

A man and a woman are posing together against a bright cyan background with a large, wavy orange shape behind them. The woman, on the left, has blonde hair and is wearing a red dress and red high-heeled shoes. She is pointing towards the camera with a smile. The man, on the right, has short brown hair and is wearing a dark blue suit jacket over a red shirt and dark trousers. He is holding a large, plush red heart. The text 'DARE' is written in large white letters across the top, 'I ASK' in white letters below it, and 'HIM!' in large teal letters to the right of the woman. The overall mood is romantic and playful.

DARE
I ASK HIM!

ZOE
ADAMS

Enemies to Lovers Trilogy

DARE I ASK *HIM!*

By Zoe Adams

Dare I Ask HIM!

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Hot Coffee Date

The Little Nell

Saturday Afternoon

Holy fuck balls.

Ann-Marie had already signed the initial marriage agreement, and now we're going to get married, so I don't understand why I'm so nervous about what to wear to *coffee*. How did I go from not caring if anybody thought of me as an asshole to being paranoid about my wardrobe choices? I've never been in this position before – not with Sylvia or Whitney. Yet here I fucking am with Ann-Marie, grappling with so many more feelings than I've ever had with anyone else.

Ann-Marie is already something else to me, the kind of someone I've never had in my life before, and I'm not sure what to make of it. But I'm not about to let her go.

As easily as she signed the initial agreement, I'll contact my attorney to draw an official contract. He can keep the prenuptial private, and with the client/attorney privilege, I should be able to make all the moving parts work. I'll make us all happy, especially Ann-Marie. Though, it'll probably take a couple of weeks to get the official paperwork back. She'll be giddy when she gets the deed, and I can't wait to see that smile on her face.

My phone rings, and I pull it out of my pocket without taking my eyes off the narrow row of clothes in my closet. Why the hell did I bring *these* clothes? None of them will work for my coffee date with my hot fiancée. I should email the lawyers before my clothing choices make her second guess her decisions.

I smooth my thumb over the screen and put it to my ear. “Hello?”

“Adam?”

I pause in my clothes-hunting. “Oh, hey, Blane. What’s up?”

“Just what the hell do you think you’re doing?” Blane’s voice sounds strained.

“Wh-wh-what do you mean?” I’m not sure what he’s figured out or what he’s heard, but I haven’t exactly sorted out how to talk to him about proposing to his new assistant. If he knew I couldn’t think of anything but her legs wrapped around my middle, he’d drag me out in the street, shoot me, and hide my body in the mountains. But those long legs... and that sunshine hair falling over her face.

After a long pause, he asks, “Why didn’t you tell me how important the building was to you?”

They aren’t the words I expect to come out of his mouth, so it takes me a moment to catch up. “The building?”

“Sylvia told me how important this building downtown is to you. So why didn’t you come to me first?”

“Come to you first?” I’m still mentally pedaling to catch up.

“We’re friends, and I would do everything in my power to make sure you were able to fund the building you were interested in,” he says. “You know, I could make up the difference. So I don’t have the added complication of waiting on a will.”

“Oh.” Everything comes into focus. “I didn’t ask Sylvia to say anything.”

“I know, but you’re one of the smartest risks I know.”

“That’s why I didn’t talk to you about it like that. I don’t want to borrow from my friend. I’ve seen it go wrong too often.”

“With your dad?” he asks, incredulous.

“Yes, with my dad and others, but mostly with my dad.”

“I don’t think you can compare me to your dad. He and I are nothing alike. For all you know, he was sleeping with every one of his business partners’ wives, and that’s why everything went south for them.”

I have no residual love for my dad, but Blane’s words still sting; answering is beyond me for a moment. Guilt twinges in my gut as I shove my hand through my hair, a bit like it was back when Sylvia and I were a secret couple.

“Listen, I’m sorry,” he murmurs, probably picking up on my reaction. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“You’re not wrong.” It’s all I can think to say.

“It’s not okay that I said it, though,” he says gruffly.

Agreeing or disagreeing doesn’t matter, so I add nothing.

“Despite all that, I would like to invest in your business plan, Adam.”

I take a long moment to show I’m thinking about it. “Blane, I appreciate the offer but don’t need your money. I only need to be able to get the money my father left me, and I’m working on a loophole.”

“A loophole?”

“Yeah, a way I’ve figured out how to get Daniel –”

“Daniel?” Blane echoes.

“That’s the son of my dad’s lawyer from back in the day. Daniel runs the practice now. Daniel’s not the one who drew up the will documents, but he’s the one enforcing them. So I’m hoping the loophole will make him happy.”

“Ah.”

“The loophole should make everyone happy.” It’s true. I can make Ann-Marie happy with the apartment, and I’ll be happy with the money for the new acquisition.

“Is this loophole a done deal?”

I think for a moment. “Almost.”

“Then don’t be stubborn. My offer is a sure bet.”

I sigh. Blane’s the only asshole bigger than me. “I’m protecting our relationship.”

“Adam....”

“Blane.”

“Fine. Talk to your attorneys. They can write up whatever agreement you want them to write up.” That’s when the

realization hits me: he's not going to let this go, but neither am I.

Well, shit. That means I only need to placate him, so I say the only thing I can. "I'll talk to the attorneys."

"When?"

"Now," I say. Sometimes Blane knowing me so well, didn't work in my favor. "I'll cc you when I do," I add. "Will that work?"

"Sure." Another uncomfortable silence happens, and it's time to end the call. We're not exactly in agreement about everything, but Blane is doing his best to be my friend.

Finally, I cleared my throat. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"For caring."

"No problem." A click follows his words.

It's as close as we ever get to expressing feelings, but there's a lot to unpack, and none of us have time for that. I drag my laptop out of the case, open it, and hastily type an email to Nathaniel at Pitman & Sons. Nathaniel has been my attorney and the lead on most of what I do with my personal life – including the eventual fake marriage contract. Nathaniel won't tattle on my plan to my dad's law firm.

I drop Blane's email address in the carbon copy spot on the email. Then, I instruct Nathaniel to respond with the paperwork for a business loan, knowing full well that it won't be necessary once I have the paperwork from my impending

marriage of convenience. Still, the investment paperwork will take a week or two to draw up.

Then I send an email to Ronald, the attorney for the owner of the building I want to purchase in Denver. For the hell of it, I cc'd Blane on that, too, attaching the signed offer statement. Blane wants to be in the middle of things, so I'll let him. He doesn't have to know the details of the loophole. Not yet.

Then I get back to figuring out what to wear on my coffee date, finally settling on two items. It's fucking boring as hell, but at least the black polo and black slacks are classic. Next, I brush my hair and splash on some cologne. Then I make my way toward Ann-Marie's hotel room.

At my knock, she throws open the door, and she's in leggings and an off-the-shoulder sweater, nearly the white of freshly fallen snow on the pines just outside of her balcony. The line of her jaw, her neck, and her shoulder lead my eye down, and I've never been so turned on by a damn collarbone. Or a waist or fucking sexy hips. As my appraisal hits the floor, she curls her toes into the carpet, and her bare feet surprise me. Though, her bare toenails surprise me, too. Most of the women I know have regular pedicures and manicures, and I make a mental note to ask her later if she'd like it.

“Hi, Adam,” she murmurs.

My gaze jumps to hers. “Am I early?”

She laughs, but she doesn't invite me in right away. "No, I'm late."

"Everything going okay in there?" I don't want to ask my way in, but hanging out in the hallway isn't my top choice. A bellhop hurries down the hall behind me, and I keep my eyes on Ann-Marie.

"Yeah. I found the jacuzzi and bath and had a long conversation about our families. It was therapeutic."

The grin splits my face. "You have the best way of looking at everything."

She studies my outfit. "Black on black. Very... funeral-like." At least the twinkle in her eye gives away her teasing. "So, are you going to ask me?"

"Ask what?" A maid scurries through and scowls at me as though I shouldn't be standing there at all.

"To come in."

"Uh, sure." I lean forward and lower my voice to a whisper. "May I come in, please?"

"Pretty please?"

"What?"

"You know. Pretty please. Didn't anyone make you do that when you were a kid?"

A sigh wants to escape, but instead, I give in. "May I come in, pretty please, with sugar on top? Plus a cherry."

She beams at me, moves backward, waves me into the room, and bows, far more easy-going than she's been since I've met her. It's like she signed on the dotted line, and all bets

are off. The thought sends a tingle through to my balls and my dick. All bets are off... but maybe everything's on the table now. I could go for that... her, on a table.

She crosses her arms. "Well?"

"Well?" I echo.

"You're still out there."

"Oh." I step inside and close the door behind me. "Better?"

"Fuck, yes."

"You ready to go get coffee?"

She tips her head back and forth. "Yeah, sure."

"But you're not?"

"I'm barefoot."

"I noticed." Yes, I did – her bare feet, hips, and everything about her today. "If you want to get a manicure or pedicure this weekend, I bet Sylvia knows a place nearby."

She snorts. "I don't do those without some event."

"Oh."

"But I do need some help."

"I'll do whatever I can."

"Wanna help me take my clothes off?"

I freeze at that, trying to process the words she's speaking. Instead of adding shoes, did she just proposition me? So, I go with something safer. "I beg your pardon?"

She smooths the tip of her tongue over her lips.

Oh, fuck. The things she could do with her tongue. If she lets me, I will do all sorts of things with my tongue, and another rush of desire floods me. Hopefully, she doesn't notice anything going on south of my belt.

She puts her hands on her hips, and I'm sure she intends to leave me wondering if I heard what she actually said. "Probably a thought for a different time. I've got to put my shoes on before we can go."

"Is coffee in the lobby okay? They contract with a local family, and they get Alaskan coffee beans. I forget what it's called, but it's a red goat logo."

"Sure. I'm easy."

"Oh, you're definitely not easy."

"Didn't take much to talk me into marrying you."

"Why did you sign the contract?"

"To show you I was serious."

"Will you sign one after it goes through my attorneys?"

She finishes tying her shoes, straightens, and shrugs. "As long as it's the same as the other contract, I'm game."

"Very good." We make our way out of her room and into the hall, and we fall silent as we make our way to the elevators.

My hand finds its way to the small of her back, and I relish the sensation of escorting this incredible, lively woman. It's something I could get used to, and as I think about it, my heart flutters – all because of this woman with me. Skipping a beat

is an arrhythmia, isn't it? Maybe I should call an ambulance for myself.

"It's my turn to have a question for you," she says abruptly.

"Shoot."

"What's your history with Sylvia?"

My throat goes dry, and I'm not sure I can speak or swallow.

Of course, that's when I choke on my own spit.

Caffeine & Dopamine

The Little Nell

Saturday Afternoon

“What?” The word comes out of his mouth like a squeak as we come to a halt in front of the elevators.

I press the down arrow button, letting the silence stretch a little while I drag my gaze over him. He’s in all black, making him seem sexy and brooding. Even though I’m going to get paid for the task, I’m about to marry this guy, and if the opportunity comes up, I’m going to seduce him today... or let him seduce me. Chickening out back in my hotel room hadn’t been my plan.

I tip my head to the side. “You know, Sylvia, Blane’s sister, pretty dark-haired woman. Your ex.”

He flinches and coughs as though I’ve asked something shocking, and I’m giddy from the discreet enjoyment I’m getting out of harassing Adam Smith, my asshole neighbor. But of course, he’s not the asshole I’ve always thought he was, and my life’s been pretty good since he wormed his way into it.

“Well?” I press.

He squirms a little as the elevator dings, and the doors slide open. He places his hand on my lower back, and we move inside. “I’m not sure I heard you.”

“You did, too. Both times.” We do an about-face. When he doesn’t answer, I continue. “I asked about the story with you and Sylvia Astor. You two seem to have some kind of history. Well, at least according to her.”

The elevator begins moving, and he rubs his chin, then the back of his head. “She told you about that, did she?”

“Was she a crazed stalker after you for your money?”

He snorts as the carriage comes to a stop, and silently, an older woman steps into the elevator, clutching a small tri-color terrier. She doesn’t speak but smiles and nods a greeting to both of us.

“No, nothing like that,” he says. “Every part of our relationship was always consensual.”

The stranger’s eyes widen slightly, but she clutches her dog closer and makes no sound.

“Then she basically staked her claim.” I catch the eye of the stranger, and I already know I’m looking happier about the whole thing than I should.

“Her *claim*?” Adam clearly doesn’t care there’s a stranger in here.

“She said you were going to propose to her.”

His eyes widen, and his eyebrows hit his hairline. “She said *that*?”

“In as many words.”

He winces. “Did Blane hear her say all that?”

The woman hurries out ahead of us and gives us both a look over her shoulder.

My mouth twists into a lopsided grin. As I suspected, their relationship had been a secret. At that, I can't stop my grin since it must mean she felt threatened by me at lunch. It's an ego-stroke if I'm being honest. Though, I'm not about to tell Adam.

“Did he?” he asks again, and we move out of the elevator.

“Oh, don't worry. He stepped away to answer a call, so your secret's safe, but I'm still interested in the rest of the story. Do you keep all your relationships secret from Blane?”

“No.” He drags out the single word so much it's almost two syllables. “But she's his sister, so I did. We didn't go out on a formal date until we had already been together for several months.”

We stroll into the coffee shop and stop in the short line. “How long was your relationship?”

“Six months, give or take.”

“And you broke it off.”

“How did you know that?”

“Because she's still burning a candle for you.”

“I don't think that's true.” He turns to the barista and places his order. Then he turns to me.

“Largest iced mocha with three extra espresso shots.” I tug a twenty from my pocket and hand it to her before Adam can offer his card. “My treat.”

He blinks at the money without making any comment.
“That’s a lot of caffeine.”

“I plan on being up late tonight.”

He doesn’t answer, but his expression turns thoughtful as the wheels turn in his head.

“What are *your* plans tonight?” I ask.

“I don’t have any. Do you?”

“Not yet, but I’m pretty sure something will pop up (*especially if I have anything to do with it.*)”

We take our coffees to small tables near the wide windows and spend the afternoon talking about life. Then, close to five o’clock, my phone buzzes, and I recognize the number as Mrs. Miller.

“Oh, excuse me. I have to take this,” I say, hurrying onto the patio. “Hello? Mrs. Miller?”

“Ann-Marie? Is that you?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“There’s a lot of static on the line, but I wanted to ask if Butterball is up to date on her vaccines.”

“Yes, why?”

“She seems to not be feeling well.”

I gasp. “What? What’s wrong?”

“She seems to have filled her litter box, and it’s not... Well, it’s not normal.”

“She has special food. Is that what you’ve been feeding her?”

“Oh.” The silence on the line worries me. “Is she allergic to shrimp?”

“Did you feed her shrimp?”

“It wasn’t very old. It was only out for a single day.”

For fuck’s sake. “And you fed it to her?”

“She wouldn’t stop asking for it.”

“How? How did she ask for it? She hasn’t been in your house,” I bite back the rest of what I want to say. “When you clean the catbox, the fresh litter is in the....”

“No, ma’am, I don’t do litter boxes.” Mrs. Miller’s tone prohibits any argument.

“Do you have anyone who can do that? Maybe Pete?”

“I’ll ask and let you know. You really should have said something about her allergies before now, Ann-Marie.”

“You’re right. I should have.” I’m too far away from Denver to argue with her since I still need her to take care of Butterball. “Everything else going okay?”

“Yes. When are you coming home?”

“As soon as possible, but my work here isn’t finished.”

“Mmm,” she says, and I get the impression she doesn’t believe me. “Then I’ll call you when if I need anything else.”

“Sounds good.”

“We’ll speak soon, Ann-Marie. Bye-bye.”

I end the call, trying to think of anybody else in the building who might be able to clean out a litter box. Old Pete is all I can think of, but he’s older than Mrs. Miller.

Adam appears beside me. “Everything okay?”

My grimace belies my concern. “It’s fine.”

“No, what’s wrong?”

“Butterball has the shits, and Mrs. Miller doesn’t want to clean the litter box. So I’m stuck in Aspen and can’t do anything about it from here.”

He waves his hand. “Oh, don’t worry. I can ask my people to change out the box.”

“Your people? Would they do that?”

“I’m fond of Butterball, too, and we have pets from time to time. It’s not a big deal.”

“It kind of is.” I elbow him. “How will they get into my apartment?”

“I left the keys with my security and the doorman.”

I make a face, touched by his care of Butterball. “But a litter box? That seems like a big ask.”

“Let me make a few calls,” he shrugs. “Hungry?”

My cheeks warm, not from embarrassment but from desire. “I was thinking about ordering in. Room service or something.”

He nods, and we make our way back toward my room without speaking. But he calls a few people and finds somebody to clean the litter box in my apartment, and the whole thing overwhelms me. Finally, his asshole-ness seems to be a thing of the past.

When we stop at the door to my suite, I press my hand to his cheek. “Thanks for caring about Butterball.”

He slips his hand into his pockets and leans against the wall beside me. “Sure. No problem.”

I lower my hand and unlock the door. “You know. I have another question for you.”

His gaze narrows, and he seems dubious. “What is it?”

I move over the threshold, but I don’t close the door or send him away. “Where are you sleeping tonight?”

He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “Where do you want me to sleep, Ann-Marie?”

I can’t see the bed I made this morning from the door of my hotel room. “I’ve got a lot of energy to burn.”

“Makes sense. You had a bunch of caffeine.”

“And now I’m looking for some dopamine,” I add.

“What kind of dopamine?”

I reach for the belt loops on the front of his slacks and tug him into the hotel room, so I can close the door behind us. “I’ll show you.”

A groan rumbles out from him, and the sound makes my stomach twist with excitement. “Ann-Marie. Are you sure you want to do this?”

“More than you know.” Then I drag him into the bedroom, so I can show him just how sure I am. I don’t want to do *this*... I want to do *him*. It’s going to be a helluva weekend.

The Little Nell

Monday Morning

I cover a yawn, not quite sure I'll have the wherewithal to stay awake through Blane's dictation today. I got up too late to get down to the lobby for a coffee before work. Blinking, I try to clear the blariness from my eyes.

My weekend of fucking has come to a close, and Adam is probably on his way back to Denver to look into our contracts or his building or something else. Once I get back to Denver, we'll sign the paperwork, get it notarized, and we'll be a couple. But we didn't leave the hotel room Saturday night or at all on Sunday. We ordered food in, and I didn't think of skiing once. Instead, we planned to hook up again when I return to Denver.

A hotel employee hurries toward me in the hallway, and she has a coffee cup in her hand. "Miss, here's your coffee," she calls, coming to a stop beside me.

I frown at her. "My coffee? I didn't order any coffee."

"No, no, ma'am. You didn't, but Mr. Adam Smith called your coffee order down before he checked out this morning. He mentioned what you'd be wearing today and asked me to catch you. Then he placed the order and paid for it."

I reach into my pocket to grab some money, but she places her hand on my arm. “No, don’t worry about it. He already tipped me.”

“Thanks,” I murmur.

“Let us know if you need anything else, Ms. Smith.” She hurries away.

My breath catches in my throat, and I chew my bottom lip. It’s been the fucking best weekend I’ve ever had, and Adam isn’t an asshole at all. Good food, good sex, a good mattress, a good bathtub... Maybe I didn’t go skiing, but Adam’s worth it.

I take a long drink of the iced coffee, board the elevator, and carefully make my way toward Blane’s suite. The door opens before I can knock, and I slip inside.

“Did you have a good weekend?” Blane’s in a t-shirt, shorts, and it looks like he’s just been in the shower.

“It was great.”

“Did you get any skiing in?”

“Not this weekend, but that’s okay. I’m sure it’ll happen one of these days.” I grin at him, but I don’t add anything else. Throwing Adam under the bus isn’t on my day’s agenda. “What’s up first?”

“I’ll start my childhood story, and you ask questions as we go. We’ll have to keep it down since Sylvia is still sleeping, but today will help us get to know each other. There’ll be a lot of back and forth. Don’t worry about getting up to speed today.”

I nod. “Perfect.”

He continues. “Tomorrow, we’ll talk about what I plan for chapters and the layout. It’ll help flesh out the autobiography, and once we get through this week, you can transcribe everything up to that point before we get on with the teenage years. I don’t expect we’ll get much farther than either of those this week, but I expect we’ll have everything together after a couple of weeks.”

After I get my laptop turned on, Blane starts talking, and I make notes with questions for him. But I can’t keep Adam out of my head, and my trip back to Denver can’t get here soon enough.

Truth Hurts

Denver, Colorado

Monday Morning

Two Weeks Later

A light double-knock sounds through the apartment, and I glance up from my exercises as I try to place the sound. It's not from the front door where I hope maybe Ann-Marie has come by for an early morning hello, but it's knocking, nonetheless.

Nope, not from the front. So, I glance toward the fire escape. It's Butterball, pawing at my window, begging to be let in. She knows I have treats for her now, and she comes by every morning to get one. I open the window, and she scurries inside where I give her a treat. She purrs the whole time. As she cleans herself, post-snack, I grab my cell.

Me: Are we on for today?

Ann-Marie: Yeah. I'll be there about 2 PM. Did you make the appointment with your attorney?

Me: He's going to make a house call.

Ann-Marie: We should invite Mrs. Miller and blow her socks off. Or maybe we can get her and Pete to make it a double wedding. Lololololol.

In the last two weeks, I haven't seen Ann-Marie much at all since she's been snowed under with work from Blane, but we've been texting back and forth while she's been in Aspen. Once Blane figured out she was competent, she became indispensable to him. Maddeningly, my fiancée hasn't been naked in my apartment yet, and I'm hoping to change that. She enjoyed it the last time I was shirtless in the hall with her cat.

Butterball meows from someplace in the back of my penthouse.

"Well, come back in here," I call back.

She appears at the corner of the entrance to my bedroom and jogs toward me. Her jingly collar chimes as she makes her way toward me, stopping to smell the corner of the dining room chairs, the couch, and the cabinets between us. She stops at my feet and sits back on her haunches, staring up at me, meowing several times.

"Your mama doesn't like it when I give you more than one. She says it ruins your dinner, and I'm not about to give you diarrhea again. Your mom would kill me if I did that. She wasn't happy with Mrs. Miller when she gave you bad shrimp."

She meows at me again, clearly not happy with my answer to her demands.

“I haven’t seen your mom in a few days.” And I miss Ann-Marie. So, I scoop the cat into my arms, shove my cell phone in the rear pocket of my jeans, and head toward the elevators. “She hasn’t come up here to see me,” I murmur. “So, let’s go see her.”

In the hallway outside of Ann-Marie’s apartment, Mrs. Miller is bustling after a couple of small children. When she sees me, she gives me a derisive sniff. “Have you stolen Ann-Marie’s cat?”

“I do, indeed, have Ann-Marie’s pussy, Mrs. Miller.” Playing up the lecherous angle, I leer while I’m saying it so she knows exactly what I actually mean.

The intake of her breath sounds like a hiss, and she puts her nose in the air but hurries away.

“Has Old Pete proposed to you yet? I heard something around the building about that.”

She whirls back toward me, and the two small children run ahead. Her eyes widen, and indecision crosses her face as her eyebrows pinch. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, I suggest you ask him since I’m only your landlord.”

“Harumph.” She whips back around and scurries down the hall.

Pissing her off is worth a chuckle, and I’m still snickering when I knock on Ann-Marie’s door.

“Who is it?” she calls from inside.

I put my face close to the door. “Who do you think?”

She throws open the door, and her make-up's done. Plus, she has flowers in her hair. "What are you doing here?"

"I brought your cat home."

"Without a shirt?"

"You liked it last time."

Her eyes widen as her gaze rakes over me. Finally, she licks her lips and hooks her hand in the crook of my arm, and pulls me inside. "You know, you're not supposed to see me yet," she whispers, but she smooths her hand over my bare chest. "But I have to admit...."

I flash a smile and drop Butterball to the ground, pulling her against me. "Admit what?"

"It's good to see you holding my pussy." Then she throws her head back to laugh.

I bring my mouth to her neck, kissing along the base of her neck. "Where have you been?"

"Here. Working."

"When did you get back?"

"Yesterday?"

I bring my hand down to her waist, her hips, her ass. "Fuck. I've missed your ass. Why is that important I don't see you? I could see a whole lot more of you right now."

Her chest heaves, and her hands slip into my hair. "It's to make the pictures more believable for whoever you have to send them to."

“What about after we sign paperwork with the attorney and file for our marriage license?”

“What about it?”

“What are we going to do?”

“Partake in those fringe benefits,” she says.

“We’ll already be in my place.” I want to fuck her in my bed, see her spread on my bed, calling my name.

Her lips are already bright red from the blood pulsing through her. “I’ll stay tonight. Do you have the paperwork?”

“Yeah.” *Or I will by the time my attorney shows up.* But I don’t say that part aloud.

She opens the door and shoves me back out into the hallway. “Now get out of here before we miss our afternoon appointment.”

Shit. I need a cold shower. I’m not sure I’ll be able to do without Ann-Marie. Fringe benefits is going to be the summation of my life. When I step out of the elevator on the penthouse level, my cell phone chimes.

Blane: Do you have lunch plans? Sylvia and I want to meet you for brunch. We have some news about a party we’re going to throw in about six months.

The words glare up at me from my backlit screen. I haven’t told Blane yet, and my avoidance of a confession is obvious, even to me, at this point. I’ve not seen Sylvia since I left Aspen the Monday after my weekend with Ann-Marie. Neither

of them knows about our afternoon plans with my attorney, and we can tell them together.

We're hoping the signed contract and a few pictures will be enough for Daniel, the attorney who holds my father's will. But, of course, we can always have a bigger wedding ceremony later if it's not enough to end my father's stranglehold from beyond his grave.

Me: Not today. Would tomorrow work for you two? It'll be me, plus one.

Blane: We'll put it on the schedule. Did you ever get the paperwork from Nathaniel for the business loan?

Me: I'll follow up with him today, and we can discuss it tomorrow.

Blane: Sounds good.

I type the perfunctory follow up email and cc Blane. I don't spend much time drafting it, and it's on the way without much forethought. Nathaniel will know what it's about. He also hadn't sent me anything about our updated wedding contract either, so I send another email referencing that as well.

About noon, as I'm pacing with a nervous energy, an email pings on my phone, and I don't look at it long before jogging toward the window. It's the contract for Blane, I'm sure. It came from Nathaniel of Pittman & Sons. I forward it to Blane with the message: "Loan paperwork." Another email shows up, and I forward it to Ann-Marie.

My phone trills almost immediately with an email from Blane, and I stare at the subject line:

WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO?

A text follows with the same words.

I send a question mark via text but go back to open the email. In all capital letters, Blane has typed: WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO?

It's in the subject line and in the message, and I frown at the screen. What's does he mean by all that? The paperwork from Nathaniel will be the standard business loan, and my attorney is well-versed... Something tickles the back of my mind. It has to be something in the attachment. I stare at the email for a long moment and then I open the attachment, trying to figure out what's going on.

Oh, shit.

I sent him the marriage contract I meant to send to Ann-Marie. *Oh, fuckity, fuck, fuck.* I was going to tell him about it tomorrow. Not today. Not now. Not like this.

I try to call Blane, but he doesn't answer my call. Instead, he calls back two heartbeats later.

"Hey," I say. "I know you're probably...."

"You're marrying my assistant? We had this conversation at the beginning. I told you she was off the table."

"It's to get my inheritance. She agreed."

"That's supposed to be better?" he snaps. "You're borrowing it from me, aren't you? Why would you need Ann-Marie?"

“This way, I don’t have to borrow from you. Our relationship stays safe.”

A stream of expletives flows from him. “So, now, you’re toying with *her* emotions? Risking her relationship with you and me?”

“No games. We’re going into this with our eyes wide open.”

“The fuck you say. You convinced her to keep this from me. How can I trust her now? How can I trust you? She’s got a shit ton of dirt on me now, and maybe she’s going to sell it all off to the highest bidder.”

“She wouldn’t do that,” I argue.

“How do I know that?”

“Why the hell are you getting so bent out of shape about this, Blane? What’s going on?”

“Tell me. What’s she get out of the deal?”

“Her apartment. She gets it free and clear.”

“At least she fucking gets something besides the broken heart you left Sylvia.”

“Sylvia? What are you talking about?”

“You think I didn’t know about you two? She mourned your break up for months.”

The line goes dead, and dread churns in my stomach.

I bolt out of my place and screech to a halt in front of Ann-Marie’s apartment, already dreading what I must tell her. Maybe I can tell her before Blane will.

I knock on Ann-Marie's door.

"Who's there?" she calls.

I put my face close to her door. "Who do you think?"

She opens the door a crack and has her cell phone in her hand. It lights up with a notification. "You can't keep showing up before it's time."

"I have to tell you something."

She glances at her cell phone, frowns, steps back, and taps on the message. "Fired? By text? What the hell is going on?"

"It's my fault. All of it. I should have told Blane long before now."

"You didn't?" Her voice goes up an octave with each word. "You didn't tell him? What about Sylvia? If she still wants you... Shit. Shit. Shit." She shakes her head. "Get out."

"Ann-Marie, please." When I reach for her, she winces and pulls away.

"No. Not now. I'll see you at 2 PM." Then she slams her door.

My shoulders droop, and I trudge back to my penthouse. What the hell had I done?

###

Denver, Colorado

Monday 1:50 PM

It's nearly time, and I don't have any idea what's happening at two o'clock.

But the knock on the door surprises me, and who's behind it surprises me more. Ann-Marie stands on the threshold with her lips compressed into a tight line. She has a white sundress on, flowers in her hair, and I stand there for a long minute.

She quirks an eyebrow, and she looks as fierce as she did when I broke up with Whitney. "You going to let me in?"

"Sure." I step out of the way.

"Before you ask, I said I would come, so I'm here."

The elevator dings as it arrives on my floor, and Nathaniel steps out carrying a briefcase.

"Is that him?" she asks.

"It's the attorney."

"Good." She steps in, and I offer my elbow, and she squints at it before taking it and accompanying me to the center of the living room. Her expression is harder than I've ever seen it, and she's pale.

When Nathaniel gets inside, he studies her. "You okay, Ms. Smith?"

"Fine. Let's just get it over with."

He hesitates a moment, but when I nod at him, he nods at her. "To verify, you're doing this of your own free will?"

"Yep."

Nathaniel's eyebrows lift, but he turns to me. "And this is your own free will, correct?"

“Yes, it is.”

“Is it a real marriage?”

Ann-Marie’s face twists. “We’ve had lots of sex already, so yeah, it’s as real as it’s going to get.”

“Very good.”

“What about rings?”

Ann-Marie’s face turns red. “We’re not doing rings.”

Nathaniel turns to me. “Really?”

I shrug.

The lawyer doesn’t add anything else. Instead, he pulls several papers out of his briefcase. We sign on the dotted line, and Nathaniel brings out the marriage certificate paperwork, too. After we sign that, he shakes our hands. The whole process took about ten minutes.

“It’s over and done,” he says. “I guess I’ll leave you two lovebirds to do whatever it is you want to do.”

I laugh, but Ann-Marie glares up at me. I accompany Nathaniel as he makes his way out of my apartment, promising to send copies as soon as he gets all the documentation, so I can send it to the other lawyers.

When I return to the living room, Ann-Marie throws the flowers out of her hair in the nearest trash can. Her expression still hasn’t softened one bit. She grabs a paper towel, wets it in the kitchen, and starts wiping her face. As quickly as our happiness began, it was over, and the truth hurt.

“Are you staying the night?” I see all the good of the last few weeks shriveling up and turning to ash. “I’d like you to

stay.”

“Not today. Not ever,” she snaps. “You’re the asshole who got me fired from my dream job, Adam, and I can’t forget that.”

Then she marches out of my penthouse and slams the door behind her.

Second Thoughts

Denver, Colorado

Tuesday

One Month Later

How could Adam fucking do this to me?

I scrub my kitchen countertop a little harder. It's the same damn question that's been rattling around my head for days. Rinsing the sink makes me think of the instant hot water heater I had on my daydream wish list. So much for all that.

Adam didn't tell Blane, and that got me fired. Rent will no longer be an easy street – if it ever was. Life so didn't work out for me the way I'd hoped it would.

I switch to scrub the other side of the counter. But I didn't tell Blane either. I had two whole weeks to confess, same as Adam did, and neither of us told anyone. Why? I have a sneaking suspicion it was because I didn't want to hear about how bad an idea it was or how likely I was going to get hurt.

Yet *I'm* the one who initiated intimacy in Aspen.

I'm the one who wanted to pretend it was my way into a happily ever after.

I'm the one who wanted the fairytale, and I'm the one who's pissed she didn't get it. My shoulders droop, and I bite back a frustrated groan and toss the wash rag onto the counter.

It's been one long-ass month since I stomped out of his place and slammed the door behind me. That slamming door became the biggest hurdle I've ever encountered, and I don't know what to do about it. Then, Butterball jumps onto the counter beside me and meows at me.

I scoop her up and hug her to my face, letting my random rush of tears drip into her fur. Yet, for the hundredth time this week, I wonder if I'm being too hard on Adam. He was the asshole in the apartment building, but our trip to Aspen changed all that, and I miss him, his texts, and the way his lop-sided grin lights up my insides. I let Butterball back down on the counter.

The clock on the wall chimes on the hour, and it does so now. Eleven o' clock in the morning means our mail should be in the boxes in the foyer already. Grabbing the keys from the hook by my front door, I hurry to the elevators and press the down button.

Mrs. Miller is in the elevator with her arm hooked through Old Pete's arm. Sometimes in the last month, they must have decided to go public with their tryst.

I grin at both of them, despite my melancholy mood. "Hey."

"Why, hello, Ann-Marie," Pete says, his voice as rough and gravely as it always is.

“Did you hear the news?” Mrs. Miller gushes. She wiggles her left hand, and I see the tiniest flash of something glittery on her ring finger.

“You’re fucking engaged?” *Never thought that would happen for those two.* They both look uncomfortable before I realize I’ve cussed at them. “Oh, shit. I mean, I’m sorry. It’s the excitement. I hadn’t heard anything about it.”

Pete’s the first to recover, and his eyes twinkle. “Oh, we’re excited, too. Maybe not four-letter-word excited but still excited.”

The elevator dings as we pass another floor. “Where will you live?”

“We haven’t decided yet,” he answers.

Mrs. Miller shoots Pete a dark look. “We’re going to live in both places. So I’m not giving up my space, and I’m not downsizing.”

He tucks her arm against him tighter. “We’re still deciding.”

“I told you I’m not going to....”

“Maggie,” he soothes. “We’ll figure it out. We have all the time in the world, my love.”

Mrs. Miller bites back anything else she intended to say, and she beams at Pete, staring into his eyes as he peers into her soul. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen her back down from chewing anyone out. They’re the only two in the whole world, and I’m the third fucking wheel. Clearing my throat does nothing to break their trance.

The elevator dings as we hit the lobby level, and I bolt out of the torture box, sprinting around the corner to the wall of mailboxes. It's been a week since I've gotten the urge to check my mail, and my box is full. When I open the door, everything falls out into my arms. A large over-stuffed envelope falls out with Mr. Adam Smith stamped across the front of it.

A sigh works up from my toes. It looks like something official and probably needs to get to Adam as soon as possible. At least my trip back to my apartment is blessedly lonely, and I'm in my place without any incident.

I'm not as mad at Adam anymore. Instead, I'm mourning what could have been, but I'm thankful for the memory of the trip to Aspen. Of course, none of that would have happened without Adam referring me to Blane, despite the lousy way it all ended up.

A girl doesn't get married every day, and I could have stayed the night in his place. A big part of me regrets not seeing what he had planned that night. A bigger part of me regrets not marching up there and demanding some of those fringe benefits sometime in the last thirty days.

But he hasn't reached out to me either.

And I won't reach out to him. I can't. Can I? I don't know, and scrubbing my kitchen isn't helping me figure out what to do next.

Though, I can already tell my resolve is crumbling. I have five more months of being Mrs. Adam Smith before I get my apartment, and I have to take advantage of my rent-free life while I'm hunting for a new job. Maybe Adam's been able to get his inheritance. If he has, maybe I can get rid of some of

the guilt I feel since using marriage to get a free apartment. It made sense back when I entered the contract, but it feels selfish and self-serving now.

I drop the mail on the counter and four bills tumble out, too. Electric, water, cell phone, internet... all of them are due the same week, and I'm not sure I'll have the funds to get them paid. In between small gigs, I've been working on transcribing and organizing Blane's two-weeks of interviews. It's almost complete. Maybe it's silly to finish it after he fired me, but I don't want to leave the job half-done, no matter how late it is.

My cell phone is as silent as it's been for the last month, no matter how many times I wish it to connect me to Adam in the penthouse upstairs. I scroll through my email messages, typing in Adam's name, and scrolling through the few emails he'd sent.

I tap the attachment to the email he sent me the day all the shit hit all the fans in Denver. For the first time, I read through the contract. At the end, I catch a misplaced decimal for the interest rate. They can't possibly mean the rate listed in the contract. I drum my fingers on the counter I've just cleaned, trying to recall what I learned when I had been typing out the Intro to Economics class lectures for the lazy college student. Surely, the attorneys caught it, right?

Or...

Maybe I could use it and the mis-boxed mail as an excuse to get in touch with Adam. He can't tell me to get lost if I save him some money on interest rates on his business loan with Blane. Maybe if I can finish Blane's project, I can also send it

over to him with an apology. But first, I'll run upstairs to point out the interest rate error to Adam. It can be my thank you to him for balancing the scales a little better between us.

I print the contract, circle the interest calculation errors, and make a quick note on several Post-it notes. Then I tuck the papers in a large envelope before I scrawl his name across the front.

Adam hasn't been up to his usual antics anymore. He's not been making fucking noises all night. When I get to the front door of Adam's penthouse, I raise my hand to knock, but I hear a woman's voice inside. I frown.

It sounds like Whitney. Did he go back to Whitney after we got married? Is that what he'd been doing for the last thirty days? My eyes flood with tears, and I bite my bottom lip, trying to keep the moisture from spilling over my cheeks. Interrupting him isn't an option, not if he's got a woman in there.

I shove the envelope with the contract under his door, followed by the official mail, but before I can stand up, the door opens, and I tumble backward in the hall, landing on my ass on the hall floor. Sylvia's standing there in the doorway with her eyes wide and her dark hair curls around her face.

My eyes flood, and her presence there is like a punch in the gut. How do I get out of this? Can I even get to my feet over the shock of all this? It's supposed to be Adam, standing there, not... not... *her*.

"Oh, god, Ann-Marie!" Sylvia exclaims. "What are you doing here? Do you live in this building? Oh!" She grins as though she never warned me about her claim on Adam. "It's

your cat that's been here! Adam said something about...," her voice trails away. "Are you okay?"

I swallow against the lump forming in my throat. It's like my enemy has benefited from my sweet fur baby. "Has Butterball been bothering you? I can close my window in the mornings. I don't mean...."

She gestures between us and shakes her head. "Oh, no, no, she's not a bother. The first morning, she was a surprise, and she had to teach us where Adam keeps her treats, but she's been the sweetest thing."

A vaguely familiar man peers out at me from behind Sylvia. Who the hell is that in Adam's house? Is Sylvia cheating on Adam already? My stomach rolls.

I climb to my feet. "Hey, Sylvia," I murmur. "How are you?"

"I'm great – better than great."

Shit. It wasn't Whitney in there at all; it's fucking worse. Sylvia's been in Adam's apartment, and my stomach curdles, sending waves of nausea through me. Sylvia! Of all fucking people in the world, Adam's hooked up with Sylvia after that shit at the table with Blane.

"How are you healing after the accident?"

"I'm on less restrictive duty, but the break isn't quite one hundred percent yet." She glances at the man. "But I have good care."

"You want to come in?" Sylvia asks me. "Adam isn't here, but we can keep you company."

“Where’s Adam?”

“Oh, he left as soon as everything went down with Blane. He’s off visiting someplace sunny, I think. Said he needed to clear his head. I’m not sure when he’ll be back.”

“You’re not mad at him for being gone?”

She crosses her arms, and her gaze narrows slightly. “Which him?”

“Adam.”

“Oh, I was a little at the beginning, but not anymore. Now I’m more pissed at Blane for throwing a fit over something so stupid. That’s why I’m here instead of at Blane’s.” She gestures to the man behind her, and he puts his arm around her waist as he joins her. “This is Dr. Franks.”

“Dr. Franks?” I echo. “Wasn’t that your doctor back in Aspen?”

“The one and the same,” she says with a giant grin, dropping a kiss on his cheek. “We’ve been together ever since. He’s part of the reason you and Blane were in Aspen for two weeks instead of one. I didn’t want to leave him behind.”

Dr. Franks smiles. “We’ve been inseparable since Aspen.”

“Do you want to come in, Ann-Marie?” she asks. “We’re just thinking about throwing something together for lunch.”

“No, thank you, though. I should get back to my place.”

“Oh,” Sylvia says. “Adam left something for you. He asked me to give it to you if you ever came around while he was gone.”

“He did?”

She rushes away from the front door and reappears a moment later with a fat letter-sized envelope and a thin brown business-sized envelope. “I’ve been meaning to run this down to you, but... well...,” she shrugs, looking at Dr. Franks. “I’ve been a little distracted.”

The extended envelopes feel a bit like I’m being handed a couple of ticking time bombs. I don’t know what’s in either one, and I’m just not sure I want to. Nevertheless, she pushes them toward me, and I take them before retreating hastily back to my place.

When I toss them onto the counter, Butterball jumps up beside them, rubbing her face on them and purring. I let her out every morning, but if Adam’s been gone, she probably misses him.

Maybe even as much as I do. *Shit*. It’s so true. I miss Adam, and I miss him more than I’m mad at him anymore. But I can’t bring myself to pick them up and read them yet. It’s risking throwing myself into an emotional bonfire.

An hour ticks by.

Then two....

I have one hundred different emotions.

Finally, I’m unable to come up with anything else to put off the obvious. So, carefully, I open the smaller of the two pieces of mail. The multi-page missive looks hand-written, and as I unfold it, I verify it is. A string of flowers falls out of the folded letter, and my knees buckle. They’re the blooms I wore on the day we married.

“My dearest Ann-Marie....”

I sink into the nearest chair as he pours out his heart on the pages, using ink as the method to confess everything he's been carrying in his heart.

Oh, fuck.

I had no idea....

And the second envelope holds the biggest surprise of all.

Return

My dearest Ann-Marie,

I've drafted multiple emails, memos, contracts, thank you letters, and so many different communications in my lifetime. But this... I don't know how to begin this... I've never confessed love to anyone before. Not sure I'm going to get this right.

It's been a month since you married me and walked out of my life, and I already miss you more than I thought possible. Your absence leaves a growing void in my chest, and I can't get you out of my head. You've become a part of me more quickly than I ever thought possible, and learning to live without you is like learning to perform surgery on myself and my soul. Maddening doesn't describe it well enough.

Your face has been sunshine in the darkness of my life, and your touch is like lightning, living in my memory. Your hips, your taste, your voice: I miss all of you. I dream of holding you, reliving our weekend in Aspen in exotic places all over the world.

The first time I saw you, I knew you were different. Yeah, maybe you were easy to piss off (and I'll be honest, I loved your indignance, your fury, your flashing eyes), but changing

locations removed the responsibility from my life and made me free to see you as my heart wanted to see you all along. Every morning, I wake up with visions of you in my mind. Some afternoons, I lose myself in daydreams of the sun and the sand with the blue waters stretched out beside us, and your sun-kissed body calls to me, and I've lost days to the fantasy.

I can't go on like this, and I need to clear my head as I learn to live without you.

While our relationship began under the guise of accessing my inheritance, this isn't what you are to me. I'm not sure you've ever only been that. You're so much more to me, and I want you to be as happy as you can be on this earth. I'm sorry I ruined your employment with Blane. I know how much you need that stability in your life, and I intend to do what I can to make these things right.

You'll find a divorce decree and the deed to your apartment in the other envelope. If you sign both, I can send the papers to Nathaniel to file with the county when I get back to town. Once you complete them, slide them under my door. We don't have to see one another in person.

Don't worry about my inheritance, Ann-Marie. I'm taking the loan from Blane, and everything will work out. I want you to have your home without worrying about where you're going to live and making your rent payment. It won't ever be between us. I won't let it.

I can't stay here with you so close but far away, so I'm going away for a little while. When I come back, I'll be moving into my new building to manage the repairs.

Kiss Butterball for me.

Always yours,

Adam

Denver, Colorado

Late Friday

Close to midnight, I drag my carry-on suitcase into my apartment, still replaying the words in the letter I left behind for Ann-Marie. Including the flowers I saved from our wedding day might have been too much. She'd ripped them out of her hair and thrown them away that day, and she probably threw them away again the moment they fell out of the letter. My gaze jumps to the mantel in my living room. The rest of the flowers still rest on the mantle over my fireplace. At least I still had mine.

With the movers coming tomorrow, I couldn't stay away any longer. It's been an incredible penthouse, but it's time to change addresses. Ann-Marie's soul fills up this building, and I can't live without her close, yet not in my life.

I close and lock the door behind me and scan the hardwood floor around the entrance to my home. No envelope yet. She's probably having her attorney review everything before signing it. My heart cracks. I haven't heard from her at all, so I don't

know how she took any of it. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Rain beats against the glass of the penthouse windows, and a cool breeze blows in through the morning gap Butterball uses, scenting my home with earthy petrichor. It's nearly cold enough outside for the rain to be snow, and it makes me long for Aspen.

My Ann-Marie lives downstairs. *Downstairs*. Only five hundred steps away.

She's so close yet so far away, and I don't know what to do with the gnawing yearning in my stomach. She's why I had to go away after Blane's mess and the blow-up. It took some time for him to cool off. Last I knew, he intended to hire her back or give her some more work, but he hadn't gotten around to it yet.

I'm relieved Sylvia, and her fiancé have already left my penthouse, leaving me alone with my thoughts for the weekend. The movers are coming first thing Saturday morning to move the big stuff to my new place in the new building.

Sylvia's going to have a great life. Dr. Franks had wooed Sylvia most successfully after her surgery, and they're great together. She and I had a long talk to work out all the kinks in the previous iterations of our relationships. So, the couple stayed a few days in the penthouse during the installation of several new kitchen appliances since I had to get out of town to clear my head.

Yet my first-class trip to watch sunsets from a beach house in Orlando didn't do anything but make me wish for an endless weekend in Aspen, watching the snow blanket the pine

trees around the hotel. We hadn't done much but spend the weekend naked and in each other's arms.

Hell, come to think of it, Ann-Marie and I never even got around to skiing, had we? Well, it'll never happen now. My suitcase wheels squeak slightly as I move through the main room into my bedroom, tossing the suitcase onto my bed. The dirty laundry goes into the hamper, and the empty case goes into the closet.

Getting the divorce papers drawn up had thrown me for an extra emotional loop I couldn't avoid, and the deed to the apartment put me clear over the edge. Professing all the feelings hadn't helped in the way I expected either, but I needed her to be free of me, free to find peace. Her happiness is most important to me, whether that's with me or not.

I'm not tired, but a long, hot shower sounds good after flying for half the day and before crawling into bed to think about Ann-Marie. The handles squeak as I turn on the flow. It turns hot almost immediately, and steam begins pouring out. My slacks hit the floor, and my polo joins them before I make my way to the kitchen to pour bourbon on the rocks while naked.

The ice clinks in the glass, and I swirl the container as I watch the droplets of rain smooth down the exterior of my windows. The bourbon and the soft roar of the rushing water in my shower dull my thoughts. I'd been so close to something so....

It takes me a moment to realize a light, but intentional, tapping is coming from my door. The clock shows 12:30; it's after midnight. Who the hell could be knocking on my door so

late? Mrs. Miller? She'd certainly have the gall, but she would call the landlord's number rather than hustling her way to my front door. Pete, maybe? Even that seems far-fetched.

I knock back the rest of my drink and grab a dishtowel to hold to my front. God help whoever might stroll behind me, but at least I won't flash Mrs. Miller. I frown—if that's who's at my door at zero-dark-thirty.

The check through the peephole shocks me. Ann-Marie is out there, tapping on my door as though she wants in but doesn't really want to bother me. I scramble to unlock everything and throw open the door. But the edge of the dish towel falls to the side, and I spin around before I remember my ass is barer than my dishtowel side. Then I drop the bit of terrycloth altogether.

Ann-Marie squawks, then her eyes go wide as her gaze drops. Her hand goes to her mouth, covering it as it falls open. In her other hand, she has the manila envelope I left behind for her. She shoves her hand through her hair, making her breasts bounce beneath the off-the-shoulder t-shirt she's wearing over skin-tight leggings.

“For fuck's sake,” I growl. “Please come in.” I gesture to her and get the door closed behind her, deciding it's better for her to see me naked again than any other tenant strolling in the hallway. “Ann-Marie,” I say, dropping to a squat and groping for the dishtowel before straightening and trying to get it back in place.

She clears her throat. “That was... more...of you... than... than....”

I flash a sheepish grin, and I have to work hard to keep my gaze on hers. “Sorry. Can’t seem to get anything right with you.”

“More right than wrong,” she murmurs, keeping her eyes below my abs and making me think about everything I want to do to her with my dick.

“Beg to differ.” I shrug but keep the movement small since the dish towel loin cloth is still my only clothing. It’s not going to be much camouflage when the raging hard-on hits me, so I try not to think about sexy shit. “Come in.”

She hesitates as though I should go ahead of her.

I glance down at my dish towel loin cloth and nod to her. “You go first, for obvious reasons.”

She snickers but makes her way into the living room. Her leggings hug her hips and showcase the taper of her legs down to her ankles. How many times had those legs been wrapped around me in Aspen? My daydreams died the day we got married, and it’s been a nightmare ever since.

A sneaking suspicion trips through my mind. Is she trying to make the whole thing as awkward as possible? Maybe she’s trying to throw me off, so bargaining with me is easier on her. I can’t see the documents, so I don’t know if she’s signed them or intends to ask me for the salary she would have earned with Blane or what. Has every feeling she ever seemed to have for me been completely gone? At least I can tell her Blane wants her to work for him again.

“I’m going to get dressed.” I move around her, keeping my ass-end directed away from her as I hurry into my room to

grab a pair of shorts. Bothering with underwear seems silly at this point, so I step into them only, turn off the shower, and return to the living room.

Anne-Marie has the paperwork spread out on the coffee table. Fortunately, none of the documents have been signed. She's leaning over the papers, and I want so badly to scoop her into my arms, lay her back on the couch, and make love to her, proving how much I love her.

My fingers twitch. Keeping my distance is paramount for keeping my hands away from Anne-Marie, off her skin, and my head cool. Yet... would my advances be so unwelcome?

"Want something to drink?" *God knows I need one.*

"Red wine?" she asks.

"No problem." I pour another bourbon on the rocks for me and red wine for her. When I hand her the wine glass, her fingers graze mine, and she holds my hand in place for a moment longer than she needs to. I grit my teeth and bite back a proposition.

When she lets go, she takes a drink and then leans back on the couch. "Why did you work up a divorce decree?"

"Because you don't need to be married to me anymore." *You made that clear when you marched out of here, when you left and didn't come back.* It's an anguished stream of thoughts I cannot share with her.

She places her glass on the table and then moves the papers around. "You're trying to give me the apartment without letting me do the work for it?"

I throw back the bourbon in one gulp, relishing the burn, and I settle in the upholstered seat beside the couch. I'm surprised she's taken it this way. She should be relieved. I expect her to be relieved. Finally, I say, "That's not it at all."

"Are you wanting to be rid of me?" She keeps her eyes on the papers, speaking so softly I strain to hear her.

"What?" *No!* It's the farthest thing from any thought in my head.

She raises her gaze to meet mine, and my stomach clenches as whatever façade I had before crumbles into a million pieces. "Do you want me to sign the divorce paperwork?"

"I...I..." Rubbing my forehead and then the back of my neck doesn't help ease the tension pounding there. *Marry me for real, Ann-Marie! Be my wife forever.* "I'm not sure what answer you're looking for."

"Do you want me to move on? Get out of your way? Maybe make room for something easier... like Whitney?"

My breath catches. I haven't thought of her since we parted ways. "Whitney? Why would you ask about her?"

Her mouth twists into a soft smile. "I'd have asked about Sylvia, but I met Dr. Franks and saw them together."

Thinking of them makes me grin, too. Their care for each other is obvious to everyone who meets them. "They're pretty incredible together, aren't they?"

She beams. "Yeah, and she didn't even stake her claim about Dr. Franks either."

I don't comment, but Sylvia and Blane both already know how I feel about Ann-Marie. Honesty was the only way I could get her to hand off the envelopes while I took a break from life in the building.

She leans back and pulls an ink pen from her pocket. "Should we sign it now?"

My mouth goes dry, and I can't speak for a long moment. *Nooooo!* I want to yell it as loud as I can. *No, I don't want to divorce the incredible Ann-Marie Smith.* But I say none of it. She knows how I feel about her. I wrote it all out, and she read it.

Instead, I cross my arms. "Don't put this on me, Ann-Marie. The ball is in your court. What do you want to do?"

She stands, and her hands go to the top buttons of her shirt. Then, seeming to rethink the buttons, she hooks her thumbs in the waistband of her pants, letting them slip over her hips to the floor.

My eyes must be bulging. "What are you doing?"

"Well, we never had a wedding night, did we?"

Lost Opportunities

Denver, Colorado

Early Saturday

His whole face has gone ashen, and his mouth falls open.
“W-w-what?”

“You heard me.” I wink and lick my lips, dragging my gaze over the length of him. “Don’t pretend you didn’t this time.”

His eyes widen, and his gaze follows my tongue as it smooths over my lips once more. “I’m not sure I did.”

“We never had a wedding night, did we?” I repeat, throwing the words over my shoulder as I stroll into the penthouse bedroom, letting him enjoy the view of my ass in my sexy red thong. It took a little time to process my feelings about his letter, but I miss him, miss having him in my life. So, I stop on the threshold, bend down, and pretend to pick imaginary lint off my toenails before straightening.

He groans my name but stays in the living room and doesn’t answer for a long time. My intentions must be obvious.

“We should recapture lost opportunities,” I murmur. “We have all the time in the world to make things right.”

“Ann-Marie, what are you saying?” he whispers. “Are you saying you want to be together?”

I slip into the bedroom as a giggle works up from somewhere in my belly, and I can't help it as it bubbles up and out. But I press a pillow to my face, trying to muffle it until the urge passes. I've never seen him so out of sorts, and I love that it's my fault. I climb onto his bed, unbutton my shirt, and position myself so he can see me, but the sides of the shirt still cover my breasts.

Finally, he calls after me, “Uhm, no, we didn't do that, but we didn't ever go skiing either.”

“Another lost opportunity, isn't it? I guess we'll have to fix that one of these days, too. You coming in here, or do I have to come out there and get you?”

He mutters something I can't make out. It sounds like a long string of curse words, and my cheeks hurt from grinning so largely. Then, cautiously, he follows me into the bedroom but stops on the threshold to stare at me. His wide shoulders become his chiseled chest and abdomen, then a trim waist. He's got a hard-on I can put to good use.

He crosses his arms and leans on the door facing. “I'm moving tomorrow.”

This surprises me, but I don't care anymore. Adam loves me, and I love him, and I don't care about the details. We'll figure out the rest. “You planning to take your wife with you?”

“My wife?” he whispers.

“One Mrs. Ann-Marie Smith. I heard she didn’t even have to change her name to be married to you.”

He chuckles, and his gaze drops to the ground before returning to me. “What are you doing to me, Ann-Marie?”

“It’s not clear yet?” *I’m seducing you, Adam, and you’re making it incredibly difficult!* I want to yell it at him, but I don’t.

He moves to the edge of the bed and lowers his arms. “I’m moving tomorrow....”

“Where to?”

“My new building downtown to oversee the repairs.”

“Do you have to?”

Indecision crosses his face. He reaches for me, but his hand lowers. “It’s the only way I can be apart from you and live in the same town.”

“Then why should we be apart?”

“Ann-Marie,” he says, the sound of an anguished prayer.

“Adam, come here.”

He drops to his knees beside the bed. “What are you saying?”

I scoot closer to the edge of the bed and press my palm to his cheek.

He shudders and leans into my hand before tucking his arm around my waist. He pulls me closer, and he buries his face in my middle. He’s trembling, or maybe it’s me... I don’t know. I bury my hands in his hair and cuddle him close for a

long time. He kisses my hip and waist, and he works his way toward my middle. I laugh when his lips reach my belly button because it tickles, and he lifts his head.

“Will you marry me, Adam Smith?”

“Every day, Ann-Marie, and twice at zero-dark-thirty.”

“Handy that we’re already married, isn’t it?” My laughter echoes in the room, and happiness floods me, warming my toes and every part of my heart.

He places another kiss on my belly button, and the wet heat of his tongue smooths over my skin, and then there’s nothing but Adam and his tongue and the heat pouring through me as I curl around him.

His mouth works up my abdomen, up my sternum, my neck, over my chin, and his mouth captures mine while his hand slips beneath the side of my shirt. He rolls my nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

My breath catches, and I arch toward him. I whimper his name, the sound muffled by his mouth. I pull him against me so hard my bottom lip is pinched between our teeth, but I don’t care. I want to consume him, press our bodies so close together that our hearts meld together.

He breaks the kiss and quickly works his way down to the waistband of my bright red thong. He presses the flat of his tongue to my skin, pushing the tip of it underneath the band and dragging it along the edge. Lightning desires course through me.

When he stands, he stares down at me, and I’m there, teetering on the precipice of losing myself completely in him.

“Ann-Marie, I never believed we would have this again,” he says.

I reach for him, unable to form any words at all. Everything disappears the moment he buries his face in my neck, pressing kisses along my shoulder and collarbone. My thoughts explode into a million shards, and love explodes in my brain, and I’m tumbling in an ocean of love.

“Fuck me, Adam,” I rasp. “Don’t make me wait anymore.” I’m whimpering, begging, and I don’t care. I grab the top of his shorts and shove them down. The moment they hit the ground, he steps out and climbs onto the bed, positioning himself over me with his hand on either side of my body. When he thrusts, his dick slides against me, and he buries himself in my center, and every moment of anticipation I’ve had, waiting and watching for his return, fans the flames of my want.

I wrap my legs around him and bring myself hard onto him. “Yes....”

He shudders and brings his face close to mine, and his breath stirs my hair. “Ann-Marie, you’re beyond beautiful, and you’ve been in every dream, every moment of every day since Aspen. I never want to live without you.”

My cheeks heat, and I know I’m blushing. A flush burns over my body, and I pull my hips to him, eliciting a tortured groan from him. “I love you, Adam.”

He gasps, and a tremble rolls through him. His arms shake on either side of me. “And I love you.”

“You know what else?” I grin up at him.

“Hmmm?” He bends down and kisses the dip in my collarbone at the base of my throat before raising up once more to study my face. “What’s that?”

“Asshole neighbors seem to make pretty good husbands.”

He snorts, bends down, takes a button in his mouth, and moves both sides of my shirt aside. Then, lowering his mouth to my breasts, he earns a long, halting sigh from me when he swirls his tongue around my nipple. The suckling noises send a million goosebumps spreading over my skin.

I bury my hands in his hair, lift my hips, and shove myself as hard onto him as I can, curling around him. “Oh, Adam. I’ve missed you.”

He thrusts and calls out. We move together again and again.

And now there’s no more missing, and we’re united again with nothing standing between us. All the details can wait, and we’ll make the universe stop spinning for us as we consummate the merging of our futures. We’re going to have a fucking amazing wedding night.

Hours later, I raise my head, frowning at the sun streaming in through the windows.

Oh, the pounding might be in my temples, but I’m not about to get out of bed. Not with Adam’s strong arms around my middle. Our legs are twisted in the sheets and linked

together. Every inch of my body feels spread across the bed, like spent liquid sex, satisfaction incarnate. But the minute his dick gets hard against my back, that's when I know he's awake, too.

“Did you hear that?” he asks.

“I thought it was my pulse...,” I giggle and tuck his arm around me more tightly.

“Somebody's at the door,” he says. “Should I answer it?”

“Who is it?”

“Oh, shit. The movers.” He leaps out of bed, hurries out of the room, and his bare ass disappears around the corner. “I'm coming,” he yells at the door, and a moment later, I hear it open.

“Better grab a loin cloth,” I call after him, giggling. “Don't tell them I dragged you to bed.” Then I cup my hands around my mouth. “Also, I love your ass.”

“Ann-Marie,” he yelps back toward me. “Please. Sorry about that....”

It makes me laugh harder, but I can't help it. The whole world should know we're married and happy and sexed. So I stretch, cover a yawn, and wonder how long it's actually going to take Adam to get rid of the movers.

“Should we have sex and then coffee or coffee and then sex?” I yell after Adam.

He doesn't answer. Instead, they continue conversing in low tones.

Five minutes later, when he finally returns to the bed, he gives me a long look. “That poor mover. He blushed the whole time we were talking, Ann-Marie.”

I laugh. “Don’t worry. I’ll find more interesting things to yell from back here for your next visitor. I can scream bloody murder if Mrs. Miller ever knocks on your door.”

He jumps into bed and pulls me close with my back against his chest. “I guess life’s never going to be boring, is it?”

“Not anymore. Not with me around. I guarantee it,” I agree. “Did you tell them you’re not moving now?”

“I told them it was rescheduled indefinitely and handed them five hundred in cash.”

I turn to face him and frown. “You’re still going to move?”

“Well, we have to figure out where we’re going to live. Here or in your apartment?”

I raise my eyebrows. “Huh. I guess I need to get that deed signed and sublet my apartment, don’t I?”

He presses a kiss to the back of my neck. “Whatever you want. As long as we’re together.”

Epilogue

The Little Nell

Saturday Morning

Six Months Later

“You’re pretty incredible in your tux,” I say, slapping Adam’s ass and earning the offended look I was going for. “Fucking amazing, Mr. Smith.”

“And you look like you shouldn’t still be in that dress, Mrs. Smith.” He rushes me then and scoops me into his arm. “I like your manicure and pedicure.”

“Sylvia took me to a great place yesterday.” I wiggle my light blue toes and then playfully pound on his chest. “Now put me down. You know we can’t be late.”

A knock sounds on the hotel room door, and he puts me down. I wait for the usual “housekeeping” to follow, and when it doesn’t, I hurry to the door.

“Come on, you two love birds! We don’t want to be late!” Blane’s voice calls.

I open the hotel room door. “You mean you don’t want to be late.”

Blane rushes in. “Since Franks has been around, Sylvia hasn’t been late once. Can you believe that?”

Adam fastens his cufflinks, shaking his head. “Hell hath indeed frozen over.”

My gaze narrows as I whirl to face him. “You better not let her hear you talking like that.”

“It’s okay. I’m pretty sure you can take her, Ann-Marie.”

Blane crosses his arms and strokes his chin. “That’s an interesting thought. I might pay to see that matchup.”

“Oh, both of you shut up.”

While they chat about the plans of the day, I move to the large mirror in front of the lighted makeup table and dab a little more powder on my nose. It’s been an incredible six months, and we were back in Aspen at the Little Nell.

Sylvia wants her wedding to happen in the place where she had the accident, which introduced her to her own happily ever after with Dr. Franks, but it had taken a lot of planning to get it to happen. Afterward, the reception will be hosted downstairs at the Little Nell Hotel, and we’ll have mimosas and catering in a back room at Element 47. There’s family and friends and so many people I don’t know.

I’m fussing with my hair when Blane turns to me. “We still need to talk about your next project.”

“How’s your book doing in the charts? Didn’t it release this week?”

“It’s the best seller in a couple of categories: self-help and autobiographies. It’s doing well. I think we might hit the bestseller lists. Maybe we’ll hit the Washington Post list this week. The advertising firm says the USA Today list is feasible, too, but nothing’s guaranteed.”

“That’s great. Good reward for seven months of work.”

“You started it all.”

Adam elbows Blane. “Stop wooing my wife.”

“I saw her first.”

I beam at them both. “No, not true. I met the asshole version of Adam first. Then you. So, technically....”

“Come to think of it, are you still charging her rent on her apartment, Adam?”

My husband glares at Blane. “That was her idea.”

“Now, I wanted to own it with my work.”

“I’ll give you anything you want, my love,” Adam murmurs.

“And you wouldn’t love me if I was any different than I was,” I say, wishing it was easier to explain my fierce need to do some things on my own. Someday, he’ll understand.

“You know how stubborn Ann-Marie can be, so I just don’t want to make her bad again,” Adam says to Blane.

“Besides, I saved Adam a buttload of money when I caught the mistake in the contract, so there’s that.” I arch an eyebrow at them both, trying to imitate a stern teacher. “Now, if Blane could get out of here and stop causing drama in somebody else’s marriage.”

Blane raises his hand in surrender. “Fine. Fine. I know when I’m not wanted.” He hands Adam an envelope, then jogs toward the exit. “I’ll see you two down there.”

After Blane leaves, Adam comes to my side. “You’re beautiful.”

“You are, too.”

“What’s in the envelope?”

Adam opens the envelope and laughs as he shows me Blane’s scrawled note on a post-it note attached to an itinerary with tickets to his private plane.

Have a real honeymoon. Love, Blane, and Sylvia

“What is it?”

He shakes his head. “It’s a two-week vacation in the swankiest penthouse in the building, followed by two weeks in Bali.”

“Who the hell takes a month-long honeymoon?” I ask, lowering my hands to the makeup table.

He winks at me in the mirror. “You do. No arguing. It’s Blane’s dime, so you don’t even get to complain about the expense.”

“When did my life turn into a fairytale?” I whisper to myself.

“Since you made my life a happily ever after,” Adam murmurs as he lowers a hand to my upper back, tracing my spine. “Would it be awful if I’m hoping we can find a way to slip out early? We can re-enact our Aspen weekend and maybe even get some skiing this time.”

I grin at him through the reflection, glad he’s already saying what I’ve already been thinking. “That sounds great to me, but let’s get to the wedding. Did you call the car?”

“They’re all down there, waiting for the guests.”

I take one more look at myself in the mirror. “I guess I’m ready, then.”

“There’s one more thing you need,” Adam says. “I almost forgot.”

I shift to face him on the bench as he drops to one knee. “What are you doing?”

He reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a small velvet box. It’s bright red, not the usual square, but more like an octagon shape.

I catch my bottom lip between my teeth. Is he really....

“Ann-Marie, I love you more and more each day, and I didn’t do it right the first time. Our relationship is so much more.” He opens the box, revealing a glittering diamond solitaire with pave diamonds on either side. “I should have given this to you long before now. You’re my forever.”

My breath catches, and my eyes flood with tears, and I punch his shoulder. “Why did you wait until after I’d done my make-up?”

“When else would an asshole do it?” The grin splits his face. “I love you, Ann-Marie.”

“Oh, you’re not an asshole. Never an asshole, Adam. I love you.”

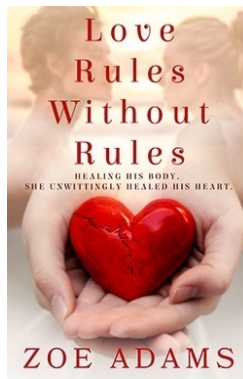
We share a long kiss, and then he slides the ring onto my finger. Thankful for the incredible way all our lives have changed.

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