again. “I forgot my phone.” She looked up, and that was when she saw how all of her daughters had turned white. “What’s happening?”

No one answered.

Since Vik stood closest to her, Astrid tried to reach for her phone first, insisting, “Let me see.” But to Astrid’s shock Vik backed away from her, phone clutched to her chest.

And that was when it hit her.

“It’s me,” Astrid said flatly. “Whatever it is - it’s about me. *Isn’t it?*”



ACHERON WAS AT HIS desk when Wickham came striding in unannounced, an ominous look on his weathered face. “You remember when you asked cyber security to monitor any online activity concerning Ms. Jones and her family?”

The billionaire stiffened. “Have we been found out?”

“It’s worse.” Wickham placed the printout of the report emailed to him by the company’s cyber security division.

*What in hell could be worse than the world fucking Pippi’s life up just because she had been foolish enough to date him?*

He reached for the printout and had his answer in just a few seconds.

*FUCK.*

It was an anonymously posted exposé about Astrid Jones’ affair with a married man and written in such a way that readers were meant to see Pippi’s mother as both a home-wrecker and gold-digger. According to the post, Dolph McTavish, a businessman from Chicago, was a happily married man and father of three when he and Astrid happened to share the same flight to Miami.



*It had every indication of being a paid character assassination,* Acheron realized sickly, and even though his team only had preliminary results to share, he already knew that what his guts were telling him was real.

One way or another, this could and would be traced back to him, and Astrid had merely been caught in the crossfire.

*People who love us only end up getting hurt.*

Fuck.

Fuck.

**Fuck.**

The glass surface of Acheron's desk shattered into pieces at the violently forceful crash of his fist, and Wickham flinched. "Acheron—" Bleak dark eyes turned to his, and for one painful moment, it was like seeing Acheron back when he was sixteen, and the boy had no one in the world.

"Amelia was right," Acheron said tonelessly.

The older man started shaking his head in protest. "Don't think like that—"

"There's no other way to think about this," Acheron gritted out. "This is my fault, and it happened because I didn't have the balls to let her go."



PIPPY KNOCKED ON THE door to Astrid's room. "Mom?" She waited for Astrid to answer like she used to - gaily calling her out to come in, but there was just silence, and she wanted to cry.

*My fault, she thought. This is my fault.*

She tried the knob, and it turned easily under her fingers. Stepping inside, she found the room dark and silent, the curtains drawn. Astrid was a child of the sun, she loved the warmth and heat of it, and now her mother was acting like she no longer deserved to see the light of day.

Astrid was seated on the edge of her bed, her lovely face wan and tear-stained. But at the sight of her eldest daughter, she readily summoned a smile. “What is it?”

It was just like Astrid to be so strong, to not say a single word even though she must have an inkling that this could only have something to do with Pippi.

She swallowed hard. *Oh God, what was there to say?*

“Pi? What is it? Is anything wrong?”

The concern in Astrid’s voice was unmistakable, and this was just so like her, too, with the way she always placed everyone else’s needs above hers—

It was just too much, and before Pippi could even think of what to do, she was already running, falling into her knees with a sob as she took her mother’s hands in hers.

“I’m so sorry, Mom.”

“Oh, hon.”

She felt Astrid lay a comforting hand on the top of her head, and she wept harder. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, baby.”

*“But it is. You know it is. We all know it is.”* Between sobs, she told Astrid of how she something in her had just snapped and she found herself coming into the defense of Acheron’s ex-lover. “I can’t prove it yet, but I know - those women are behind this, and it’s not fair - it’s n-not right that they’d go after you—” Her voice broke anew. “I’m so sorry, Mom.”

The sound of her daughter’s weeping hurt, and yet in a way, it also gave Astrid the strength to ignore her own pain. Her daughter needed her, and Pippi and her girls would always come first.

“Hush, baby. It’s okay now.”

Astrid pulled Pippi up and made her daughter sit on the bed next to her.

“It may be as you say it is, but that still doesn’t make things your fault. All the signs about Dolph being a married

man were there, but I chose to close my eyes to all of them. I loved him, and I didn't want to know anything that would tell me I couldn't love him."

"You were young—"

"But I also knew what I was doing, and now I'm paying the consequences for it—" When Pippi started shaking her head, Astrid said quietly, "This is how it should be, and in a way I'm glad to finally have it in the open." Her lips formed a wry smile. "As the cliché goes - nothing like the truth to set us free, darling." Astrid's slim shoulders moved in a shrug. "And now, it's going to get interesting, being Isla de Flores' aging Jezebel—"

The description had Pippi choking back a teary giggle. "Mom!"

Astrid simply smiled, and seeing it, the urge to cry and laugh grew stronger. That smile said everything, reminding her of the family motto.

*Together.*

Everything was possible...*together.*

And maybe, just maybe - because she loved Acheron...

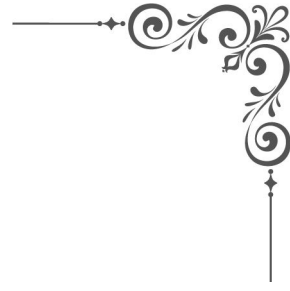
Pippi swallowed hard, but before she could say a word, Astrid had already reached for hand, saying softly, "The answer is yes."

*You love Acheron, and that makes him family.*

*So don't give up on him.*

*Instead, face your troubles...*

*Together.*



## Twenty-Six

ACHERON'S FINGERS CURLED around his phone in a tense, hard grip as he waited for Pippi to answer his call. And if she refused to talk to him, then that was only to be expected. And maybe, it would even be better if it were so -

“Acheron?”

He jerked in his seat, his heart slamming hard against his chest at the sudden sound of Pippi's voice.

*Pippi.*

She had answered his call—

“Acheron?”

It seemed like forever since he had last heard her voice, and his eyes closed.

*I love her.*

The realization should've felt sudden, but it didn't. The truth had been there all along - he had turned himself into a clown, cosplayed as a police, bought a fucking ambulance - no man would do such things for a woman he didn't love, and now he realized that he had loved her from the very start.

He loved her.

Her.

“*Pippi.*”

The sound of his voice made Pippi want to weep. Oh God, it had been so long. *So, so long.* Lying on her bed, she could

only turn on her side and gaze blindly outside her window, pretending that Acheron was one of the stars watching her.

“I only called to let you know that my legal team’s already filed the appropriate cases against those women. Rest assured they’ll be dealt in the severest way possible.”

Pippi didn’t know what to say. She was glad that the women were being made to pay, but was that really the only reason he called?

Acheron waited for Pippi to say a word, to blame him for fucking her life up the way she had every right to, but when she didn’t, he took it upon himself to do it for her. “I’m sorry, Pippi. I know I promised I wouldn’t let you take any risks, and I failed you.”

“It’s not your fault—”

“*Stop being nice, dammit.*” Because the nicer she was, the less he deserved her. He just wanted to believe that he could one day earn the right to be with her. Was that too fucking much to ask?

“You weren’t the one who put that thing online—”

“None of this would’ve happened if you hadn’t gotten in the crosshairs of those bitches, and that wouldn’t have happened either if you hadn’t come to Millie’s defense.” A short, hard pause, and then Acheron asked harshly, “Why did you fucking do it?”

“Because...” *I just snapped.* Or at least that was what she had thought at that time. But now she knew.

Now that she had accepted just how much she loved Acheron -

Now that she remembered Acheron was family...

And you would do everything for family—

“I took a risk,” Pippi whispered.

Acheron stiffened.

“I d-didn’t know it then, but now...now I know - *I was wrong.* I was so wrong, Acheron. Love isn’t about avoiding

risks. It's the opposite, actually. It's about taking risks - *together.*" Her voice caught as a wild rush of emotions struck her, and she just felt so, so much.

So here's to taking another risk—

"I love you, Acheron."

Acheron inhaled sharply.

"And I think...I can...I can..."

*Take a risk, Pippi.*

"I can make you love me."

Acheron couldn't - wouldn't - let himself speak.

Because people who loved them only ended up getting hurt.

And he had to fucking remember that.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that." He could feel Pippi's heart breaking at the words, but he hardened himself against it. He was doing this for her. He was doing this because she was right, and he loved her. "In fact, I think it's best if we both pretend nothing ever happened between us."

Pippi couldn't believe what she was hearing. "*No—*" Pretend nothing ever happened between them? "No. No. No!" And this time, the word came out a sob.

"I'm sorry," he bit out.

"But I l-love you—"

"Goddammit, Pippi—"

*I love you!*"

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"I'm sorry," he said doggedly.

And the line went dead.



AMELIA SLIPPED SILENTLY away as soon as she was certain the call between Acheron and Pippi Jones had ended,

and there was nothing else for her to listen to. *Jesus Christ, but that woman was so damn hard to get rid of.*

She needed a plan.

And she needed to act on it fast.



“YOU WANT A DRINK...*now?*” It was only nine in the evening, but that one phone call with Pippi had completely drained Acheron, and the thought of having to go out and surround himself with strangers was as appealing as the idea of drinking poison.

“It’s been weeks already, and the furor over Anthony’s death’s died down. They stopped giving a fuck about me the moment the police caught his murderer.” When Acheron still didn’t look convinced, she adopted a light, cajoling tone, “Just one drink, Acheron - please?”

He thought about numbing himself to the emptiness inside of him with a drink, and he said reluctantly, “Fine.” Amelia’s doctors at the clinic had said liquor was alright, anyway, as long as it was consumed with moderation.

Acheron took them to a nearby pub, and after ordering her drink Amelia excused herself to go to the ladies. She made a call as soon as she had placed enough distance between her and Acheron, tipping the press about their location and promising them a money shot if they came within half an hour.

*It should be enough to pretend that she had gotten herself drunk,* Amelia considered, and with it she could make her move.

And so everything fell into plan, with Amelia pretending it had been so long that a single beer was enough to intoxicate her.

“That’s enough, Amelia.” Acheron’s voice was tired but firm as he took the bottle out of her hand and placed it out of reach. He saw her body start to slump, and he swore under a breath even as he swiftly reached for her.

Amelia's arms went around his neck, and the strength in her grip took Acheron by surprise. He looked up, and her mouth immediately covered his.

*What the fuck?*

He pushed Amelia away, and the moment he saw the look in her eyes—

“You planned this. Didn't you?” Fuck. Fuck. FUCK. All of a sudden, he remembered Pippi's words, warning him about Amelia doing whatever she could to keep him with her, and he realized with a jerk that Pippi had been right. Even worse, he realized how successfully she had played him for a fool, deliberately feeding his fears to force him into breaking up with Pippi.

Amelia refused to look away when she saw the anger and disappointment on Acheron's handsome face. “I love you.” But when the words once were powerful, she was horrified to see that now they did nothing. “Acheron—” It was finally beginning to dawn on her, just how much she had lost, and that this time it was the end for good. “Acheron...” And this time, her voice broke. “I just did it because I love you. I had to do it —”

“Even if it meant hurting someone who had never done anything to you?” he asked hollowly.

God, he had been such a fucking fool.

Pippi had told him...

Pippi had fucking told him...

“I will never forget how you saved my life, Amy.”

She had always dreamed of him calling her that, but now it only made her start to cry. Because now she knew - now she knew that him calling her like how everyone else called her - it meant she had truly lost him.

“But these days, it only seems that you saved me just to kill me over and over.”

They looked at each other, both of them remembering—



Amelia thrashing his library, accusing him of thinking she was stupid, when he had been the only one to love and respect her.

Amelia nearly bankrupting him, wanting Acheron to join her in hell when all that time he had begged for the chance to take her to heaven with him—

“I don’t want to hate you, but that’s how things are going to end up if we don’t part ways now.” Acheron closed his eyes, and the memories - the few good memories he had of his childhood came sweeping back in, and they were all of her.

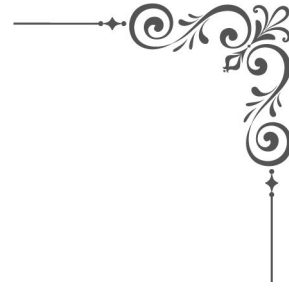
Because once, she had been his reason for living.

Because once, he had loved her.

And he liked to believe that she had loved him, too.

“Amelia...”

He opened his eyes, and it was only then he realized that she was gone.



## Twenty-Seven

PIPPY: *Please answer the phone.*

Pippi: *Please. Let's talk.*

Pippi: *Please.*

Pippi: *I love you.*

But her phone remained silent, and the tears wouldn't stop falling. Pride begged her to give up, to cut her losses and consider the possibility that she could be wrong.

Acheron Simonides was a billionaire.

A drop-dead-gorgeous, incredibly sexy Greek billionaire!

Was it truly possible for a man like him to fall for a girl like her?

She stared at the messages she had typed, wondering how it would feel if Acheron turned out to be a jerk and made his own cruel viral post. *How Pathetic Women Can Get, Exhibit One.*

Just imagining it made her want to throw up.

*So give up.*

But her heart refused to heed the words.

Love was supposed to be about taking risks together, and if she wanted to be with Acheron, she needed to find the courage to face these risks.

Pippi: *I'm not going to give you up without a fight.*

After taking a deep breath, she hit *Send*, and her heart skipped a beat.

Oh, the things she did for love.

To distract herself, she clicked on her phone's browser and started searching for the latest news about Acheron. Falling in love with a billionaire meant learning how to handle the rumors—

And that was when she saw it.

A tweet from a well-known society gossip columnist, sharing a photo of Acheron and Amelia kissing in a pub.

The hashtag below it: #ATM

If only she could believe it meant 'automated teller machine'.



ACHERON HAD JUST GOTTEN back home when the news broke out, and when he saw Wickham waiting for him in the hallway outside his apartment, he knew right away something had fucking gone wrong again.

“How bad is it?”

“Extremely,” Wickham said grimly, “if Ms. Jones happens to see them.”

The billionaire took one look at the tweeted photos Wickham showed and stepped back into the elevator without a word. He knew - he already fucking knew - if he didn't make it in time, he might lose her for good.

When the knock sounded on the Joneses' front door, everyone looked at each other, knowing it could only be one person.

“I just want to talk.”

And it was Acheron, of course.

“Don't let him in,” Pippi cried out when Astrid started to stand.

But her mother only gave her a chiding look. “I didn't raise you to be a coward.”

“Mom, *please*.”

Astrid steeled herself against the tremor in her daughter's voice. "At least just talk to him..."

Pippi's heart started to sink as she watched Astrid walk away to open the door.

*Talk to him?*

She couldn't even think of him without falling apart.

The door started to open.

*I can't.*

And she found herself breaking into a run.

Acheron caught sight of Pippi's tearstained face just as she flew up the stairs, and his heart clenched. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* Why couldn't he stop hurting her? He glanced at Astrid, torn between his need to apologize and go after the woman he loved—

"You're forgiven," the older woman said softly.

*"Thank you."*

Pippi heard Acheron's footsteps, and in her panic she locked herself in the first room she could reach -

And it just happened to be the Monarch Room.

Which was *his* room.

*Omigodomigodomigodomigod.*

His things were everywhere, and so were the memories - God, there were too many memories, and she sank to her knees with a sob.

Pain ravaged Acheron's heart at hearing Pippi cry. "It's not what you think, baby."

Pippi squeezed her eyes shut against the hoarse sound of his voice.

"You were right all along. Amelia...had feelings for me, and she set the whole scene up. She wanted to keep causing trouble between us—"

*And she succeeded,* Pippi thought dully.

“She’s gone now.”

*But for how long?*

Because it was completely clear to her now.

She was wrong about him.

*“Pippi, I love you.”*

A hysterical laugh escaped her. “You don’t.”

He loved Amelia, not her.

“I love you. I’ve always loved you—”

“Stop lying.”

“I’m not. I love you—”

“How can you love me,” she choked out, “when all of the risks you’ve taken in your life were for her?” And just like that, all her pain came pouring out. “Anthony Nolasco could’ve killed you just for wanting her, and yet you still ended up falling in love with Amelia. She nearly cost you your whole business, but you still took her back in! *And I...And I...*”

God, just thinking about it hurt so damn much.

“I g-gave you e-everything, and you left me—you couldn’t even take a single risk—”

The pain in her voice devastated him. “I was scared. I thought I was doing the right thing, leaving you so you wouldn’t suffer the way Millie did. I didn’t want others to hurt you—”

“So you decided it was better for you to hurt me instead?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Baby, I’m sorry.”

“Pippi, please.”

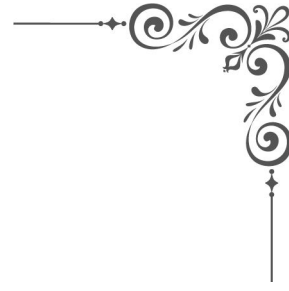
“I love you.”

“Please, baby.”

He begged her on his knees, begged her for hours, begged until his voice became hoarse and ragged - he begged and begged until he realized...she was right.

He had never taken any risks *for* her.

And it was time to change that.



## Twenty-Eight

“YOU MISS HIM,” ASTRID said knowingly over breakfast two weeks later. “It’s written all over your face, so don’t bother denying it.”

Eyes that were both blue and bloodshot at the same time glared at Astrid. “I admit to not being over him, but I also believe it’s just a matter of time before I learn to move on and forget about him.”

No one bothered correcting Pippi, but the looks her family exchanged among each other spoke volume. They didn’t believe her at all, the traitors!

On her way to work, Pippi did her best to clear her mind of all things that had to do with *him*, but it proved impossible. Her family might think she didn’t have it in her to forget *him*, but she couldn’t let herself lose hope like that. She had to find a way to get over him - or die trying.

Gareth Evans was already at the office when she arrived, and she couldn’t help shooting him a suspicious look, saying, “It’s not like you to be early, sir.”

“It’s not like you to come to work looking like you’ve been run over by a truck either,” her boss pointed out dryly, “but that’s life for you.”

*Sheesh.* Pippi rolled her eyes. “Touchy much?” But she was grinning as she said the words. The one good thing that came out from her breakup was that it had somehow granted her immunity to the opposite sex, and she was now able to handle Gareth Evans’ occasional flirtations without getting flustered—

“If you’re the one doing the touching...by all means.”

*Like now.*

“Ha ha ha, Mr. Evans. Very funny.”

Gareth released a sigh of mock regret. “You’re no fun these days, Ms. Jones. You used to blush so easily.”

She noticed him glancing at his watch as he spoke and frowned thoughtfully, trying to recall if they had any important meeting scheduled for today. *Mm.* She reached for her appointment book and flipped to today’s page. *Odd.* There was nothing scheduled for today so—

A phone alarm suddenly sounded off, and Pippi jumped in surprise.

“Finally,” she heard Gareth mutter just before reaching for the remote control to switch the TV on.

*Oh no.*

The last time he had done this, she had ended up with a broken heart.

“Are you waiting for today’s stock report?” she asked hopefully. *Please say yes. Please say yes.* Because if this ended up being about *him* again -

“Actually,” Gareth drawled, “there’s this indie movie I’ve been looking forward to watching.”

“An *indie* movie?” She would never have thought him the type.

Gareth grimaced. “You make it sound like I’m incapable of appreciating the arts.”

“Well—”

“Don’t bother answering that,” her boss grumbled. “Just grab a seat and watch this with me.”

“But—”

“It’s an order, Ms. Jones.”

“In that case - very well, sir.” She sat back down, back straight, hands on her lap, and gaze pinned to the TV. She



worked hard to keep her face expressionless as well, wanting to hide her thoughts.

*An indie movie, of all things!*

The credits started to roll, and Pippi sent a quick prayer to God to keep her awake. It would be horribly embarrassing if -

*Wait.*

Her eyes widened when she realized she was staring at her face - on the TV.

She rubbed her eyes hard.

But when she returned her gaze back to the TV, she saw that it really was her still - and it appeared to be from the CCTV footage—

“This was the first night I met her.”

It was *his* voice, doing the narration for the movie.

“The woman I will love for the rest of my life, although at that time I didn’t know it yet.”

SHIT.

“Pippilotta Jones.”

NO WAY.

“Most people call her Pippi or Pi. But I like to think of her as my little blusher.”

JUST NO.

“And as you can see...it’s something she does rather easily.”

And then she heard the narration fade just as his voice - *from that time* - came barking out.

*Are you just going to stand there like an idiot?*

She knew the safest and smartest thing to do now was to leave, to forget what she had watched, but instead she turned to her boss, saying unevenly, “I don’t understand...”

“It’s his apology,” Gareth said gently. “And it’s a good one, too - if you’d take the chance to watch it until the end.”

Her gaze slowly moved back to the screen.

The movie turned out to be a montage of mostly CCTV clips, artfully woven together to tell a story that was threatening to rip her heart into pieces. Although it had its moments of comic relief, it could never pass for a rom-com, with its refusal to shy away from the most painful moments of her life. And of his.

She tried her best not to cry when it showed a flashback of Acheron confronting Amelia for the way she had almost wiped his fortune in a single fortune. But then she saw they had also managed to acquire footage from her neighbors' own security cameras, and one of it showed her three Great-Aunts walking with proud expressions on their faces.

It was that day Astrid's affair had been exposed, and she gazed at her Great-Aunts with blurry eyes, her heart fit to bursting as she watched them to take things by stride.

*We will weather this together,* their faces seemed to say, *just like we had weathered the past storms.*

And in spite of her better judgment, Pippi started to cry once more in Gareth Evans' presence.

Oh, if only she could just have even a fraction of their strength...

At that point, she didn't think there could be anything else that would make her cry harder, but she was wrong.

The second half of the movie comprised of a series of interviews, and the first "guest" to show up on the screen was none other than Gareth himself.

*I never thought the day would come that Acheron Simonides would come asking for my help - and I had certainly never imagined my secretary would turn out to be the only woman who could bring Simonides to his knees.*

And then it was Millicent Longbourn's turn, and her words were as candid as ever.

*I'll be honest - I once thought it wouldn't matter who my successor would be. I'd hate her all the same because,*

*obviously, I'd rather have Acheron for myself. But when I met dear Pippi - let's just say I'm not the type to fight a losing battle. And I don't mean it's because I'm afraid to compete with her. I'm saying it's no good since Acheron's only got eyes for her.*

Wickham and her whole family were also interviewed. Everyone was in it, even her neighbors, her old boss Mr. Collins and near the very end of the movie - there was Amelia, too.

*Acheron told me that you think he loves me more because the only risks he's taken were for my sake. I guess it's true, if you're thinking about how he's risked his life and livelihood for me. He's even asked me countless times to run away with him, start a new life with him - but you know one thing he's never asked?*

*He's never begged me to love him.*

*And yet with you...*

The screen suddenly went black, and Pippi started in her seat.

*Was that it?*

A moment later, Acheron showed up. He was alone in his living room, and he was looking directly into the camera.

“I don't mind begging over and over again. Because otherwise, it would mean I've lost you for good, and that's the one risk in this life I could never afford to lose. I love you, Pippi. Always and forever.”

Gareth glanced at his secretary, saying, “In case it's escaped your notice, this movie's actually playing live on all of the company's social media platforms as well.” He saw Pippi turn green at the words and suppressed a smile, thinking that a shy thing like Ms. Jones indeed had her work cut out for her once she became the billionaire's wife.

Pippi glanced at the TV and saw the camera following Acheron as he walked towards the front door.

*Oh.*

She rose to her feet, saying awkwardly, “Um...can I...um...?”

“Do I translate that to a request for taking the rest of the day off?”

Pippi smiled sheepishly. “Yes, sir.”

Ten minutes later, and she was inside the elevator and well on her way up to see Acheron. A part of her was still terrified beyond belief, but the bigger part of her wanted to jump for joy. She would take on all the risks in the world as long as it meant they would be *together*.

The elevator doors slid open, and Acheron was already there.

*Oh.*

For several moments all she could do was stare—

“Are you just going to stand there like an idiot?”

The familiar words made her laugh even as her eyes stung. With her heart on her sleeve, she gazed up at him, a smile wobbling to her lips as she murmured, “I’m sorry for the unseemly reaction, Mr. Simonides.”

The words were more than he had allowed himself to hope, and hearing them made Acheron draw his breath sharply. If she had wanted to, she could have made him bleed first, and she would have had every right to do so.

But she hadn’t.

Because she loved him.

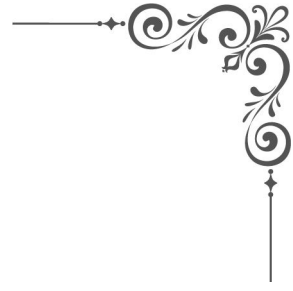
Even after having a taste of what kind of hardships she’d face just for choosing to be with him - she loved him still.

She loved him.

Acheron slowly went down on one knee. “Take this one last risk with me, and I promise to dedicate the rest of my life to bringing you happiness. Will you marry me, Pippilotta Jones?”



HE COMES FORWARD. TAKE this one last risk with me,  
and i promise I'll dedicate the rest of my life to making you  
happy. He goes down on one knee. Will you marry me,  
Pippilotta Jones?



# Epilogue

IT WAS A CHARMINGLY simple wedding, with only the closest friends of the bride and groom in attendance - along with almost every family making up the local population. Damen Leventis stood as Acheron's best man and his daughter Nala made the loveliest flower girl as she walked down the aisle and tossed out rose petals from her tiny basket.

The luncheon that followed was decidedly rustic, with picnic tables spread out by the beach and the food consisting of homemade dishes instead of catered gourmet treats. It was not how most people would imagine a billionaire's wedding to be, but for Acheron and Pippi it was perfect.

And besides, getting married was wonderful and all, but what they were really looking forward to was what happened *afterwards*.

*"I'm so damn hungry for you, Mrs. Simonides."*

"So am I." Her smile was an enthralling mixture of shyness and mischief, something that only Pippi could do, and *Theo*, how it turned him on.

"I hope I can fucking last," Acheron muttered even as he spun his bride to her back and started on the long row of buttons of her wedding dress. While Acheron was proud of his ability to stick to his word and keep his hands off her until the day of the wedding, it had left him rather ravenous, and his fingers actually shook when they accidentally grazed the satiny texture of her naked back.

*Theo*, how he desired her!

Pippi turned to him as her wedding dress fell in a pool of silk around her feet. She had the strongest urge to cover herself, but because she wanted to please him, she managed to keep herself still, hands against her side as his hungry gaze devoured every inch of her body. She could feel her breasts swelling as he continued staring at her, and even her nipples had started to tighten. She tried not to fidget, but it was hard,

and soon she felt it, too, that rich, creamy rush of wetness drenching her folds -

“Have I made you wet, *mikrí mou?*”

She nodded, whispering, “Getting wetter by the second, too—”

The unexpectedly dirty talk made him groan as his control snapped. He hauled her to him, and in another swift move, he had both of them lying on the bed, his powerful, throbbing body on top of hers.

Pippi bit her lip hard, her senses overwhelmed by the familiar heat of his strong, muscular figure. She had missed this so, so much!

“I love you, Mrs. Simonides.”

“I love you, Mr. Simonides.”

His head bent just as her arms went around his neck. Their lips met, their kiss gentle and tender at the start, but then his tongue slowly pushed in. Mairi whimpered, her body writhing under his, and Acheron let out a growl.

The kiss deepened in the next moment, the movement of his tongue becoming deliciously forceful. But instead of resisting and pulling away, she surrendered to his dominance. When he sucked on her tongue, she sucked on his back, and it had both of them panting when the kiss finally ended.

His mouth trailed down, sucking on the side of her neck before nuzzling the valley between her breasts. She clawed his back when he began kneading her breasts, and her nails dug deep into the muscles when he started sucking on her nipples, one at a time, and oh so slowly that it had her panting even more.

By the time he parted her legs, she was more than ready, and it didn't even hurt at all when his long, thick cock finally slid inside to claim her virginity. She started to sob as he started to move. It was so good. It was too good. It was unbelievably, ridiculously, impossibly good, and she never wanted it to end.



Acheron did his best to keep his pace slow and steady, but when he felt his wife begin to move as well, her hips rising up to meet his thrusts and her inner muscles squeezing his cock, he could no longer control himself, his hips slamming down harder and harder with every thrust.

The sound of his balls slapping against her thighs mingled with the sliding hiss of his cock as he rammed into her over and over.

*“Please.”*

*“Acheron, please.”*

*“DON'T STOP!”*

Hearing a virgin say such a thing made Acheron shudder with lust, and if there had been the slightest hope of holding back - that was all gone now. He plowed into her again and again and again, harder and faster until the pleasure overtook them both, striking them at the same time, and their bodies arched against each other as he started to come inside of her.



FOLLOWING THE WEDDING, Acheron and Pippi had their honeymoon in Greece and while there he introduced her to his other friends, such as Stavros and Willow Manolos and the still-single Ioniko Vlahos, who appeared more than interested in buying a beach house at IDF, after hearing Pippi gush about her town.

Their honeymoon lasted for over a month, and they returned just in time to move in to the new extension of Mariposa House. Pippi, whom he knew secretly dreaded the thought of having to live apart from her family, had been over the moon upon seeing her family home renovated and she had burst into tears when Acheron told her they were making their home base in IDF instead of Miami.

Life settled into a peaceful and comfortable routine after that, but it was not in any way boring. The hours at work were always exciting - and sometimes downright suspenseful, too. With Pippi now working directly under Acheron's supervision, she had come to discover that her husband was an intensely

sexual man. Put simply, he wanted to fuck her as many times as he could get away with it, and there were times that they nearly didn't escape getting caught.

Even the lives of her family had changed, and it was a wonderful change, too. Acheron being Acheron, he had simply overruled everyone's protests and took over the family finances. All outstanding loans had been paid in full, there was no longer a need to worry about tuition or living expenses, and all of them - her Great-Aunts, Astrid, and her sisters - all received a monthly allowance in exchange of working for Simonides Inc.

"I love our life," Pippi said with a sigh one day.

"I love our life, too, *mikrí mou*."

They were seated by the window in their favorite cafe in Isla de Flores, with both of them nursing mugs of steaming hot coffee between their hands.

"I'm just so thankful you gave my town a chance," his wife said shyly. "I know you've yet to make any friends here, and while the people here aren't as sophisticated as your friends, they're all very nice, and you'll find them great company, too."

Acheron only nodded, thinking it was too soon to shatter Pippi's illusions about how "simple" Isla de Flores was. As he found more and more time to explore the town and meet the other locals, he had come to realize that IDF seemed to have the highest population of secret millionaires in the entire state. And in this case, he was using the word 'millionaire' rather loosely, having realized that these men had deliberately avoided crossing the billion-dollar mark to avoid being in the limelight.

The owner of the cafe they were in, the town's sole lawyer, the guy managing the corner bookstore and even IDF's own mayor - Acheron, because of his rather extensive connections, had known who they all were despite their rather convincing attempt in downplaying their wealth.

Even Alistair had moved to IDF recently, and thinking about this made Acheron frown as he recalled the last time he was at the local hospital. “Has Vik mentioned anything to you about finding a boyfriend?”

“Vik? My man-hating sister Vik?” Pippi shook her head with a laugh. “That’s impossible.”

And yet he had seen Vik and Alistair together.

“Why do you ask?” his wife questioned curiously.

“Just a thought.” Whatever was going on between those two was up to them. There were other better ways to spend the time than meddling in other people’s businesses, and speaking of which—

Pippi straightened up in her seat in shock when she felt Acheron touch her knee under the table. Her gaze flying to his, she frantically shook her head -

But then she felt his fingers start creeping up.

“Open your legs, mikrí mou.” Her husband’s voice was low and husky, a voice meant to seduce and own. “*You know you want to.*”

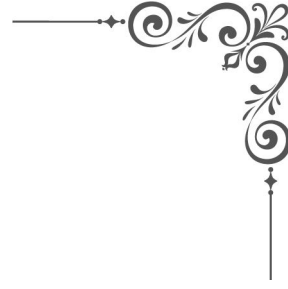
*Lud, lud, lud.*

But because he was right, her legs slowly parted—

*Aaaaaah.*

*I love our life.*

**THE END**



## Dear Reader,

29 MARCH 2023 (WED) 2352h

Manila, Philippines

Thank you so much for reading *Too Wicked for Love*, which was [previously published](#) as *Acheron's Woman*. I hope you enjoyed Acheron & Pippi's story, and in case you're interested, I also have stories planned for Pippi's other sisters.

If you enjoyed reading this book, please consider leaving even just the shortest review or a quick rating. Feedback from reader is a huge, huge help to indie authors like me.

mairi

Side characters like [Damen & Mairi](#) also have their own book; almost all of my stories are interconnected, actually, so please [click here](#) if you'd like to know more about this.

I usually offer limited-time sales for both new works and republished titles, and you'll be able to take advantage of that by [subscribing to my newsletter](#). I also send out emails to share exclusive excerpts for upcoming books from time to time.

That's it for now. Thank you so much again!

Until our next journey,

Marian Tee

*P.S. In case anyone needs to hear this, Exodus 14:14 The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.*