

A SURPRISE BABY
REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE



NANNY FOR THE

NEIGHBORS



LILY GOLD



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ONE

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BETH

“ARE YOU BLOODY KIDDING ME?!” The shout echoes around the street below me. “SHE COULD’VE *DIED!*”

I watch out of my window as my neighbor paces up and down in front of our building, talking animatedly on the phone. His large biceps flex under his shirt as he tugs hard at his hair. He looks like he’s having some kind of mental breakdown.

My best friend Benny leans over me to get a better view. “Jesus. What’s wrong with him?”

“I don’t know,” I murmur, squinting against the sun. “I’ve never seen him like this before.”

Benny snorts. “Yeah, because you know him *so well*. Have you ever actually spoken to the guy? Do you even know his name?”

“Yeah,” I say defensively. “It’s Jack.” I’m on the fourth floor, so I’m looking down at him, but I could recognise Jack’s broad shoulders and bright blonde hair anywhere. “And I know him pretty well,” I add stubbornly. Benny huffs a laugh.

Which is probably fair. Technically, I’ve only spoken to Jack once. But I still know plenty about him.

I know he lives on the fifth floor, in the apartment right above mine. I know he has two unnaturally attractive roommates. I know that whenever I’ve bumped into him, he’s seemed sweet and a little shy. I’ve certainly never heard him shout before.

“WHY WOULDN’T YOU TELL US?” Jack’s frustrated bellow floats up through the afternoon air. A few pigeons toddling across the street scatter in fear. “WHAT THE HELL DO WE DO NOW? NONE OF *US* KNOW HOW TO LOOK AFTER HER! I... hello? *Hello?*” He stares at the dead phone

screen, then slumps down on the building's steps, defeated.

I twist my fingers together, concern tugging at me. "It sounds like something's really wrong. Maybe he needs help."

"Perfect." Benny reaches over me and flips the latch on my window. "Now you finally have an excuse to speak to him." He shoves the window open, and I grab his arm, yanking him back.

"What are you *doing*?!" I hiss, horrified. "I can't shout at him from a window! That's so creepy!"

"Right. Watching him silently from afar is so much more normal." Benny looks exasperated. "For God's sake, you've been stalking this guy for two years. Just *talk* to him, Beth. It's not that hard."

I pull a face. That's easy for him to say. Benny is gorgeous: tall and brown-skinned, with a head full of wild curls and muscled arms covered with colourful tattoos. No man or woman can resist him, and he knows it.

On the other hand, I'm tiny, so pale I reflect sunlight, and covered in so many freckles that in the summer they all blob together. Standing next to Benny, I look like an anemic ginger goblin. There is no way I'm marching upstairs to hit on my absurdly hot neighbor. I'm perfectly happy admiring him from afar.

Benny's phone suddenly dings, and he sighs, checking the screen. "Shit. I've got to go."

"Another date?"

He shakes his head. "Going out with mum and dad. We've got a family dinner." He rolls his eyes. "One of the foster kids passed their violin recital, or something."

I smile, my expression a little brittle. "Okay. Say hi to Jane and Paul for me."

He gives me a sympathetic look.

Jane and Paul are my old foster parents, and Benny's adoptive parents. Benny and I met when they fostered us both as teenagers. They kept us for almost a year before booting me back to the group home and adopting him.

I don't usually keep in touch with old foster families—hurts way too much—

but Benny point-blank refused to be ghosted. Now, ten years later, he has morphed from an ex-foster brother to a best friend. He's the closest thing I have to a family.

"Tell you what." He claps me on the back and stands, pocketing his keys. "I'll buy you a pizza if you grow some balls and talk to Jake."

"*Jack*. And I don't want to talk to him." I turn pointedly back to my open laptop. "I have work to do."

Benny ignores my hint. "Please. You've fancied him since the day you moved into the building."

"I have not. You know I don't date."

"That doesn't mean you can't fancy the man." He holds up his phone. "I have the drunk texts to prove it. You want me to read them to you? They're pretty embarrassing." He starts scrolling through our text thread threateningly. "*Saw Blonde God when I was taking out the trash tonight,*" he reads aloud. "*He's so cute. Heart emoji.*"

My mouth falls open. "I didn't say that."

"Oh, but you did. I think this is the night you took six shots of tequila and spilled hummus all over your carpet." He scrolls down. "You also said *I swear his jawline is like, ninety degrees and omg he's utterly flawless.*" I try to swipe at him. He dodges out of the way. "*Well, almost flawless. He has a really cute birthmark shaped like a fish on the back of his neck.* God, I don't even want to *know* how you got close enough to see his birthmarks. Do you have binoculars stashed away somewhere?"

I shove him away from the desk. "Didn't you say you had to leave? Feel free to do that. Right now."

He laughs, grabbing his coat. "Yeah, yeah. Call me later, okay? Good luck with the job hunt. Love you."

"Bye," I call, and he blows me a kiss, slamming out of the flat. As his footsteps echo down the corridor, I sag back in my desk chair, spinning to look out of the window again. Jack is still slumped on the steps, his head in his hands. Worry twinges in me.

Tragically, Benny is right. I've been secretly crushing on Jack ever since I

moved into this building. The sad part is, I've only ever talked to him once, on the day I moved in. I was trying to drag two giant suitcases into the lift, and Jack spotted me struggling. He bent down and picked them both up like they weighed nothing, his blue eyes shy behind his hipster glasses. I was immediately smitten.

Ever since then, he's smiled at me a couple of times while we were waiting for the lifts or checking our mailboxes, but that's been the full extent of our interactions. I don't think he even knows my name.

As I watch, Jack stands, hanging his head, and climbs back up the steps into the building. I wait for him to disappear, then sigh, turning my attention back to the job listing site I've been crawling for the past three hours. I need to concentrate.

I've been unemployed for almost a full year now, ever since my old nanny agency went bust last summer. At first, I wasn't too worried; I was sure I had enough savings to last until I found my next job. London is full of busy, professional parents. How hard can it really be to find a nanny gig?

Very hard, it turns out. I've applied to over a hundred positions over the past year, with no luck at all. My savings ran out, and then so did my overdraft. And now I'm about two weeks from becoming homeless. My eyes drop to the pile of bills stacked on the corner of my desk. It's getting dangerously tall.

Anxiety crunches my stomach. Taking a deep breath, I open a new browser tab and type in the name of another job site, widening my search options. I'll take anything at this point. Hazardous waste removal. Toilet cleaning. Filling out online surveys. I'm seriously desperate.

I've been steadily scrolling through listings for about fifteen minutes, when I'm interrupted by a knock on my door. I frown, looking up from my computer.

No one ever knocks at my door. I like to keep to myself. Benny is pretty much my only friend, and he had his own key made, so he usually just barges in.

"Bethany," a low voice calls outside. "Um, Bethany Ellis? Are you in there? It's Jack. I live above you, in apartment 5A."

I go still.

“You, uh, might not know who I am,” he continues, his voice muffled by the wood, “but me and my flatmates have run into a bit of a problem. We could really use a hand, if you’re in there.”

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TWO

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BETH

For a moment, I'm frozen, my heart pounding in my chest. Then I jump into motion, scrambling out of my chair and lurching towards my mirror. God. I look like crap. There's a hole in my t-shirt, my makeup is smudged, and my red curls are unbrushed and wild. I try to comb through them with my fingers, but they just stand up even more, frizzing around my pale face. Swearing under my breath, I cast around my room for a hair tie, finally spotting one under my desk. I launch myself at it like a batter sliding into home base and frantically tug my hair into a sloppy bun, then look around wildly for some clothes. A pile of clean laundry I haven't bothered to put away is stacked next to my bed, and I grab a striped summer dress, shimmying into it as fast as possible.

In the hallway, there's another half-hearted knock, and then a muffled curse. Shit. He's about to leave. I grab my keys and throw myself at the front door, frantically unlocking it and yanking it open. Jack has already turned around, heading back down the corridor.

"Hi, sorry!" I call. "I thought I heard someone knocking. Did you want something?"

He spins back to face me, his face lighting up, and butterflies explode in my stomach.

Jack Insley is even more stunning than I remember. High cheekbones, square jaw, and electric-blue eyes shining at me from behind a pair of dark-rimmed glasses. His blonde hair is spiky from him running his fingers through it, and he's wearing a pair of Converse with Pacman printed on the side. The whole effect is very *geek chic*.

He's also shirtless.

Holy crap, his body is *incredible*. Tanned and muscled, with wide shoulders, strong arms, and a flat, washboard stomach. My eyes take in the shadows

underneath his full pecs, then trail down the ridges of his lean abs, following the tight V of his hips as they disappear into his jeans...

“Bethany Ellis, right?” He asks, and I jerk back to reality, my gaze flying up to meet his. He’s smiling nervously. “I saw your flyers in the reception.”

It takes me a few seconds to remember what he’s talking about, then my heart sinks. He doesn’t remember my name; he’s just seen the leaflet I pinned to the noticeboard downstairs. In a final act of desperation, I posted my details on the bulletin board, just in case anyone in the building needed childcare.

Guess I’m the only one who’s been stalking from afar, then.

“It’s Beth,” I say breathlessly. “You’re Jack.”

“Yeah,” he grins. “Look, this is going to sound weird, but do you know how to stop babies crying?”

I blink, taken aback. “Uh. Yes?”

He sags in relief. “Oh, thank God, Seb said you would. D’you mind coming up to my flat for a second?”

“Um. Sure. Do you need—” I wave a hand at his bare chest. “Um. Something? I have some oversize t-shirts that might fit you...”

Why am I offering to cover him up? What’s wrong with me?

Jack looks down at himself, and his cheekbones colour. “Christ. Sorry. Forgot about that. I’ll grab a shirt upstairs.” He gives me a lopsided smile. “I know this looks like some kind of set-up, but I swear I’m not hitting on you. I really do need your help.”

Shame. “Sure,” I say immediately, nodding too hard. “Of course. Anything.”

“*Thank you.*” As if he’s scared I’ll change my mind if he waits too long, he grabs my hand and tugs me out of my flat, leading me down the hallway. I stare at his strong fingers closed around my wrist.

“One day,” he mutters under his breath. “We’ve had her for one day, and I think we’re already losing it.” He pushes open the door to the stairway, jogging up the stairs.

I trail behind him. “You’ve had who one day?” I ask, puffing slightly. “A baby?”

He glances at me out of the corner of his eye, then pulls me out of the stairway and into the corridor of floor five. “I think it would be easier to just show you,” he says grimly, leading me down the hallway. We pull up outside a door identical to mine, with 5A engraved into the wood. Jack yanks it open. Immediately, I hear a high-pitched baby cry.

“I brought her!” Jack calls. The crying gets even louder.

“Thank God,” someone mutters. “I was about to scratch my ears out.”

Jack ushers me forward, and I step inside, looking around.

The first thing I notice is how much nicer his suite is. I have the cheapest room option: a tiny one-bedroom flat with flaky wallpaper and barely any windows. I’ve never been inside the building’s luxury apartments before, and this place is *beautiful*, all exposed brick and metal accents. One wall is entirely made of glass, looking out over the city. The room is full of bookshelves and armchairs, and there’s even a widescreen TV hanging off one wall, positioned opposite a long black leather sofa.

Two men are sitting on it: a golden-skinned guy with inky black hair, and a brunette in a suit. I recognise them instantly as Jack’s uber-hot roommates. Neither of them look up at me as I step forward, both staring stubbornly at something on the coffee table. I follow their gazes and finally see the source of all the noise.

There’s a baby sitting on the coffee table, tucked inside a grey plastic car seat. She’s small, probably five or six months, and dressed in a little pink onesie. And she’s shrieking at the top of her lungs.

Without even thinking, my feet cross the room towards her. Oh, she is *gorgeous*. Tan skin, thick black hair, and huge brown eyes with long lashes. Her cheeks are puffy with baby fat, and they’re all pink from screaming.

“Oh, hello, precious,” I whisper. “Can I touch her?”

“*Please*,” one of the men says. “Just make her *stop*.”

I reach into the car seat and pick her up. It’s been over a year since I held a baby. She’s so soft and small in my arms I could cry. “Aw, honey. You don’t feel so happy, huh?” I rub my cheek against hers. “What’s up, sweetheart?”

She looks up at me, anguished, and covers her face with her tiny hands.

“I’m not sure she’ll tell you,” the dark-haired man drawls. “She’s not been very chatty so far.”

I turn to look at him, trying not to blush as I take him in. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a man ooze so much sex appeal. He’s lounging on the leather sofa, wearing jeans and a silk shirt that he hasn’t bothered to button up. His eyes and tousled hair are both shockingly black, and his fingers glint with stacked silver rings.

“Hello, neighbor,” he says softly, smiling. His voice is low and rich, like melting chocolate. “Glad to finally meet you. I’m Cyrus.” He flicks his head towards the suited man sitting next to him. “This is Sebastian.”

“Beth,” I squeak.

Cyrus’s smile gets wider. “Oh, I know who you are,” he murmurs, his eyes subtly dropping from my face to my hips.

Holy shit. Is he checking me out?

The baby wails again, and I clear my throat, looking back down at her. “It’s okay, sweetheart,” I whisper, stroking her arm. “What’s your name, huh?”

“Camilla,” Jack says, coming up behind me. Sadly, he’s now put on a t-shirt. The thin white cotton melts all over his hard chest, clinging to his biceps. “We’ve been calling her Cami.”

“Cami. That’s a very pretty name.” I kiss Cami’s cheek. “Very, very pretty. Just like you.”

She shakes her head, roaring furiously. I pat her butt, feeling her nappy. It’s a little too loose, but thankfully empty. “Your nappy seems fine. Are you hungry, honey?”

“We fed her ten minutes ago,” Jack says.

“Burped her?”

“She puked all over Jack’s back,” Cyrus says, watching me intently. “Of course, that might have just been a reaction to the shirt he was wearing. It was pretty nauseating.”

Cami shudders with tears, banging me with her tiny fists. My heart breaks. “Oh, baby. It’s okay, it’s okay. Shh. Shh.” I keep jogging her on my hip,

cuddling her close and rubbing her back. “It’s okay.”

Slowly, her cries start to die down. I hug her, murmuring to her under my breath, until eventually they trail away into sad little snuffles. “There we go,” I say quietly. “It’s not so bad, is it? Everything’s okay.” I wipe her cheeks dry. She snuggles angrily into my chest, hiccuping. “She’s fine,” I tell the guys. “She just needed a cuddle.”

No one says anything. I look up. All three men are staring at me, their eyes wide.

I blink. “What?”

“She’s a witch,” Cyrus says faintly. “What the Hell. She’s been crying for about six hours straight. Are you saying all we had to do is *pick her up*?”

I frown. “Didn’t you try that? You just left her crying in a car seat?”

Jack looks uncomfortable. “She’s a baby,” he says. “We thought they just cry when they need food, or sleep, or a new nappy. But we tried all of that, and it didn’t work.”

“They’re not Tamagotchis,” I say reproachfully. “You don’t just feed them and clean their poop and then ignore them until they die.” Cami sputters, pouting, and I press a kiss to her hair. “Poor thing. Are all the horrible men ignoring you?” I glance down at the car seat on the table. It’s a convertible model, with a handle you can push up to use as a carrier. The padding inside looks cheap and thin. “She was probably crying because she was uncomfortable. Why was she in this?”

“That’s how she was given to us this morning,” Jack says, wringing his hands. “We tried to buy her some stuff, but we didn’t know where to start. We still don’t have a crib or anything.”

I look around the room again, picking up on the details I’ve missed. There are brand-new baby items strewn all over the place. Baby wipes. A pack of onesies. An unopened bag of dummies. A pot of formula is sitting by the sink in the kitchenette, the little plastic scoop laying on the counter next to it.

I soften a bit. Clearly, someone had an emergency and dumped the baby on the boys last-minute. It’s hardly their fault they’re unprepared. “Whoever stuck you guys on babysitting duty must have been desperate, huh?” I kiss

Cami's head. She paddles her little feet against my stomach, looking up at me with huge eyes. "Who was it? Sister? Friend of the family?"

Jack looks uncomfortable. "Not exactly."

"No?" I jiggle Cami in my arms. "Where's the mum?"

"She's... out of the picture," Cyrus says, after a moment.

"Oh. The dad, then? He really should've sent her with some nappies, at least." I pat Cami's little butt. "This one doesn't even fit her right." There are a few beats of silence, and I glance up at them. "Guys? The father?"

No one answers.

I frown. "I'm sorry, is that a hard question?"

Jack and Cyrus share a loaded look. Sebastian clenches his teeth, not meeting my eyes.

Dread trickles down my spine as I take in their guilty faces. Something is wrong. I straighten, my voice sharpening. "Whose child is this?"

Jack sighs, running a hand through his hair. "If we're honest, Beth, we're not entirely sure."

THREE

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BETH

Shock rocks through me. Automatically, I tighten my grip on Cami, taking a step towards the front door. “*Excuse me?*” My voice comes out an octave higher than normal. “*You’re not sure?*”

“Nope,” Cyrus drawls. “No clue, I’m afraid.”

I stare at him, my mind running at a mile a minute, and he just smiles back, dimple flashing.

Just my luck. I finally get to meet my gorgeous neighbors, and they turn out to be kidnapping psychos.

“I’m sorry; did you *steal this child?*” I ask, incredulous. The smile drops right off Cyrus’s face.

Jack’s eyes widen, and he steps forward. “No! No! She definitely belongs to one of us. We just... don’t know who.”

The other two nod, as if that’s a completely reasonable explanation, and not *absolutely batshit insane*.

“Right. Yeah. Okay.” Edging slowly away, I turn to the door. “I’m calling the police.”

“*Shit,*” Cyrus swears.

Jack jumps up, moving to block my exit. “Please, no! Crap. I know this looks suspicious, but I swear we’re telling the truth.”

“Get out of my way,” I tell him, my voice shaking. “Now.”

He does, reluctantly, running a hand through his spiky blonde hair. “This is not how I expected this to go.”

“And what did you expect?!” I ask. “For me to walk in, find you all standing here with some random baby, and say *okay, yeah, that’s totally fine, just keep*

it?”

“We’re not lying,” Jack insists. “She definitely does belong to one of us.”

“Well, almost definitely,” Cyrus amends. “The dates all match up.” He shuffles up on the couch, patting the cushion next to him. “Will you please just sit down and let us explain?” He cajoles.

I squeeze my eyes shut and take a deep breath through my nose. “I’m not *sitting down*,” I bite out. “You have exactly five seconds to tell me why the Hell you have this baby.”

Cyrus and Jack share a helpless look. “It’s kind of a long story,” Jack starts.

“Summarise.” My voice is hard.

I’m not usually like this. I’m generally a pretty shy person. I don’t think I’ve ever been so rude to a group of strangers in my life, but I don’t screw around with child safety.

The third man stands up. Sebastian. My heart starts to beat faster as he turns on me, meeting my gaze.

He’s... intimidating-looking. Everything about him is sharp and angular. He’s dressed in a dove-grey suit, with a crisp white shirt and a thin tie knotted precisely around his throat. His coppery-brown hair is styled neatly, his pale grey eyes are cold and steely, and his hard, sculpted face looks like it’s been carved out of rock.

The only thing that softens up his expression is his mouth. His lips are full and pink, almost sulky, as he steps towards the coffee table, laying a hand on the car seat.

“We got a call from the porter this morning,” he says. His accent is crystal-clear and clipped, like a BBC newscaster. “He was furious. Shouting and swearing at us down the phone. We couldn’t work out what was wrong, so we went down to the reception.” He twists the car seat around, and I suddenly notice the gold gift tag tied onto the handle. *Appt. 5A* has been scrawled on the back in felt tip. I feel sick. “Someone had left this on the doorstep of the building,” he says grimly. “Inside it was Camilla, a packet of nappies, and her birth certificate.”

I’m absolutely horrified. I clutch Cami even tighter. She starts chewing on

my dress. “Please, *please* tell me you’re kidding.”

“No.” He picks up a piece of folded paper and holds it out to me. “There was also this.”

I stare at the paper like it might explode. Slowly, I shift Cami onto one hip and reach for the page, flipping it open.

It’s a note, written with biro in shaky, child-like handwriting.

To the boys in apartment 5A

Congratulations. You have a kid. This is Camilla (Cami). She is six months old. Please take care of her. She belongs to one of you.

I tried to keep her but I can’t anymore because I am in trouble for dealing and possession of smack and my family is sending me to rehab for it.

I am not a good mum. She’s yours now. I know you’ll be as good to her as you were to me.

Sorry I didn’t tell you

Anisha

I put it down slowly. “And you know this woman? Anisha?”

“In the biblical sense, obviously,” Cyrus says casually. “We didn’t know her well enough to know that she would pull a Dumbledore and leave a defenceless baby on a doorstep instead of, like, ringing the doorbell and giving her to us in person. But, yeah, we were pretty *familiar* with her.”

“We had no idea that she was an addict,” Jack chips in. “Maybe she only started using after we stopped seeing each other. Or maybe she hid it really well. But she clearly spiralled since she got pregnant.”

My eyebrows are probably hidden in my hairline. “You’re telling me that you, three *roommates*, all consecutively slept with the same woman within, what, a month? A couple weeks? What, was it some kind of competition, or something? Wasn’t that awkward?”

“Ah,” Cyrus says, his expression smoothing. “I see where you’re getting confused; see, we actually all slept with her simultaneously.” He pauses.

“Many, many times.”

“You’re serious?” All three men nod. Jack’s face gives it away; he’s blushing fire-engine red.

“It’s something we do,” he admits. “Every so often.”

“Oh.” I consider that. “That... actually makes a lot more sense. Yeah.”

“Think about it,” Sebastian says. “If we’d kidnapped a child, we wouldn’t be banging down the door of the building’s only childcare worker, would we?”

Cami shuffles in my arms, hiding her face in my neck. Her little lips move against my skin. I stroke the back of her tiny head, my throat tightening with emotion. “There’s nothing else in the car seat?” I whisper. “No toys, or keepsakes, or anything?”

“There wasn’t even a blanket,” Sebastian says icily. “It was five degrees outside this morning. She was just left there, crying, until the porter found her.”

Jesus. I rub my thumb over the gold bracelet looped around my wrist, tears stinging my eyes.

“Are you okay?” Jack asks quietly. “Sorry. I know this is a lot to drop on someone at once.”

I wander over to the floor-to-ceiling window and look down onto the street outside, trying to collect myself. A group of builders are leaning against the wall, smoking. A guy zooms past on a motorbike. Cami tightens her fist in my hair.

She must have been so *scared*.

“You know how long she was there?” I ask eventually.

“Not too long,” Cyrus answers. “Maybe fifteen minutes.”

I close my eyes. “And what do you want from me?” I force out.

“We’re getting her DNA tested tomorrow,” Sebastian says. “We tried today, but it’s a bank holiday, so nowhere’s open. We...” For the first time, his confident, clear voice hesitates. “We don’t know what to do with her. None of us know how to look after a baby. We need help.”

“Right.” I take a deep breath. “I see.” I think hard. “When will the DNA results come through?”

Jack perks up. “There are same-day labs in the city. If we can get a swab from her tomorrow morning, we should know by evening.”

I nod. “And you want this baby? If she turns out to be yours, you’ll take care of her?” My eyes flick between their faces.

They all nod solemnly.

“Please don’t take her away,” Jack says quietly.

I sniffle, hastily wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. Cami pulls back and watches my face, her little mouth opening and closing. My chest feels like it’s going to burst.

“Okay,” I say. “Here’s what we’re going to do.”

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FOUR

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JACK

Before anything else, Beth calls the porter and demands to see the building's CCTV footage from this morning. The cameras clearly show Anisha hurrying down the street, leaving the car seat on the front steps, and rushing away again. She doesn't kiss Cami. She doesn't cry. She doesn't look sad at all to be abandoning her own baby.

Watching the video makes me want to puke. Luckily, it's enough to convince Beth we're not child-stealers. We all go back upstairs, and she spends the rest of the afternoon giving us an intensive crash course on baby care.

It's a disaster. We are utterly useless. None of us even know how to hold a baby, let alone change a nappy or make up a bottle. Luckily, we have a very sweet, encouraging teacher. No matter how dumb we are, or how many stupid questions we ask, Beth never loses patience or gets irritated.

As the hours pass, we slowly start to get the hang of it. Beth shows us how to make bottles, draw baths, change diapers, and soothe Cami to sleep. She drills us on feeding and sleeping schedules, infant first aid, and bedtime rituals. It's an unbelievable amount of information. When Cyrus finally succeeds in settling Cami down for her afternoon nap, we all slump around the coffee table, exhausted.

How the hell do parents do this all the time? We've only been looking after the kid for a few hours, and all three of us are ready to drop. I look around at the other guys. Cyrus is scrubbing his eyes, groaning, and Seb has his head in his hands.

Of course, Beth is as perky as ever. I watch as she curls up on our sofa, her bare feet tucked under her, writing down a list of baby essentials for us to buy.

I still can't believe she's actually in our flat. Today has been the most hectic day of my life. I think I've felt every emotion under the sun since I first laid

eyes on the tiny child scrunched in a car carrier on the porter's desk. And now, to top everything else off, *Bethany Ellis* is on my sofa, drinking coffee out of one of my mugs and scribbling in one of my notebooks. It's hard to process.

If I'm honest, I've been kind of infatuated with Beth ever since I first met her. I remember it so clearly; she was in the reception, trying to carry her luggage into the lift and failing miserably. She was wearing a white dress with little red hearts all over it. Her hair was windswept, and her cheeks were flushed by the sun. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen.

Since then, I've picked up all sorts of information about her. I know she shops at the local Lidl. I know she's terrible at taking her washing out of the communal driers. I know that she gets more bills pushed into her mailbox than all three of us put together.

It's not that I've been *watching* her. I'm just... aware of her. Hell, it's hard not to be. Every time I pass her in the lobby or the lift, or see her chatting with the porter, it's like my whole body just electrifies.

It's ridiculous. I'm twenty-nine, for fuck's sake. I'm too old to have such a strong, all-consuming crush. *Especially* since I'm pretty sure that she has a boyfriend. I've seen a tall, good-looking black guy buzz into her flat hundreds of times in the last couple of years.

Still, I can't stop the flutter of nerves in my stomach as I watch her frown at her handwritten list, gnawing on her bottom lip. The evening sun is slanting in through the windows, stroking down her soft face and lighting her red curls up like fire. She's completely stunning.

I jerk out of my daydream when Cami suddenly shouts in her cot, bursting into tears.

Beth claps her hands together, standing. "Perfect! Nappy time!" She beams at me. "Your turn, Jack."

Even hearing her say my name in her sweet, soft voice sends a rush through me. I try to ignore it, crossing over to the carrier and picking Cami up awkwardly. Her babygrow is wet and stained.

Beth hums. "Looks like she's leaked a bit. These nappies are too big. You're lucky you haven't had any accidents."

“We have,” Cyrus says, looking so haunted that I can’t stop myself from laughing. “There used to be a cream rug where you’re standing.”

“Well, that was a bit thick,” she mutters under her breath, patting the towel she’s laid out on a side table. “C’mon, Jack. Show me what you’ve got.”

I carefully lay Cami down, and Beth patiently talks me through the process of cleaning and changing her.

“That’s good,” she says, as I lift both tabs, remove the nappy, and tentatively start to wipe Cami clean. Cami pouts at the ceiling. “You don’t have to be so gentle. You’re not going to hurt her. Drop the wipe in here.” She offers me a plastic bag. “Then grab a new nappy. Pick her up and slide it under her... perfect. Just fix the tabs.... And you’re done! Now we just need to wash up.” She glances over her shoulder. Sebastian is hanging around behind us, watching intently. “Do you want to give it a go while she’s on the mat? I think Jack and Cy have got the hang of it.”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea,” Seb says, taking a step back.

Her eyebrow quirks. “What if she’s yours? You’ll need to know how to change her.”

He shakes his head firmly. “She’s either Cyrus’s or Jack’s. Not mine.”

I roll my eyes, going to wash my hands.

“Oh.” She strokes Cami’s hair. “Were you not involved in the group sex?”

He reaches up and tugs at his tie. “I was involved.”

“Very enthusiastically, if I recall,” Cyrus drawls.

Beth frowns. “Well, then—”

“She’s *not mine*,” Seb says crisply. “I used protection.”

“We *all did*,” I point out, drying my hands. “We’re not fifteen.”

“Well, maybe you forgot,” Sebastian counters. “I never forget.”

“Neither do I,” Cy mutters.

Beth looks between us, then back down at Cami. “She does kind of look like you, though,” she tells Cyrus. A spike of irrational jealousy stabs through me. “She’s got your colouring, at least.” She strokes down Cami’s light brown

cheek, then tugs a shiny black curl.

Cy shrugs. “I’m half Bengali, and her mother was full. I’m not sure how different a half-brown kid would look from a three-quarters one.”

“Yeah.” She chucks Cami’s cheek. “You’re a little mystery, huh? You’ve got everyone confused.”

Cami gabbles back up at her, wriggling sleepily in her clean nappy. Beth tickles her feet, then checks her phone. “I’ve got a call in a couple of minutes. Will you guys be fine taking over?”

I nod. “Think we’ve got it. Thank you so much.”

She smiles at me, her brown eyes shining. “It’s my pleasure. I haven’t played with a baby in ages.” She crosses to the door, grabbing her keys. “If it’s okay, I’ll come back up in the morning to see how she’s doing. I can help you pick out a cot as well, if you like. You *have* to get rid of that car seat.”

I carefully pick Cami up, joining her by the door. “Thank you, Beth. Really.” I glance over my shoulder at Cy and Seb. They’re both locked in a quiet, intense-looking argument. I don’t think they can hear me, but I lower my voice, anyway. “Look, can I ask you a question?”

She straightens from tying her shoes. “Of course!”

“Why are you doing this? Why didn’t you just turn us in?”

Beth hesitates, fiddling with her keyring. Her eyes are hazy as she stares out of the window. “If she gets put into care, it might be difficult for you to get her back,” she says eventually. “Not right away, at least. I don’t want to put her through that if we can avoid it.”

A chill wriggles down my back. I instinctively hold Cami closer. “What? Why? We’ll have the DNA results tomorrow. How can they take her away after that?”

“It’s not that simple.” She waves around the room. “You guys aren’t prepared for a baby. You don’t have anything she needs. Like, at all. If she were taken into care, you would probably have to prove that you’re capable of looking after her; and right now, you’re not.”

I stare at her, horrified, and she gives me an encouraging smile, reaching out to touch my arm. “It’s gonna be okay, Jack. That won’t happen.” She bends

to kiss Cami's cheek. "Bye bye, jellybean. Have a good evening. I'm sure I'll be seeing you soon."

Cami reaches out and tugs at her hair. Beth's eyes flick back up to mine, and something tightens in my stomach. "Bye," she says shyly, then turns and disappears, slipping out of the flat in a waft of apple-scented shampoo.

The door claps shut behind her. For a moment, no one says anything. Cami gurgles sadly, shivering in my arms.

Cyrus is the first to speak, turning to me with narrowed eyes. "Did you know our neighbor was so fit?"

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FIVE

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JACK

“Is that really what you’re focussing on?” Sebastian asks, collapsing back onto the sofa. “We have a *baby*.” He looks at Cami’s carrier, his face inscrutable.

“Yeah,” Cy agrees. “We have a baby, *and* our neighbor is fit.” He jabs a finger at me. “And *he knew*, and *didn’t tell me*. What the Hell, man?”

My cheeks warm. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I was wondering why you always fixed your hair before you walked past her in the lobby. I never really looked at her before. It all makes sense, now.”

Cami yawns in my arms, her eyes falling half-shut. She just woke up from her nap, but she looks ready to go back to sleep already. Maybe she didn’t nap long enough? I hesitate, then cross the room and slip her back into her carrier.

It’s not like we have any toys for her to play with, anyway. She may as well sleep the rest of this crappy day away. I settle her in the car seat, and she twists, pressing her fat cheek against the padding as she snuggles down.

Sebastian rubs his temples. “I can’t believe Anisha did this,” he mutters.

Cy snorts, draping himself over the sofa cushions. “Can’t you? Why not? We barely knew the girl. And there wasn’t a whole lot of time to give her a mental health assessment between foursomes.”

“She seemed like a rational, normal person,” Seb argues. “A rational person would have contacted us when she found out that she was pregnant. She would have called us after giving birth. She would have *handed Cami over*, instead of leaving her on a doorstep.”

Cyrus’s face darkens. “I guess she was really messed up,” he says slowly. “Really out of her head.”

We all go quiet, the implications of that sinking in. What has Cami already been through? Has she been looked after, these last few months? Beth said that she seemed healthy; she came in with clean clothes and hair, and judging by her pudgy limbs, she's definitely not been going hungry. But being clean and fed is a pretty shit baseline for childcare.

I glance back at the carrier. Cami's little feet are kicking slightly as she sleeps, her tiny fist curled up by her cheek. Suddenly, all I want to do is pick her up and hold her close.

Sebastian pulls out his phone. "We need to talk to Anisha again. I'll ring the rehab centre. They must have some kind of accommodation for the children of addicts."

My eyes widen. "No!" Cyrus and I say, simultaneously.

"She can't just put her child on our doorstep and then *leave!*" Seb protests.

"*Our* child," Cyrus points out. "She belongs to one of us. She could be mine." He stands, anger hardening his usually easygoing expression. "And I will be fucked if you try to give my *daughter* back to the woman who left her outside, in the cold, like Harry fucking *Potter*. The woman's not proven herself to be a natural mother."

"And are you a natural father?" Seb counters, clenching his fists.

"I've not abandoned her to starve alone in the middle of London, so I believe I'm currently doing better than her, yes. We all are."

Seb throws up his hands. "We couldn't even change the child's nappy! What if she gets sick? Or she's crying, and we can't stop it? Something could be really wrong with her, and we wouldn't know what! We have no idea how to look after a kid!"

There's a beat of silence, then Cyrus shrugs. "Easy. We hire the hot nanny."

"We don't even know her credentials, yet—"

He groans. "Christ. Why do you have to make things so difficult? Beth's unemployed. She lives sixty seconds away. Cami already likes her. Jack fancies her. How many more signs do you need the universe to give you?"

"I don't fancy her," I protest.

“Say her name without blushing.”

I open my mouth, then snap it shut again.

Cyrus sighs, running a hand over his eyes. “Look. I don’t know what the Hell we’re doing. All I know is that a *baby* just got abandoned by her mum today. That *tiny little girl*.” He points at Cami. “She’s already lost *everything*, and she’s a goddamn infant. We have to try to look after her. She deserves someone who will.”

We all look at Cami. She sighs in her sleep, her soft curls stirring, and flexes her miniature fingers. She looks as fragile as a doll.

Cyrus shakes his head, his shoulders slumping. “I’m going to work,” he mutters, bending over Cami’s carrier to press a kiss to her cheek. “Don’t wait up, gorgeous,” he tells her. “I’m gonna be a while.”

He grabs his keys and heads out, shutting the door softly behind him. As soon as the lock clicks shut, Cami squirms, whimpers, and then starts crying again.

I float over to the carrier and pick her up. She cries louder at first, bashing me with her tiny fists, so I jog her around a bit, like Beth did. Eventually, she settles with a sob, burying her face into my chest. Warmth floods through me, so strong and sudden I feel almost dizzy. She’s so *small*. I bend my head to kiss her hair, breathing in her sweet smell.

I haven’t thought about kids in a long time. Not since a couple of years ago, when one of our exes had a pregnancy scare. Back then, I’d wanted that kid desperately.

And now, here I am, with a baby in my arms. It feels almost surreal. I bob her up and down until she stops grizzling, then carefully settle her back into the car seat, wiping off her wet cheeks. “There we go,” I say quietly. “You’re okay, baby. It’s safe to sleep.”

She snuffles, curling up in a sad ball. I keep stroking her cheek until she relaxes again, dropping off. I sit back on my haunches and look at her.

“You’re good with her,” Seb says over my head.

I glance up at him. He’s standing frozen by the sofa, watching. His face is pale. “Are you okay?” I ask. “You look like crap.”

“I’m fine,” he mutters. His phone bleeps. He checks it, and his mouth

tightens. “Shit. I have a teleconference call.”

I nod. “I’ll stay out here with her.”

His forehead wrinkles. “You have another bug report to go through,” he reminds me, and I swallow a groan.

“I’ll work on it out here. It’s fine. Cami can help me.”

He nods jerkily and disappears, and I fetch my laptop, settling down next to Cami’s car seat. As soon as I power the computer up, my email notifications start dinging madly. I wince.

I don’t suppose there’s ever a *great* time to have a surprise child left on your doorstep, but this really is pretty inconvenient. I’m crazy busy. My new mobile game is due to release in less than two months, and it’s stressing me the Hell out.

Seb and I started Trinity Games last year, after a mobile-based fantasy game I developed as a hobby blew up online. This will be our second release, and I’ve spent thousands of hours writing and programming it. It has to be perfect.

I scan the emails. They’re all notifications of bugs in the coding, picked up by our beta team. We have a new round of tests tomorrow, so I need to fix as many of them as I can before morning. I sigh and get to work.

Cami starts grumbling after about ten minutes. I rock her a bit, typing with one hand, and she settles down for a minute or two, but her cries eventually get louder. I look up when the smell hits me. It’s pretty obvious why she’s upset.

“Okay,” I say, setting my laptop down. “Let’s see if we can do this without Beth, shall we?”

I pick Cami up and take her to Beth’s makeshift changing station, laying her down carefully on the towels. Cami bawls as I untape her nappy. “It’s okay,” I tell her, in what I hope is a soothing voice. “I know you’re having a really bad day. But you’re safe, now. We’re gonna take care of you. Okay?” I turn and grab the box of nappies that Cy bought earlier. They all have animals printed on the front. “Which one do you want?” I hold them up for her to see. “Lion or koala?”

Cami roars.

“Lion it is.” I set it to the side, and then peel up the tabs on her dirty nappy, carefully sliding it down. When I get a look at the inside, I freeze. Panic spikes through me.

Oh *no*.

“Seb,” I call, my voice wavering. “Come here a sec.”

“One minute,” he mumbles from inside his bedroom.

“Now. I think there’s something wrong with Cami.”

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SIX

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JACK

Seb appears immediately, slamming out of his room and coming to look over my shoulder. I show him the nappy. “This is wrong, right?”

Cami’s poop is *green*. It was a normal colour this morning. I don’t understand. We’ve had the girl less than a day, and we’ve already made her sick. Is it something we fed her?

As we study her, Cami starts screaming even louder, her fists flying through the air.

Sebastian nods sharply. “I would say so, yes.” He straightens, reaching for his phone. “I’ll call a doctor.”

“It’s the middle of the night,” I remind him, grabbing the wipes and cleaning Cami up like Beth taught us. “Shh, shh. It’s okay, baby. I know you feel sick. You’ll feel better soon.” I try stroking her tiny foot. Her bottom lip trembles as she sobs. Fuck. How are we so bad at this?

“I’ll take her to A&E,” Seb declares.

I fix the tapes on Cami’s new nappy. “You can’t. What do you think they’ll do when they find out you’re not on her birth certificate? Or you don’t know her health history?”

He swears. I pick up Cami, trying to bounce her like Beth did. Her face is bright red as she roars. “Christ.” I touch her cheek. “She’s crying so much. Do you think she’s in pain?”

Seb goes white. “Get Bethany. Tell her to come back. She’s looked after infants before, she’ll know what to do.”

I nod. “Right. Yeah. On it.” I give Cami a kiss, and then set her down gently in her car seat, grabbing my keys and dashing out of the flat.

I feel like an absolute knob as I knock on Beth’s door. The hallway is dark

and silent; all of the other tenants have obviously gone to bed.

“Beth?” I call quietly, knocking harder. “Are you in there? It’s me again.” I wince.

There’s some low shuffling sounds. “Ugh. Crap. Coming!” she calls, her voice croaky. I hear light footsteps as she gets out of bed, and then the click of the lock. My little prepared speech dies in my mouth as she pushes open the door.

God, she looks adorable. Her red curls are rumped around her face, and she’s wearing cherry-print pajama pants and a white tank top. Without a bra. I force myself to keep my eyes fiercely locked on her face, but I can’t help noticing how the thin, stretchy fabric clings to the soft curve of her cleavage.

Normal people would be pissed to be woken up in the middle of the night, but Beth just smiles, leaning in the doorway. “Hi. Fancy seeing you here.” She smothers a yawn.

“Sorry we keep meeting like this,” I say. “But Cami is sick.”

She frowns, suddenly looking more alert. “Really? She seemed perfect when I left. What’s wrong with her?”

“Her poop is green. And she won’t stop crying.”

Her shoulders relax. “Oh, that’s just the formula, honey. You’ve switched brands, it’s digesting differently. That’s all.” She rubs her eyes. She’d been wearing makeup earlier, and now, with her face washed clean, I can see a faint sparkling of freckles across her nose. Her eyebrows and eyelashes are practically transparent, and her lips are a very pale pink.

She’s gorgeous.

There’s a muffled wail from upstairs, and we both look up at the ceiling. Beth smiles. “Sounds like she’s unhappy,” she says. “Might be time for another feed, if she’s crying so much.”

I groan, thinking of the bug report waiting for me upstairs. It’s too much. There’s no way I can get the errors fixed by tomorrow morning if I have to spend all night stressing over Cami.

“Look,” I say, feeling terrible. “What’s your overnight rate? I’ll triple it if you can just come upstairs and look after her tonight. We don’t have a guest

room, but our sofa is super comfortable. I just..." I sigh. "I really need to work tonight."

She smiles sweetly. "It's fine. I'll help. You don't need to pay me."

"Of course we'll pay you—"

She shakes her head. "You're clearly overwhelmed, and I'm your neighbor. I don't mind helping you out. And I think I'd quite like to have a favour to call in with you guys." She grabs her phone and toes on a pair of slippers. They have little bunny ears on them. They're adorable. "Maybe when the next season of *Love Island* comes out, I can come up and watch it on your huge wide-screen telly, or something."

"Beth, if you help us with this kid, you can use our TV whenever you like."

Her eyes sparkle. "You know it's on six nights a week, right? For two straight months?"

"Don't care," I say honestly.

She gives me a little smile, locking her door behind her. "Lead the way."

When we make it back up to the room, Beth quickly warms up a bottle and starts feeding Cami. The baby goes quiet as soon as she gets the teat in her mouth, drinking happily, her big brown eyes looking around the room. She's the picture of health, and I feel like a total idiot. I leave Beth cooing softly to her and head to the laundry room to find some clean bedding.

SEVEN

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BETH

Cami takes her bottle really well, then starts making that slack, dopey face babies get after they just ate, so I settle her back down into her carrier and rock it as her eyelids flutter closed. I feel so sorry for her. It's ridiculous that she's had to spend all day in this thing, and now she's sleeping in it at night, too. No wonder the poor thing is grouchy.

Although I guess the car seat is the least of her problems.

I watch Cami squirm in her sleep, her little hands clenching, and my heart aches.

Her mum just left her. After six months, she decided that she'd had enough. What was the last straw that made her give up on her own child? Not just give her up—abandon her on a freezing cold doorstep.

I shiver, suddenly realising how chilly it is in the big lounge. I hadn't thought to throw on a hoodie or a dressing gown when Jack yanked me out of my warm bed. I'm just in my thin little tank top and pajama bottoms.

A horrible thought occurs to me. I look down.

Shit.

I'm not wearing a bra. You can see my nips clear as day through the tissue-thin white fabric. I just followed Jack back to his flat with my headlights blaring. Heat rises to my face. I look around for a blanket or something, but someone must have cleaned up since I left this evening, because the place is pretty pristine.

A door opens down the hall, and Jack reappears, hefting a pile of pillows and folded up linen. I cross my arms over my chest.

"It's not much," he starts, leaning over the sofa and tucking sheets over the couch cushions.

“It’s fine. I can sleep anywhere.”

“Still. I feel so bad for putting you out here.” He plumps up some pillows. “Especially since there’s not actually anything wrong with her.”

I shake my head. “Freaking out when you have a new baby is completely normal. You’re only worried because you care about her. Trust me; I’d be a lot more pissed off if you were acting like she didn’t matter.”

He hums and drapes the sofa with a soft-looking comforter. “There.” He straightens, surveying his work. “That’s as good as it’s gonna get, I think.”

“It’s perfect. Thanks.” I hesitate. “Hey, um, do you have a jumper or something I could borrow?” I wave my hand over my tank top. “Um, I forgot to grab something.”

He blinks a few times, dazed-looking, then nods. “Yeah. Yeah! Sure, come with me.”

I give Cami one last quick glance. She’s curled up peacefully, so I stand and follow Jack down the hallway.

His flat is so much bigger than mine. Four doorways line the corridor: I guess a bedroom for each of the boys, and then a bathroom. Jack heads for the door at the far end of the hall, holding it open for me to enter.

His room is much messier than the rest of the flat. There’s stuff everywhere. Posters cramming the walls. Clothes crumpled on his black bedspread. He has three different computers set up on his desk: a plain laptop, a sleek PC with a massive screen, and a chunky white computer that looks like it came straight out of the eighties.

He rubs the back of his head, embarrassed. “Sorry about the mess. I’ve been patching the last few days. Things like tidying and laundry kind of fall down the priority list.”

“Patching?” I look around. Despite the clutter, I like it here. It’s cosy. He’s got turquoise LEDs lining the ceiling, and they give the room an ambient glow.

He nods, heading towards a dresser and pulling open a drawer. “I’m a game developer. We’re currently in the testing phase, so I have to write out all the bugs and glitches. I swear, they pop up out of nowhere. And launch date is

coming up soon, so—” he shrugs, sifting through the drawer. “I’ve got a lot on my plate.”

“You’re about to have a lot more, if Cami is yours.”

I can’t see his face, but I can *hear* his voice soften like he’s smiling. “Yeah. I guess so. That’s a good problem, though.”

I glance around. There’s a set of shelves nailed to the wall above his desk, stuffed with what I assume are books. As I get closer, I see they’re actually the book-shaped cardboard boxes they used to sell old, floppy-disk computer games in. He probably has hundreds packed into his shelves.

“Wow,” I look through his collection. “This is awesome. You play them on that?” I point at the ancient-looking PC, and he nods.

“It was my Dad’s. He wanted to chuck it, but I took it apart and souped it up, and now I can play all of his old games.”

Jesus. I figured that Jack was smart, but he’s clearly on another level. I examine the boxes. Some of them are plain cardboard, with the titles scribbled on in felt-tip. Maybe games he programmed himself? “The Ruby Dungeon?” I read aloud.

He turns to see what I’m looking at and bites his lip. “It’s a D&D-based game I made back in uni. Dumb, really.”

“I don’t think so. I used to play dungeons and dragons, back at the—”

I snap my mouth shut.

Christ. I’d almost said *the care home*. “Back home,” I say.

I’m not embarrassed about growing up in the care system. But I don’t like chatting about it with strangers. Pity isn’t a great base to start new friendships on.

“Here.” Jack straightens, passing a hoodie to me. It’s white and crisp, with a faded university logo on the front. “What did you play?”

I smile. “Dragon-born bard. I used to ad-lib songs about our adventures and accompany them with hauntingly beautiful tunes on my plastic recorder.”

He jabs a thumb at his chest. “Halfling rogue. No one saw me coming before I got a knife in their back.”

“Impressive.” I wriggle into the hoodie. It’s warm and unbelievably soft, and smells like sweet soap. I fight the urge to huff the scent right out of the fabric like a total freak.

“I’d invite you to play with my group,” Jack continues, “but I haven’t had the time in months. Everything has been so hectic.”

“S’okay,” I say, popping my head out of the hoodie and fixing my mussed up hair. “I’m not sure you’re quite ready for my recorder skills, anyway. They can be overwhelming.”

Jack doesn’t say anything. He’s staring at me, his eyes trailing over his hoodie. “You look nice,” he blurts out. “In my clothes.” I blink at him, and he cringes. “Sorry. That sounded weird. I’ve been up almost two days straight.” He shakes his head. “Thank you so much for doing this, Beth. You have no idea how much you’re helping us out.”

“No need to thank me. I told you. I expect compensation in TV privileges.” I shift my weight. “I’m, um, actually really glad that you called on me. I’ve seen you around the building before, but I never had a reason to talk to you.”

“Me too,” he says quietly.

I don’t know which of us moves closer, but suddenly, he’s right in front of me, so close I can see the LEDs reflecting in his blue eyes like tiny turquoise starbursts. My heart pounds in my chest. Heat prickles over my skin. His gaze flicks down to my mouth, and he swallows, Adam’s apple bobbing.

There’s a noise from the lounge, and I step back, breaking the spell.

“Okay. Go kill your bugs. I’ll take care of the illegitimate child.”

“Thank you,” he says again. I smile and head back out into the lounge.

Cami’s still sleeping peacefully in her carrier. I wipe a bit of drool off her cheek and climb onto the sofa.

“We’ll sort this out for you,” I whisper to her, snuggling under the crisp sheets. “I promise. Tomorrow, we’ll find out who your dad is.”

I can’t help but hope it’s Jack.

EIGHT

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BETH

I wake up a few hours later to the sound of a baby's cry. For a second, I don't remember where I am. I stare blankly at the pristine white ceiling and the expensive-looking light shades. I'm not in *my* flat, that's for sure.

There's another gurgly wail, and it all comes flooding back to me. I sit up, squinting through the dim living room to see Cami, wriggling and red-faced in her carrier.

"Hey, baby," I mumble, sliding off the sofa and pushing my hair back. "Don't worry, I'm coming." As soon as I pick her up, it's clear what has her so annoyed. I change her nappy quickly, then warm up another bottle. According to the clock on the wall, it's almost five AM, and dawn is slowly starting to lighten the sky outside the wall-to-ceiling windows. I spin around one of the leather armchairs so I can look out over the view as I feed Cami. She clings to me as she drinks, her tiny hands clutching at Jack's hoodie.

About halfway through her bottle, I hear a movement, and look up to see Sebastian stepping into the room.

"You're up early," I murmur. I'm not surprised. He seems like the kind of guy who wakes up at the crack-ass of dawn to 'maximise his productivity'. He's probably already meditated, lifted weights, and drunk a protein smoothie made of raw eggs and kale.

He shakes his head. "Haven't slept," he mutters, heading for the kitchenette. I notice that he's still wearing yesterday's clothes, the white shirt and silver tie now slightly wrinkled.

I nod, looking down at Cami as she glugs happily away against my chest. "I guess it's a lot to take in."

He doesn't answer. I hear the hiss of a coffee machine starting up. "You want one?" He asks.

“No, thanks.”

Cami finishes eating, and I burp her quickly. Seb moves quietly around the kitchen behind me, rattling cupboards and chinking china. I expect him to go back to his room after he makes his coffee, but instead, he comes and sits on the chair next to mine, looking out over the view.

The sun is slowly rising over the city. I don't think many people would say London is a particularly *beautiful* place—when you get out of the touristy parts, it's mostly just ugly overpriced housing and wet, chewing-gum covered streets—but the morning sunrise softens everything.

“Sorry for just barging in,” I say. “I guess it must be a shock to just find a random woman in your lounge.”

“I knew you were here. I checked in on Cami a few times in the night.”

“Oh.” Cami finishes up her bottle. I pat her back until she lets out a tiny burp, then cuddle her closer. Her tiny lips smack, and she curls up against my chest. “Good girl,” I say quietly. “That's right, baby. Get some more sleep.”

I glance up to see Sebastian staring right at me. His gaze is so intense I flinch. It's like his eyes are boring holes into me. “You want to hold her?” I ask. “I can show you how.”

An odd expression crosses his face. He shakes his head. “No,” he says shortly. “You appear to have it covered.”

“Okay.”

He clears his throat. “I'd like to suggest a probationary period of a few days. Name your daily rate, we'll pay it, and see if you're a good fit.”

“Excuse me?”

“You're hired,” he says simply.

“*What?*” My voice is too loud. Cami mumbles against me, and I sway her gently from side to side until she settles back down.

“Is that a problem?” Seb asks. “You're a nanny, and you're unemployed. Do you not want the job?”

I sputter. “I... how do you know I'm unemployed?”

“Aren’t you? I hear you playing music through the floorboards most days. You don’t seem to leave your flat to work.”

My mouth falls open. “You can’t hear my music!”

“You’re a fan of musical theatre, Taylor Swift, and the Spice Girls.” He pauses. “You’re a very... enthusiastic singer.”

My cheeks heat. Oh my God. I thought the ceilings were sound-proofed. “Well, yes,” I stammer. “I am unemployed. But you’re not Alan Sugar. You can’t just say *you’re hired*. What hours do you want me to work? How much will you pay? How do you want her to be looked after?”

He blinks. “There’s different ways?”

“There’s a million different parenting styles. Usually parents pick one that they like, and then send me, like, a million blog articles about them.”

He shrugs, fixing his cufflinks. “I’m sure you know best. We’ll discuss the details of your employment when I come home this afternoon. I had my assistant order all of the items on your list. They should be here in a few hours.” He glances down at Cami. “For today, I’d like to prioritise her paternity test and immunisations. I’ve called up a private infant doctor, you have an appointment this morning.”

I nod. “Will you all be coming along?”

He frowns. “Why would I come?”

“You might be her father,” I remind him.

“I’m not the father. Can’t you take her alone?”

“It’s probably not a good idea for me to turn up with a random baby, and be like, ‘yeah, I just found this kid. I don’t know anything about her except her name. I swear I didn’t steal her.’”

He hums, looking out over the view. “I’ll call ahead and inform them of the issue. I’m sure a donation to the surgery will make them more sympathetic.”

I choke on my spit. “Even so—she just got here, Sebastian. She’s in a new place with lots of strangers. You should come along and help acclimatise her. Maybe she’ll be calmer with one of you with her.”

He shakes his head. “Ask the others.”

“The others aren’t here.” I point out. “There’s only you.”

Right on cue, there’s a clatter outside the flat door. We both turn to see Cyrus stumbling inside the apartment. His dark hair is ruffled, and he’s still in last night’s clothes. He’s very clearly just rolled out of some girl’s bed.

He pulls up abruptly, eyes widening when he sees me. “Still here, sugar?”

“We had a midnight emergency,” I say drily.

The smile wipes off his face. “What? What’s happened?”

“Jack freaked himself out. Don’t worry. I settled him down, back in his room. He’s sleeping now.”

Cy’s lip twists. He shrugs off his leather jacket. “What about me?” He asks. His voice is huskier than I remember it, like he’s spent all night shouting. “Any chance you could settle me down in my bed, as well?” His eyes run down my front, catching on Jack’s sweatshirt. His eyebrow quirks.

“I’m sure you can manage yourself,” I say sweetly.

Seb nods at Cyrus. “Excellent timing. You’ll go with Beth to Camilla’s doctor’s appointment this morning.”

Cyrus groans, loping over to the kitchen area and pulling out a glass. “I *just* got in,” he complains, filling it with water and chugging it down in one go.

Seb checks his watch. “The appointment isn’t for six hours. That gives you plenty of time to sleep.” He glances down at the sleeping baby in my arms. “She’s most likely yours, anyway.”

Cy just rolls his eyes. “Whatever. Guess I’ll see you then, sugar.”

NINE

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CYRUS

Six hours later, I step into the paediatrician's clinic, closely followed by Beth and a very grouchy Cami. I'm still foggy from my nap, and my whole body aches. I had a long shift last night.

It's pretty in here; the walls are pale yellow and covered in decals of animals. There's a little playhouse in one corner of the room. Two blonde toddlers are running in and out of it, waving at each other through the windows.

I grit my teeth, my shoulders tensing.

I hate places like this. I spent most of my childhood getting dragged through doctors' offices by my parents. Now the brightly coloured posters and smiling woodland creatures on the walls just look sinister, not cheerful.

Beth carries Cami up to the desk. She's gotten changed out of Jack's sweatshirt, and is now wearing a pair of tight blue jeans that hug her hips, and a little pink tank top. She leans over the desk to talk to the receptionist, and a shaft of sunlight spilling through the front window catches in her red hair, lighting up her curls a bright, sunsetty orange. My breath catches in my chest. I can barely look away.

I've seen Beth before, in the lobby or the laundromat, but for some reason, she never really caught my attention. She's so far from my normal type. I usually pick up girls in clubs or bars, but Beth seems far too soft-spoken and sweet for a one-night-stand. She has a wholesome, apple-pie, girl-next-door vibe that makes my mouth water.

As I watch, she flags down the receptionist. "Hi," she says politely, "we have an appointment for Camilla Ray?"

The woman nods, leaning over the desk to wave at Cami. "Oh, she is *adorable*. Are you the parents?" She smiles across at me—and then freezes, dead in place. Her cheeks colour.

Shit. Please don't tell me she recognises me. Not here. Not now. I drop my eyes, pretending to be incredibly interested in the leaflets spread over the desk.

Beth clears her throat. "I'm actually the child's nanny. I believe a 'Sebastian Bright' has already called ahead?"

The woman's eyes widen, and she nods. "Ah, yes. I remember. He's made us aware of your situation. What's your name?"

"Bethany Ellis."

Her eyes hop across to me again. Her blush deepens. "And yours, sir?"

"Do we have to sign Cami in, or anything?" I ask.

"Oh, um. No." The receptionist passes a form to me. "Just fill this in, please. I suppose you might not know all the answers, so just do as much as you can."

"Great." I force myself to smile. "Do you have a pen?"

"Ah, yes. Let me just see." She stirs through her pen pot, pulling out a black biro, then shoots me another assessing look. "I'm sorry, but are you Ran—"

"Absolutely not," I tell her, grabbing the biro and following Beth to the waiting area. We both sit down in a pair of bright green plastic chairs.

Beth pulls Cami onto her lap and reaches for a picture book from the pile on a nearby table. "Wanna read a story?" She asks Cami, who ignores her, staring around the room with huge eyes. Beth isn't deterred. "This is one of my favourites," she says, flipping open the book. "The Very Hungry Caterpillar. It's a classic." She starts to read it aloud, settling back in her chair. Our arms brush.

I swallow, looking down at the yellow form. It's double-sided, and there must be at least sixty questions on it. Gripping the biro tightly, I fill in Cami's name, date of birth, and sex. Then I just stare at the printed words until all the letters blur.

I can't read most of the questions. The font is tiny and faded. The whole form looks like it's been typed out on a typewriter that's running out of ink.

For fuck's sake.

“Okay?” Beth asks, noticing my pause.

“What do I put here?” I stab the paper at random. She glances over.

“*Evidence of developmental or learning disabilities, check yes or no.* She’s too young to answer that.” She claps Cami’s hands together. “Aren’t you? You’re still too tiny!”

Cami giggles.

Right. Of course. I check the *no* box. Beth looks over my shoulder. “Oh, hon, you spelled her name wrong. It’s one *m* and two *ls*.” She shuffles in her seat. “Hang on, her birth certificate is in my bag.” Holding Cami with one arm, she hooks the page out of her purse. “Here.”

I nod, my face burning as I make the correction. I spelled her freaking *name* wrong. Jesus, Beth must think I’m a total idiot.

A child’s scream suddenly echoes down the hallway, coming from one of the doctor’s offices.

I look up. “What the fu—what was that?” I demand.

Beth is currently enacting the scene where the Very Hungry Caterpillar eats literally fucking everything, and is pretending to nibble on Cami’s pigtail. The cry comes again, loud and scared, and she doesn’t even react.

I sit up, alarm running through me. “*Beth.*”

“Hm?”

“Why is that kid crying? What the Hell are they doing to it?”

She frowns. “Oh, he’s probably just getting a jab. Maybe a blood draw.”

The screaming gets louder. I run a hand over my face. I don’t like this at all. I don’t like this place.

“What if they want to do something to her that we don’t like?” I blurt out. “Can we take her and leave?”

Beth stares at me. “What do you mean? What would they do to her?”

I open my mouth, but before I can come up with an answer, a door in the corridor opens. A grey-haired woman with a stethoscope around her neck steps out. “Camilla Ray?” She calls.

I don't say anything.

Beth gives me a weird look. "Here," she says, standing. I take a deep breath and follow her into the open surgery door.

The doctor smiles kindly as we step into the sterile-looking office, cooing at Cami. "Let's have a look at you. Oh, you're a little chubby one, aren't you?"

"Is that bad?" I ask doubtfully. I'm not putting a six-month-old on a diet, for God's sake. How would that even work? She just drinks milk.

The woman shakes her head. "She'll grow out of it. Some babies are just born a little fatter. I'd always rather see a sturdy baby than a weak one." She pats the padded table. "Alright. Hop on up, my love."

Beth lays Cami carefully down onto the table, and then we both stand by as the doctor runs her through a whole gamut of tests. Cami gets weighed, measured, poked and prodded. The whole time, the doctor peppers me with questions I don't know the answer to.

"Has she started teething?" She asks, swabbing Cami's cheek for the DNA test.

I shrug. "Not sure."

"Hm. What about crawling? Can she roll over?"

"I don't know."

The woman gives me a hard look. I feel like shit. Yeah, it's not my fault that I don't know this stuff; but *someone* should, for God's sake. Someone should care enough about her to follow all her milestones.

The appointment ends with the doctor giving Cami her shots. As she preps the needle, Cami's good mood immediately dissolves. She starts to cry lustily, as if she can sense what's coming. My heart just about breaks as I watch the tears roll down her cheeks. She looks *scared*, and it's fucking with my head.

"Oh, dear," the doctor says cheerily. "We almost made it. Right, we're going to need to hold her down."

I stare at the woman. "*What?*"

“Just pop your hand on her foot, stretch out her leg for me.”

I stare down at the sobbing baby girl in front of me. Her cheeks are pink and wet, and she’s squirming, trying to get away from the doctor. My throat closes. “Can’t we do it some other time? She’s scared.”

“Trust me, no matter when we do this, she’s not going to like it. Better to just get it out of the way now.”

I take a deep breath and nod, pressing one hand to the centre of Cami’s chest. “It’s okay,” I tell her quietly. “It will hurt, but only for a little bit. And then we can go home.”

She cries louder. I’m not surprised. ‘Going home’ is a pretty shitty incentive, in this case. What does she have at home? No mother, no cot, no toys—just three bachelors and a bloody car seat.

This *poor girl*.

Beth tries to distract Cami, kneeling next to the table and popping kisses on her stomach while I stroke back the strands of hair clinging to her wet cheeks. She screams even louder. “It’s okay,” I tell her again. “You’ll be fine. I promise. I won’t let anything bad happen to you.”

Cami looks up at me, her eyes red and teary, then buries her face in my shirt. I don’t know if she’s hiding, or she wants comfort, or she’s waiting for me to pick her up. Either way, I can feel the blood draining out of my face. I can’t do this. I *can’t*.

“Cy?” Beth puts a hand on my arm. “Hey, do you need to sit down? Are you scared of needles?”

I grit my teeth. “No.”

“You’re all white.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“Great. Ginger jokes.” She studies my face. “You look like you’re about to pass out.”

I shake my head. “I’m *fine*.”

“Are you ready?” The doctor asks. “Keep her still. She’s not going to like this.”

Swallowing hard, I press Cami down, stretching out her leg and pinning it to the table.

She writhes and sobs and screams. I have to look away as the doctor pricks her with the needle, and she starts to roar with pain.

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TEN

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BETH

Cyrus is quiet as we leave the doctor's office and head back into the street. It's a beautiful day in Bloomsbury; the sky is clear and blue, and the streets are mostly empty as we wander back home. Cami's still crying, so we stop at a local park and sit down on a bench. I hold her against me and give her a bottle, watching the beds of tulips swaying around a nearby fountain. She quiets almost immediately, glugging her food down. When she's done, I pull a cloth out of my bag and burp her, then settle her in my lap for a cuddle.

Through it all, Cyrus stays silent. I glance up at him. He's watching Cami snuggling into my arms with an odd look in his eyes. His face is pale under his tan.

"Are you okay?" I ask softly.

He nods. "Can I?" He reaches for her.

I pass her over, and he holds her to his chest, clasping the back of her head to him. She starts mewling, and he kisses the little pigtail I gave her this morning. "No," he whispers. "No, no, it's okay. I'm sorry, I know it hurts. It's okay."

Cami scrunches up her face, sputters, and decides to settle down. He rocks her slightly, his face still grim.

"Are you sure?" I push gently. "You don't seem okay."

Maybe he's just tired. Or hungover. He did have a pretty late night, after all.

Cyrus looks down at Cami and swallows thickly. "I didn't like holding her down."

"I know, honey." I touch his arm. He's dressed in a black dress shirt and jeans, but he's opened the collar, rolled up the sleeves, and added a handful of silver necklaces and rings, easily taking the look from *business casual* to

full-on *rockstar*. His bicep tenses as I pat him. “I think a lot of parents find it tough. But you did good.”

“I might not even be her dad,” he says softly, touching one of her curls with the very edge of his finger.

“Do you have a guess as to who the father is?”

He considers silently for a few moments. “Not really. Her face is too small and girly to really look like any of us.” He sighs. “Seb’s convinced that she’s not his, but we really all did use protection. We’re not eighteen, for Christ’s sake.”

“You want her to be yours?”

He nods jerkily. “She’s perfect. And I’d love a daughter.”

I look out over the park, watching a couple of students settle down on the grass, unpacking textbooks. “I wouldn’t have taken you for a guy who’d want a kid.”

He shrugs. “I’ve always liked kids. I understand them better than adults, usually.”

I look up at him, squinting against the sun. This man is so different from the Cyrus I met back in the flat. The sensual, playboy flirt from before has disappeared, and now he just seems like a normal, caring guy. An exceptionally *hot* normal, caring guy.

As if he can hear my thoughts, he looks sideways at me, a slow smile spreading across his face. “We’d better get home,” he says softly, his already low voice deepening. He reaches out and traces his knuckle across my cheek. “You’re very flushed. I think you’re already catching the sun.”

I blink, my blush getting deeper, and he smiles, carefully re-arranging Cami in his arms and standing.

It’s a fifteen-minute walk back to the building, but Cyrus insists on carrying Cami in his arms instead of the carrier. I eye the thick muscles of his biceps through his thin shirt and decide it’s probably not too much of a struggle for him. We’re only a few streets away when we pass a toy shop. Cyrus stops, staring at the window display.

“I want to get her a treat,” he decides. “For being so good.”

I glance down at Cami. She's falling asleep. "Sure. But when she wakes up, she'll probably be a little sore. We'll have to be quick, or she'll scream the place down."

"Why don't you keep her out here? I'll dash in and out."

I nod, taking Cami off him. As soon as he disappears inside, she starts to fuss, so I slip her into the carrier and rock her back to sleep before she can wake up properly.

Cyrus is in and out in less than two minutes. He re-emerges holding a soft-looking white bunny with a little fuzzy tail and long, floppy ears.

"I asked the sales assistant what a baby would like," he says, tucking his wallet back into his pocket. "Do you think she'll like it?"

"Only one way to find out."

He kneels down next to the carrier, stroking Cami's face. "I got you a present, ladybug," he says quietly, nestling the rabbit in next to her. Cami sighs, stirs, and grabs at it with her eyes still closed, hugging it against her. Cyrus's smile lights up his whole face.



When we finally make it back to the boys' flat, we can barely open the front door.

In the few hours we've been away, the lounge has filled up with cardboard boxes and shipping containers. They're stacked on the counters and scattered over the floor.

Cyrus whistles, setting Cami down on the coffee table. "Look how much stuff you need!" He exclaims. "You're going to ruin us all." He glances at me. "You got this, babe? I think I need a nap."

"Of course!"

Sebastian is in the kitchen, tapping at his laptop. He looks up as Cyrus heads to his room. "Beth. Can you come here? I want to discuss your position."

I float over to the kitchen table. Seb gestures for me to take a seat, so I do, feeling suddenly like I'm at a job interview. It doesn't help that he's fully

dressed up; even though he's been working from home, he's still smartly turned out in a navy suit, with a white shirt and silver cufflinks. The only sign of disarray is the coppery-brown hair flopping over his forehead. He clears his throat, setting his laptop aside. "I've looked at your online CV. You worked at a nannying agency up until last year, correct?"

"Yep."

"What was your salary?"

"Fourteen pounds an hour."

He nods. "Would eight-to-seven work, or is that too long a shift?"

"That's fine. She'll nap for a few hours a day, so I'll have a couple breaks to relax."

"How about two hundred a day, Monday to Saturday?"

My eyebrows raise. That's a lot more than I'm used to getting paid. "Monday to Friday," I say. "I'd prefer to give her the weekend to bond with her dad."

"Fair enough." He glances over at Cami. "They got the DNA swabs okay?"

"Yep. The nurse said you should have the results by tonight." I tilt my head, considering him. Now that I'm seeing him in the full light of day, there's something about Sebastian's face that kind of reminds me of Cami. It's definitely not his colouring; but maybe the shape of his eyes? His full, soft-looking mouth? "Are you still convinced she's not yours?"

His mouth tightens minutely. "She's not."

"Why are you so sure?"

He looks back down at his computer, clicking open a file. "She can't be mine. I used protection."

"Yeah, but most contraception has a failure rate of a few percent, right?"

"Not if you use it correctly."

"I'm sure Cyrus has plenty of experience operating condoms."

A muscle tics in his jaw. "Why, exactly, are you pushing this?"

"Maybe you should just consider the possibility? I just don't want you

rejecting her off the bat if those results come back with your name on them. It could—”

“*She’s not mine,*” he snaps, reaching out and slapping the lid of his laptop shut with a loud clatter. “Stop suggesting that she is. I don’t want to bloody hear it.”

I stare at him, shocked. His voice echoes around the room.

“Okay,” I say quietly. “Sorry.”

Seb blinks, like he’s just as surprised by his outburst as I am, then rubs his throat. “I—I’m sorry. I have some work to do,” he mutters. Then, without a second glance, he gets up, turns on his heel, and strides back into his room.

What an odd man.

ELEVEN

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BETH

The rest of the day passes uneventfully. I guess the doctor's visit must have tired poor Cami out, because she's very sleepy. While she naps, I sort through some of the boxes, stacking up nappies and sterilising the baby bottles. When dinner time comes around, I figure she might be ready to try some solids, so I make some applesauce as well as her usual formula. I prop her up in a highchair next to the counter, and she watches, fascinated, as I peel and chop apples.

Apparently, the smell is enticing enough to draw Cyrus out from his bedroom. The man looks wrecked, his dark hair mussed and his jaw shadowed with stubble. He yawns and stretches as he steps into the kitchen.

"Jesus, that smells good," he grumbles, coming to stand behind me as I pour the mixture into a bowl to cool. He rests his chin on top of my head, looking over my shoulder, and I freeze. "What is it?"

I clear my throat. "Applesauce. Not for you, I'm afraid. Cami's trying her first solids today. You'll have to make your own food."

He sighs heavily and leans over me to open the cupboard over my head, pulling out a box of cereal. His chest presses against my back, hot and hard, and my stomach flips. He pulls away slowly, heading to the fridge for milk.

I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry. "You feeling better?"

"Better, sugar?"

"Your hangover."

He raises an eyebrow, his dark eyes flicking to mine. "I'm not hungover."

My cheeks heat. "Oh. Sorry. It's just—I thought since you came in so late, and then slept most of the day—I thought you'd had a night out."

He hums noncommittally. "Nope. Not hungover. Just a night owl." He bends

to tug gently at Cami's pigtail. "And how do you feel, ladybug?" He says quietly. "Still sore?" He touches her forehead. She gabbles at him happily, clapping. "I looked up side effects online," he says over his shoulder. "She's not got a temperature."

My heart melts in my chest. "I don't think she's had any side effects. She's been happily napping most of the day."

"Good." He straightens, glancing at the bowl. "Can I feed her that?"

"You're gonna put me out of a job," I say, testing the temperature.

He shrugs, taking a massive bite of cornflakes. "If it's her first time eating real food, I wanna be there."

"Sit her down on the sofa, then."

He puts down his cereal and we squish together on the sofa. I watch as he patiently spoons apple mush into Cami's mouth. She doesn't know what to make of it, and is alternately eating and spitting it out. Cyrus wipes off her chin, looking for all the world like a doting new father.

"You seem attached," I note.

"What's not to get attached to? She's the cutest kid I've ever seen." He tweaks one of her pigtails, and she beams up at him, spitting applesauce down her chin. "Very ladylike," he praises, wiping off her mouth.

"But... aren't you worried about getting too close to her?" I prod. "What if the clinic gets back, and she's not yours?"

He considers. "I'm not worried. Whoever she turns out to belong to, the outcome will be the same."

I frown. What does that mean?

Before I can ask, a door opens in the hallway. Jack comes stumbling out of his room, raking a hand through his spiky blonde hair. His thick-rimmed glasses are lopsided.

I smile at him. "Done for the day?"

"Finally." He tugs the bottom of his t-shirt. It has a D20 screen-printed onto it, under the words *this is how I roll*. Obviously in reference to our chat last night. "What do you think?" He raises an eyebrow.

“I think you should burn it,” Cy says conversationally, rubbing Cami’s cheek with one of the ears on her bunny. She giggles. “In a bin, in the alley behind the building. Just set it on fire. Bad for the environment, but good for humanity.”

“It’s cute,” I tell Jack honestly.

I could swear that he blushes. Cyrus stretches and stands. “Well, since ladybug’s about ready for bed, why don’t we order some pizza and get to work on these boxes? I want her in a proper cot tonight.”

Jack nods. “Seb should be out in a few. He’s just wrapping up a call.” He turns to me. “You can go if you want. You must be sick of us by now.”

I shake my head. “I don’t mind staying a bit longer and helping.”

He frowns. “Your shift is eight-to-seven, right? You should go. We’ve got this handled.”

“Okay. What do you put inside a six-month-old baby’s cot?”

He looks taken aback. “Just... a mattress, a pillow and some quilts, right? And her toy?” He looks at Cyrus, who shrugs.

“A mattress and a fitted sheet. No pillows. Suffocation hazard.”

Jack pales.

Cyrus clears his throat. “What’s your overtime, sugar?”

“About as much as a medium ham and pineapple pizza. With extra cheese.”

“Noted.”



An hour later, we’ve made great headway. Between us, we’ve assembled a pushchair, a changing station, a crib, and a set of drawers to put Cami’s clothes in. We’ve also demolished three pizzas, three brownies, and a six-pack of beer. I’m having more fun than I have in a very long time.

“What about clothes and stuff?” Jack asks as I try to figure out the baby monitor. “We only have the basics. She doesn’t even have any toys.”

I lift the monitor to my mouth like a walkie-talkie. “I’ll go tomorrow, if you

like,” I say into it. My voice finally echoes out of the other monitor, and Cyrus throws up his hands in relief. “Cami could probably use an outing that doesn’t involve getting stabbed.”

“Can I come with you?” Jack asks. “I’d like to help pick stuff out for her.”

Cyrus sighs deeply. “Jack, I swear to God, if you come back with any of your nerdy cartoon shirts—”

“She’s a baby. All kids’ shirts have cartoons on.”

“Then why the Hell do you wear them? Are you in arrested development, or something?”

“Beth likes my shirts,” Jack argues.

Cyrus scoffs. “That’s probably because she’s used to spending all day with children.”

“That is true,” I allow. Jack gives me a faux-wounded look as Sebastian strides into the room. He looks down at all of us, his expression impassive, then focuses his intense stare on me. “Beth,” he calls. “Can I have a word?”

I blink. Am I in trouble already? I’ve been hired for less than twenty-four hours. Nodding, I pass the screwdriver I’m holding to Jack and join Seb by the kitchen counter. He looks down at his hands, his lips tight.

“I’m so sorry,” he says quietly. “For talking to you like that earlier.”

I’m shocked. “Um. It’s okay.”

He shakes his head. “No, it’s not. I’m sorry. I haven’t slept in two days, everything’s falling apart at work, and now *this*—” he gestures at Cami, sleeping soundly in her new crib. “I didn’t mean to snap. It’s completely inappropriate to speak to an employee like that. You’re helping us so much, and I’m really grateful.”

“That’s okay. I’m sure that all of this is very stressful.”

He nods, lifting a hand to massage his temple. “That doesn’t excuse my actions, but thank you.”

“Do you have a headache?” I ask. “I have some painkillers back in my flat, if you want some.”

“Just a little one. I’m fine.” He clears his throat, turning to Cami. “How is her health?”

I tell him about the appointment. He listens intently, asking questions as I relay all of the information the doctor gave us. At one point, he pulls out his phone and starts making notes.

“Overall,” I round up, “she seems like a perfectly healthy baby girl. Whatever her living situations were before this, they don’t seem to have harmed her health.”

His shoulders relax. “Thank God,” he mutters.

I consider him. I think I might have misjudged him. I was a bit put off when he didn’t want to come to the appointment this morning, but it still seems like he really cares about Cami. Even if he is convinced that she can’t possibly be his.

On the table by his hand, his open laptop dings, and he checks it automatically. His face stiffens.

“What is it?”

He doesn’t respond, his eyes scanning the screen. His hands grip the table as he stares blankly at the laptop, his lips parting.

I put my hand on his arm. “Seb? Are you okay?”

A few seconds pass, then he pulls away from me sharply, turns on his heel, and heads for his bedroom. The door slams shut behind him, the noise ringing through the flat.

Cy and Jack immediately stop bickering about baby clothes, looking up. “What was that about?” Jack asks.

I shrug. “I don’t know. He just got an email.”

They both share a look, then jump to their feet, crowding around the laptop.

“Ah,” Jack says, leaning in to study the screen. “Shit.”

Cyrus grabs the laptop and swivels it so he can see, his eyes flickering over the email. His lips press together unhappily. “Well, well, well,” he mutters. “Who would’ve called it.”

“What’s going on?” I ask. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” Cy says, his voice curt. “The DNA lab got back. They have the results.”

My stomach sinks. “She’s Seb’s, isn’t she?”

“Total match,” Cyrus says. “There’s no doubt.”

I look up at the doorway where Sebastian disappeared, anger suddenly burning in my stomach. “You’re telling me,” I say slowly, “that man just found out he has a baby daughter, and he just *ran away*? He won’t touch her, or pick her up, or *hold her*? He’s just disappeared into his study to *work*?!”

The others sigh. Jack rubs his eyes. There’s disappointment in every line of his body. “You should go get some rest,” he says. “We’ve unpacked pretty much everything, I think Cami’s ready for bed.” He rolls out his shoulders, checking the clock. “You don’t have to come in early. I’ll get her ready and knock on your door at nine to go shopping?”

I know a dismissal when I hear one. I’m sure the guys want some time alone to process the news. I nod sharply, standing and heading to the crib. Cami’s already curled up sleeping, but I pick her up anyway, holding her close and kissing her cheek.

It’s so unfair. She’s a tiny baby. She’s done absolutely nothing wrong. She didn’t *ask* to be born, but neither of her parents want her anyway. How is that okay?

Cami rouses in my arms, grumbling, so I settle her back down. My throat is tight with tears as I turn to the door, grabbing my keys.

A low voice calls after me. “Beth?”

I turn in the doorway. Sebastian is standing in the lounge. He clears his throat. “What’s your nightly rate?”

“Excuse me?” My voice is cold.

“How much for you to stay here tonight?”

I shake my head. “Nope. Not happening.”

“I’ll double your day rate.”

“You can triple it, for all I care. I’m not staying over. You have to take care of her tonight.”

He frowns. “Why? Do you have something better to do?”

I grit my teeth. “Whether I do or not is none of your business. For God’s sake, you just found out you have a bloody daughter. I’m not facilitating you ignoring your own kid. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He calls out to me again, but I step out into the hallway, slamming the door behind me.

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TWELVE

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SEBASTIAN

I watch Beth disappear, then turn on my heel and head straight back to my bedroom. Even when I shut the door, I can hear Cami gurgling in the background. Fury lashes through me.

I pace up and down my room, fists clenched, jaw locked. My mind is whirring so fast I can barely think.

My baby. She's my baby. And her mother left her on a damn *doorstep*.

Anisha didn't let me see the birth. She didn't tell me she was pregnant. She left *my daughter* in the cold, on a doorstep, with a packet of oversized nappies and a cheap car seat.

The past half a year, I've been going about my business, not knowing that I've got a fucking *child*.

I shake my head, panic rising. I can't have a child. I can't even touch Cami without her crying, for God's sake. When we first brought her up to the flat, I tried to pick her up and hold her. She screamed like I'd *hurt* her. It scared me so much I put her right back down again.

And now she's *mine*. How the Hell can she be mine?

I rub a hand over my face and slump down at my desk. It's obsessively clean. The surface is wiped down, the pens are separated by ink colour and stored in their own pen pots, and my papers are all colour-coded and neatly filed. I twitch my stapler so it's parallel to the wall, and try to take a deep breath.

This is how I like to keep things. Orderly. Clean. Tidy. When your external environment is controlled, it's much easier to control your internal one. And I *need* to keep myself under control. When I don't, people get hurt.

A memory flashes through my head. Anger flooding through me, consuming me. My fist smashing through someone's face. My mother's shrill voice,

screaming.

That's it. I'm sending you away! I can't live with a cruel, violent bully! You're a monster!

I brace myself against my desk, my breath coming hard. I can't think about that. I need to calm down. I can't be angry. Not around this child. I'll hurt her.

I try to remember what my old anger management therapists told me. *Talk to a friend. Write a diary entry. Meditate.*

But you can't meditate away an abandoned baby.

I bury my face in my hands and try to just breathe.

When I'm finally calm enough to head back into the lounge, Jack and Cyrus have cleaned up the mess of Amazon boxes. They're both sitting on the sofa, staring at Cami's cot. She's sleeping, her little fingers stuck in her mouth. My heart squeezes painfully when I look at her.

"I'm sorry," I say.

Cyrus looks up. Sadness is etched all over his face. "Why?"

"That she's not yours."

I wish Cami were his. For her sake, if nothing else. Cyrus would be a fantastic dad. Jack, too. But this poor kid somehow drew the short straw.

Cy looks back down at Cami. "Are we still looking at this the same way?" He reaches over to tuck her sheet more firmly under the mattress.

"What way?"

"We raise her together? As our joint kid?"

"I don't see why not," Jack chips in, sipping the dregs of his beer. "It's what we always planned. If that's okay with you, mate?" He glances up at me. I nod, rubbing my temples. My head is pounding. I'm pretty sure I'm sweating under my shirt.

Cyrus sighs deeply, studying my face. "Jesus. You look like crap. Take your meds, man."

“They don’t work.”

“How would you know? You never take them. Take your pills, drink some water, and *sleep*, for God’s sake. You can freak out in the morning.”

“I’ve got a fucking *daughter*,” I rasp, irritation flashing through me. “I can’t just *go to bed*.”

“Sure you can,” Jack says. “You’re no use to her like this. I’ll keep an eye on her.”

I shake my head. I can’t sleep. I have to watch her. Make sure that she’s okay.

Cyrus checks the clock and stands. “Well, this has been an interesting day. If you’ll excuse me, I have to go shake my balls in some girls’ faces.”

“TMI, man,” Jack mutters.

He shrugs, bending to check in on Cami one last time. “Bye, ladybug,” he says, giving her cheek a little stroke. “I’m sorry your dad is such a wanker. He’ll come around eventually.”

She smacks her lips, wriggling a bit in her sleep.

Cy grabs his leather jacket and turns back to me. “Take your goddamn meds,” he says, and slams out of the front door.

THIRTEEN

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JACK

The next morning, I knock on Beth's door at nine AM exactly, feeling very proud of myself.

It's been a hectic few hours. I woke up at six to feed Cami, then washed her, dressed her, tried to change her nappy, ended up getting poop everywhere, washed her and dressed her *again*, fed her the rest of her bottle, and narrowly avoided getting thrown up on. Then I tried to work out the pushchair that Sebastian bought yesterday. It's weirdly confusing. There are a bunch of buttons and screws, and the seat is reversible, so I couldn't work out whether to have it facing towards or away from me.

When I finally got it assembled, I popped Cami inside, then realised I couldn't fit it through the doors of our tiny lift. I ended up using a baby sling to strap Cami to my chest and pushing the empty pram down the stairs to Beth's floor.

It may have taken me almost three hours, but I did it. And now Cami is clean, dressed in her very last babygrow, and strapped happily to my chest, kicking her little legs like a frog. I squeeze her foot as I hear the bolt unlock, and Beth opens her door.

Heat rushes to my cheeks when I see her. She's dressed casually, in a pair of jeans that cling to her hips and a tight pink shirt. Her hair is pushed back into a ponytail. She looks gorgeous.

"Ready to go?" I ask brightly.

She nods, bending to kiss Cami's head. I try to ignore the fact that her lips are inches away from my chest. "Hey, chameleon," she murmurs. "You have a good sleep?"

Cami smiles at her, gurgling, and kicks her legs even harder.

Beth glances up at me. Her hair brushes my arm, and I swallow. "She likes

this carrier, huh?”

I nod. “I tried putting her in the pushchair, but it was a nightmare getting it into the lift. And I think she likes being held like this.” I glance behind her into her dark room. “Mind if I shove the pram in here and grab it when we get back?”

Beth shakes her head. “We’d better take it with us.”

“I don’t mind carrying her the whole morning.”

“You won’t be saying that when she pukes down your chest.” She steps past me and picks up the pushchair, easily collapsing it and hooking it under her arm. I stare. I didn’t even know it did that.

She smiles awkwardly. “What?”

“Nothing. You’re just really good at this.”

She laughs. “You’re easily impressed.” She glances up at the ceiling, her pretty face hardening. “I assume *he’s* not coming?”

“Um, no.” Last time I checked, Sebastian was kneeling by the toilet in his ensuite, throwing up his last eight cups of black coffee. The poor guy could barely hold himself upright, let alone hold a baby.

“He’s busy,” I tell her. “Shall we get going?”



Beth drives us to a local baby store. Stepping inside is like entering another world. A very loud, brightly lit, painfully colourful world. I blink hard, looking around. There are toys everywhere. Shelves upon shelves of teddy bears and playsets and legos. A child-sized carousel spins and plays music next to the store entrance. Harried-looking mothers push trolleys full of nappies and cots down the aisles. Some of them look too pregnant to stand; others have babies or toddlers sitting in their carts or strapped to their chests like me. The whole place is ringing with children’s cries, and mothers’ sighs, and the annoying sound effects from those weird light-up, battery-operated toys.

“Wow.”

“It’s a lot, right?” Beth asks, sounding completely unfazed. “Clothes are over here.” She leads the way, pushing the trolley. I trail after her, stroking Cami’s back. She wriggles happily against me, staring around at all the bright lights.

“Here we are,” Beth says, stopping at an aisle. “6-12 months. This stuff should fit her.”

I glance at the first rack. My face twists in disgust. “Seriously?”

There are two little t-shirts hanging side by side: a white-and-blue one, with the words *BOY GENIUS* screen-printed across the front; and a pink one, with *I’m Ready For My #Selfie* embroidered in silver thread.

Beth snorts. “Oh, yeah. The sexism starts young. Like, wet from the womb young.”

“That’s BS. I’m not dressing my ki... uh, a kid in these.” I move down the aisle, examining the other graphic shirts. *I’m a Future Boss* for the boys, and *I’m Cute* for the girls. *I’m A Superhero* for the boys, and *Born to Be Spoiled* for the girls. I look down at Cami. “I’m glad you can’t read.”

She blinks at me, then smiles. My stomach twists.

“You’re getting really het up about this, huh?” Beth asks, flipping through the rack. “I guess I’ve gotten desensitised to it.”

“It just seems wrong. Cami’s already had a harder life than me, and she’s not even one year old yet. I can’t stick her in a shirt that says *Spoiled Princess*.” I push aside two more shirts. “Where’s the one that says *I’m a Fu—uh, I’m a Friggin’ Fighter*?”

Beth snorts. “You might want to custom order that.” She pulls a onesie out. “What about this?”

I study the romper. It’s made to look like a lion, with a fluffy mane and a little tail poking out the back. It’s absolutely adorable.

“Yes, yes, absolutely.”

We go through the clothes together. It turns out, the animal-themed clothes are generally a lot less sexist, so we mostly stick with those. Before long, the cart is full of shirts, onesies, skirts, and accessories.

“Cyrus is going to kill us,” I note, dropping in a t-shirt covered with bunnies.

“He told me last night that jewel tones would best suit her complexion.” His exact words were, ‘don’t you dress my gorgeous half-Desi daughter like a nerdy white guy,’ but I doubt he’ll be thrilled with all the animal print either.

Beth laughs. “Maybe he should wait until she stops puking up her milk before he gets picky about her wardrobe.” She sifts through another shelf. I spot a green t-shirt with an adorable cartoon chameleon printed on the front, and Beth and I reach for it at the same time. Our fingers brush. Sparks flutter down my skin. She looks up at me, her eyes darkening, her mouth softening, and for a second, I’m frozen, rooted to the spot.

I remember when Cyrus, Seb and I started dating our ex-girlfriend Chloe. Back then, I was totally shit at flirting. I never knew when a girl was coming onto me. One day, a few weeks after we made it official with Chloe, she was being pissy with me, and I couldn’t understand why. Cy took me aside and very patiently explained that she wanted me to kiss her, and I kept blowing her off.

She keeps giving you kiss-me eyes, he said. Dude, are you blind?

It took me a while to understand what he meant, but I finally got it. And, unless I’m very much mistaken, Beth is giving me kiss-me eyes.

As I watch, she swallows, her gaze flickering to my mouth for a split second. I feel the pull to touch her like there’s a magnet embedded in my skin. I take a step closer, leaning forward slightly—

She pulls her hand back like I’ve burned her, her cheeks flushing. “That, um, should be enough clothes,” she stammers. “Shall we check out some toys?”

I nod, rubbing the back of my neck. *Stupid, Jack. Why the Hell would she want to kiss you? She’s got a bloody boyfriend, for God’s sake.*

“Yeah,” I say. “Yeah. Lead the way.”



It takes a couple of hours, but we finally make it to the checkout. Beth helps unload all of the items onto the conveyor belt. I can’t bend over with Cami strapped to me, so I take her to a nearby rack of baby toys to distract her, running my eyes over all the stuffed animals. I want to get her something to cuddle. I got pretty jealous when I saw her snuggling up to Cyrus’s bunny

last night.

“Let’s see,” I say quietly, sifting through the plushies. “Cy’s already got you a rabbit, so they’re out. Teddies are boring.” I spot a toy lion wedged right at the back of the shelf and pull it out, examining it. It’s squishy and soft, with a fluffy yellow mane. I hand it to Cami. “What do you think? Strong and brave, just like you.”

She grabs it and puts its tail in her mouth.

“Guess it’s a winner.” I kiss her head and head back to the checkout, dumping the toy on the conveyor belt. Cami makes a sad noise, like she’s about to start crying. The cashier smiles, scanning the toy and passing it back to me. “Here you go, love.”

I tuck the toy into the carrier with Cami, and she quiets down again, satisfied.

“This is a lot of stuff,” Beth notes, as I pass over my credit card. “I hope Seb’s paying you back for all of this.”

“I don’t mind paying for it.” I stroke some of Cami’s hair off her cheek. She grabs my finger and starts chewing it happily. My heart melts. I’m pretty sure I’m in love with this kid already. “I’ll buy you as many presents as you want,” I tell her quietly.

“Doshoodabay!” She babbles up at me, frog-kicking her legs.

“Aw, you’re welcome.”

“Ishbabady!”

“Seriously. Don’t even mention it.”

Beth doesn’t say anything. I glance across at her. She’s watching me, confusion all over her face.

“What?”

“Doesn’t it make you mad? The way Sebastian is treating her?” She crosses her arms over her chest, suddenly looking vulnerable. “He should be here. He’s ignoring his own daughter. It’s not right.” Her voice wavers a bit, like she’s really upset.

I rub Cami’s lion against her tiny ear, making her giggle. “Sebastian will come around. He’s a good person, he’s just very... regimented. Ordered. It

scares him, being out of control like this.”

“There’s no *control* when it comes to kids. You have to roll with the punches.” Her mouth flattens unhappily. “I mean, she’s not even yours.” She waves at the full trolley. “Why are you doing so much for her?”

I shrug. “She’s completely adorable. Why shouldn’t I spoil her?”

She opens her mouth, and I quickly change the subject. “I’m hungry. Do you want to go get something to eat? My treat.”

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FOURTEEN

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BETH

Twenty minutes later, I'm sitting at a back table in a local cafe, trying to feed Cami. She's too stimulated to eat; every time I nudge the bottle towards her, she just plays with the tip in her mouth, then spits it back out. She's staring around the cafe with wide eyes, taking in the bright lights and chattering shoppers. I sigh, giving up and setting her back in her stroller just as Jack comes back from the counter, holding a tray laden with food and drinks.

"Here we go. One hot chocolate." He sets a cup down in front of me, and I stare at it. The mug is as big as a bowl, topped with a snowball of melting whipped cream, sprinkled with mini marshmallows, and drizzled with chocolate sauce. A flake is perched haphazardly on top. My mouth is watering just looking at it.

"I got you the souped-up version," he explains. "And..." He pulls a plate off the tray, presenting me with a gooey, warm chocolate chip cookie. "Is it okay? I don't know what you like—"

I put down Cami's bottle, break off a massive piece of the cookie, and dunk it in the hot chocolate, practically inhaling it.

"I guess it's okay," he laughs, settling in with his own coffee and blueberry muffin.

"Sugar is my weakness," I admit, licking melted chocolate off my fingers. "Thank you!"

"You deserve it." He tickles Cami's cheek. "You've been a lifesaver these past few days. I don't know what the Hell would've happened to us, if we didn't have you to come help us out."

"I should be thanking you guys. If I'm honest, I really needed the job."

He leans forward and takes a sugar packet. His arm brushes mine and my skin lights up. "How long have you been unemployed?"

“God. Months. It’s been over a year since I had anything steady.” I reach over to clean Cami’s face. She grabs the napkin and squeezes it between her hands, staring at it like it’s a fascinating new toy. “I used to work for a private nanny company. It was really posh. We had to wear uniforms and give the kids French lessons.”

“Uniforms?” His eyes twinkle.

I snort. “They were hideous. Knee-length grey skirts and wool tights. We even had little hats to wear when we took the kids out to the park.”

“Fancy.”

I nod. “It was a good gig, but it got hit bad by the pandemic. Most people were working at home, so they didn’t need childcare. We pretty much all lost our jobs.”

He frowns. “I’m sorry.”

I shrug. “It was a shitty year for everybody.”

He hums. “The virus only hit a few months after I quit my job to work on game development. Scared the sh—” he glances at Cami, “the, um, heck out of me. Thought I was done for.”

I chew my cookie. “What did you do before?”

“Seb and I both worked at a big software company. I made educational material, and he worked in the finances department. Really boring stuff. In my free time, I developed this little fantasy game, and Seb showed me how to market it on the app store. It got weirdly popular, so I quit my job to work on games full-time. Now we work together. I develop the games, and Seb does the finances and marketing stuff on top of his old job.”

I pull out my phone. “Can I see? What’s it called?”

He hesitates. “The, uh... The Legend of Azaran.”

He looks embarrassed. I’m not sure why. That name sounds sick as Hell. I open up the games store on my phone. “Number eight paid game in the store.” I say, impressed, and download it.

“You really don’t have to—”

“Shh. I’m gaming.”

The menu opens, and an upbeat electronic tune starts playing. The graphics are pixelated and retro, like the old computer games my foster dad Paul used to play. I start a new game, and a scroll unrolls onscreen, announcing that I am on a quest to retrieve a powerful amulet being used by a queen to control her subjects. When I click *next*, my character pops up standing next to a forest. There's a wide, rushing river blocking me from entering it. I have an axe and some rope in my inventory.

"I have to build a bridge?" I guess. "Do I cut branches off a tree, or something?"

"Yeah. Kinda obvious, but it's just to get the player used to the interface." He leans in closer to show me, and his soft hair brushes the side of my cheek. I feel my mouth dry out as I breathe in his clean-laundry-soap smell. His voice is soft as he makes my character build the bridge, then guides her over the river and into the forest.

"Obviously, you can explore however you'd like, but the first item you're going to need is by the waterfall," he says, tapping the screen.

I'm amazed. I was expecting Jack's game to be one of those addictive, time-wasting games, like Flappy Bird or something; but this is a whole fantasy world that he's built. "Jack, this is amazing! You do all this yourself?"

"I hire a freelance artist who works on the design aspects. But, yeah. The storyline, the dialogue, and all the programming and engineering is me."

My character enters a clearing with a waterfall. The music shifts to something soft and dreamy.

"And the music?" I click on a lotus flower floating in the middle of the pool, and it pops up in my inventory.

"I did that, too." I stare at him. His face colours. "I mean, it's just chiptune. I don't need to play any instruments, or anything. I wrote most of these songs on my phone when I was on the Tube."

"You *composed the music*?"

"... yes?"

"You're absolutely incredible," I say. His blush deepens. He looks down at the table, but I can tell he's pleased. "Is your next game going to be like this

one?”

He nods. “It’s the sequel. And we’ve put a lot of backing into it. We really, really need it to do well.” His brow furrows. “One popular game makes us a fluke. Two makes us a success. We’re really hoping a larger company will pick us up and fund us, so we can do more complex stuff. Like full-out video games. With a full team of artists and developers, a real composer, writers... the stuff we make could be amazing.”

I put my hand on his. “It already is amazing,” I tell him honestly. He looks right back at me, blue eyes darkening. The air hums around us. He’s close enough to kiss, I realise giddily. A week ago, I was sneaking furtive looks at Jack when I met him in the lobby and blushing when he smiled at me in the elevator. And now, I’m sitting at a table with him, our faces just inches apart. I could lean across right now and brush my mouth over his. Nothing is stopping me.

His eyes flicker over my face and my stomach flutters. I tighten my fingers on his.

Cami suddenly gabbles loudly in her stroller, demanding our attention. Jack pulls away, clearing his throat. “She, uh, didn’t eat?”

I settle back in my seat, my face reddening. “Too excited.”

“I’ll have a go.” He carefully picks her up, settling her against his chest, and offers her the bottle. She turns and tries to snuggle into his jumper instead, gumming on the wool.

“You’d better not be going on a diet,” he warns her, giving her a kiss on the forehead. “It will break my heart. You’re the most beautiful girl in the world.”

I watch him try to coax some food into her, my stomach warming.

He’s good with her. Really good. Gentle and patient and kind. The cafe lights shine over his head, burnishing his blonde hair gold and highlighting his cheekbones as he drops kisses down her tiny cheek, trying to distract her enough to slip the bottle in her mouth.

It’s all so unfair. Both Jack and Cyrus already love Cami. They both treat her right. But her real dad won’t even hug her. He threw a *tantrum* when he

found out that she was his daughter.

I watch as she bats the bottle away, then yawns and cuddles up to Jack's neck.

"Okay," he says softly, stroking her hair. "Okay, I get it. It's not food time, it's nap time." He settles her more comfortably against him, and her eyes drift shut.

"Are you disappointed?" I ask. "That she's not yours?"

Jack hesitates, looking down at Cami. Before he can answer, the bell at the entrance to the cafe rings.

"BETHANY SARAH ELLIS," a deep voice booms. "WHERE THE HELL HAVE YOU BEEN?"

Jack glances over my shoulder and stiffens, his face going hard.

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FIFTEEN

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BETH

I look up to see Benny striding into the cafe. He's dressed in his bright red delivery man uniform, and carrying a massive box in his arms. I watch as he passes it over the counter to one of the employees. She blushes and bats her eyes at him, leaning closer to mutter a few words in his ear, but he ignores her, focussing his gaze on me.

I smile, waving him over to our table. "I didn't know you delivered here."

"I deliver everywhere, babe. I'm well known for my packages." He wiggles his eyebrows at me.

"Ew, wow, super gross." I stand up and let him sweep me into a bear hug.

"You've been ignoring my calls," he accuses, pulling back and pushing some hair behind my ears. "Where have you been?"

"Sorry. It's been crazy. I've got a new job. With, uh, Jack, actually." I wave at Jack, who's sitting frozen in his seat. "You might remember him. He lives in my building."

Benny's eyes widen. He stares between the two of us. "I see. Hey, do I owe you a pizza?"

"I'm pretty sure you do."

He grins. "Good girl." He reaches over and offers Jack his hand. "Benny. Nice to meet you. Cute kid."

"Yeah," Jack says, his voice cool as he shakes Benny's hand. "She is."

Benny turns back to me, tucking my bra strap under my shirt. "Hey, I was thinking, you wanna go out with me this weekend? I just met someone who works at a club in Soho. Don't really wanna go alone."

I translate that to *please wingwoman for me so I have an excuse to stalk/fuck*

this girl/guy.

I shrug. “I could do with a night out.”

“Sweet.” His phone beeps, and he checks it, grimacing. “I’m running behind. But call me, okay? Love you.”

“Aww, thanks.”

He narrows his eyes. “I *love you*,” he repeats pointedly.

“You’re my number one guy.”

“I love you *so much*,” he insists.

“Couldn’t survive without you.”

He groans. “One of these days, I’ll make you say it.”

I smile. It’s a running joke between us that I never say that I love him. It’s not personal; I never say *I love you* to anyone. I haven’t since I made the decision to stop dating a few years ago.

I know it’s stupid. But I have a ninety-nine-percent track record of people I love leaving me. Parents. Grandparents. Foster parents. Boyfriends. Friends. Benny is the only person I have left. I don’t want to jinx it.

He nods to Jack. “Nice to meet you, man. See you around.”

“Bye, man,” Jack says, his voice bright and fake-sounding. I wave as Benny leaves, then turn back to the dregs of my hot chocolate, smiling slightly.

“I’ve seen him with you in the lobby,” Jack says casually.

I nod, trying to spoon up a mini marshmallow. “He stays over sometimes.”

“Oh.” There’s a brief pause. “So, are you two..”

It takes me a second to work out what he’s asking. I burst out laughing. “Oh my God, *no*. He’s my brother.”

He blinks. “Brother?” I can see the disbelief on his face. “You look *nothing* alike. Was he adopted?”

My smile drops slightly. “Yeah, actually. He was. But, no, he’s my foster brother.”

“*You’re* adopted?”

“Nope,” I say lightly. “Just him.”

Jack doesn’t say anything, staring at me. The silence stretches out awkwardly as he puts together the pieces. He obviously doesn’t know what to say.

My cheeks burn. This, right here, is why I don’t like telling people about my childhood. It always makes things weird.

I clear my throat, standing. “Um, can you watch Cami for a sec? I need to go to the loo—”

Jack’s hand shoots out and wraps around my wrist, keeping me in place. “I have a crush on you,” he blurts out.

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SIXTEEN

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JACK

It's possibly the least smooth come-on ever, but I don't care. My thoughts are racing. He's not her boyfriend. She's single. Which means...

Beth stares at me, frozen in place. I tug her hand gently, pulling her to sit back down next to me.

"I have for a while," I say quietly. "Shit. Pretty much ever since I first saw you in the lobby."

Her lips part. "You *have*?" She croaks.

I nod. My blood beats through me as I remember the soft, longing look she gave me earlier in the shop. I thought I was just imagining it, but maybe, just maybe—

Slowly, watching her face, I reach over and push some hair behind her ear. She quivers, but doesn't pull away. If anything, she presses into my touch. My heartbeat pounding in my head, I curve my hand around the back of her neck and slant my mouth over hers.

Fireworks burst behind my eyes. Her lips are unbelievably soft. She tastes like chocolate and whipped cream, and I find myself leaning forward, deepening the kiss, licking that sweet taste right out of her. She sighs against my lips, twisting her hand in my jumper and kissing me back deeply. It's a slow kiss, gentle and tentative and sweet. Her soft body trembles against mine. Heat shimmers under my skin. I press closer, hungry for more.

Suddenly, Cami lets out a loud cry.

Beth stiffens, jerking away from me so fast she almost smacks me in the face. Her eyes are wide and horrified.

"Beth?" I ask, concerned. "Hey. Are you okay?"

She stands, breathing hard. "I, um..." She presses a hand to her hot cheek. "I

still need the loo,” she mumbles, pushing out her chair and practically running to the ladies’ bathroom. I watch her disappear, my heart sinking.

I’m so goddamn *stupid*.

“I’ve screwed this up, haven’t I?” I ask Cami. She kicks her legs and cries louder.

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SEVENTEEN

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BETH

Jack and I are silent on the drive back to the boys' apartment. I don't know what to say. My head is spinning. My lips are still tingling from the kiss. I don't know what to do.

Honestly, I'm scared. Scared of how much I like him. I was perfectly comfortable admiring Jack from afar, nourishing my secret, unrequited crush. But now he's told me that he feels the same, the whole thing suddenly feels dangerous. Like something could actually happen between us. As I turn the car into my parking space, scenarios flash through my mind. I imagine kissing Jack, running my fingers through his short hair. Curling up with him on a sofa. Raking my hands down his muscled back as he moves slowly on top of me, his lean, sweaty body pinning me to the mattress—

I shake my head hard, trying to displace the images.

No. No. I can't. I promised myself that I wouldn't date again. Besides, how would that even work with my job? If Seb found out, he might get rid of me. There's no point jeopardising my whole livelihood, just to pursue some stupid crush.

I need to pull myself together.

I cut the engine. We both just sit in the front seats for a moment, silent.

"Beth," Jack starts. "I'm—"

"It's fine!" I tell him sunnily. I can barely look him in the eye. "Let's head upstairs. I think jellybean needs her nap!"

He nods, picking her up, and we both head back inside.

When we step into the flat, the first thing I see is Cyrus draped over the living room sofa, wearing a t-shirt and a pair of tight black boxers. My eyes run automatically down his tanned, muscled thighs before I can force myself to

look away.

I'm not sure what his deal is. So far, all I've seen him do is sleep, go clubbing, and lounge around the flat half-naked. He's clearly not lazy—the biceps bulging out of his t-shirt make that pretty obvious—but I have no idea what he does all day.

He lifts his arms immediately as we step inside. “Missed you, ladybug,” he calls. “Come here.”

I carry Cami over, and he hugs her to his chest. “Missed you too, Bethie.” He tugs one of my curls.

I feel myself blush, turning to the shopping bags. “Another late night?” I ask lightly. “Or are you just a fan of naps?”

I don't mean it as a jab, but an irritated frown flickers over his face, so fast I'm not sure I even see it.

A door in the hallway clicks open, and Seb steps into the living room. He looks surprised when he sees all of the bags, like he didn't even know we were going shopping, then clears his throat.

“Jack, one of the betas found a glitch with the dialogue in the Emerald Lagoon scene. Said that the mermaids skip a few lines in one of the dialogue pathways.”

Jack swears under his breath. “On it.” He bends and passes Cami her lion toy. “Here's your *favourite*,” he emphasises, making Cyrus scowl. “Hey, it's bigger than your bunny, huh? It must feel nicer to cuddle.”

“The bunny is softer,” Cyrus argues. “Crap, where is it?” He starts patting around the sofa for the toy.

I step in between them before they start a dick-measuring competition over their stuffed animals. “I think Cami's ready for her nap,” I say diplomatically, extricating her from Cyrus's arms and carrying her to the cot in the corner of the room. She flops down on the mattress, but her eyes are wide open, so I stroke her hair back, singing under my breath. I can't remember any lullabies, so I just sing ‘The Room Where It Happens’ from *Hamilton* very quietly, and hope she finds it soothing.

Eventually, her tiny eyes close. Jack disappears into his bedroom. Cyrus

mutters something about the gym, grabbing his bag and heading out of the front door. And then it's just me and Sebastian.

"Good trip?" He asks tightly.

I nod. "Jack got a lot for her." I can't quite keep the reproach out of my voice.

"Can I help unpack it?"

I blink, surprised at the offer. "I... sure."

He sits down on the linoleum and opens up the first bag. After one last glance at Cami, I join him, sitting on the floor at his side. Together, we unpack the clothes and toys in silence. I watch as Sebastian methodically pulls out each item of clothing, removes the tags and hangers, and folds it into a perfect square. All of his movements are so careful and precise, it takes me a few minutes to realise that his hands are shaking.

"Hey. Are you feeling okay?" I ask.

"Yes." He doesn't elaborate, picking up a yellow t-shirt covered with smiling flowers. In the middle, in glittery letters, are the words *Dad's Favourite Girl*. "I assume you picked this one out," he murmurs, sounding annoyed.

I shake my head. "It must have been Jack."

"Ah." Seb looks down, his hair falling into his face. "Right." He studies the shirt for a few seconds, then folds it up, adding it to the t-shirt pile.

I sigh, some of the anger in me fading. I'm still not thrilled with the way he's been acting, but the poor guy looks absolutely exhausted. Maybe I should cut him some slack. "Look. I get that this is a lot to process."

"I would say that's an understatement." He picks up a pair of tiny pink socks and stares at them, an odd expression on his face. He looks almost longing.

"And I do sympathise," I continue. "I really, really do. It's not fair that Cami's mother kept her secret from you. It's not fair that you've become a dad overnight. But it's more unfair that a tiny baby was abandoned on your doorstep. Whatever's holding you back from Cami, you need to get over it. Now. She needs you to step up and be her dad."

A muscle jumps in his jaw. "It's more complicated than that," he says stiffly.

“How? You had sex, now there’s a baby, and she’s your responsibility.”

“I’m not talking about responsibility, I’m talking about capability. I’m just not—”

We’re interrupted by a sudden cry from the crib. Seb looks up immediately. “Is she okay?” He asks, sounding alarmed.

I nod, standing and stretching out my back. “Hungry, I think. It’s been a while since she ate.”

He jumps to his feet. “I can make her a bottle.”

I’m surprised. “You know how?”

“I watched you do it yesterday.” He heads to the kitchen. Bemused, I pick up Cami and carry her over to the sofa. She squirms, crying quietly, and I rub her back, offering her the lion Jack picked out. She clutches at it, sniffing.

“That’s it,” I tell her. “Don’t worry. Your dad is making you some food.”

There’s some clattery kitchen sounds, then Seb reappears, offering me a warm bottle.

“Thanks!” I jog Cami on my knee. “Do you want me to show you how to feed her?”

He’s silent for a few seconds. “I guess you should,” he says eventually. I have to try not to laugh at his face. He looks like a man who’s been sentenced to death.

“Here.” I pat the sofa cushion next to me. He eases himself down, and I put Cami in his arms. He holds her away from his body, like a bomb that he’s scared will detonate.

I put my hand on his bicep. “Relax your arms,” I say quietly, ignoring the hard muscle under his shirt. “She won’t feel comfortable if you’re all rigid.”

He does, holding Cami a little closer.

“That’s good. Keep her upright, with her head in the crook of your arm.” He doesn’t move, so I gently manipulate his arms until he’s holding Cami properly. She stops crying and blinks up at him, her brown eyes curious. I hand him the bottle. “Tilt it, so there’s not too much air getting in the top. She should latch on pretty quickly.”

He holds the bottle to her mouth, and watches as she latches onto the rubber teat, gulping away happily. I rub her belly. “Aw, you were hungry, huh?”

His brow furrows. “Did Jack not feed her enough this morning?”

I shake my head. “We tried to give her a morning snack when we were out, but she was too excited.”

Seb doesn’t say anything, looking wide-eyed at his daughter as she cuddles up to him, glugging away. Slowly, he reaches up and brushes a curl away from her cheek with his finger. She makes a happy noise, kicking her legs, and his lips part.

I smile. “Feels good, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” he says quietly. “It does.”

Cami drinks up her whole bottle without any extra encouragement, then starts to fuss again.

Sebastian startles. “What did I do?”

“Nothing. You did great. She just needs to be burped.”

“Why?”

“Babies can’t really burp by themselves. And they swallow air when they drink.”

“That seems like an evolutionary issue,” he says dryly.

“It’s easy.” I drape the burp cloth over his shoulder, then rearrange Cami in his arms. “Just pat her on the back.”

He hesitates, then gives Cami the most pathetic, gentle little tap imaginable. He barely even touches her.

I shake my head. “Harder,” I say. “Give her some firm taps.”

He pats her again gingerly. She squirms, her face reddening with discomfort.

“Harder, Seb. She can handle it. If you don’t burp her, it can be really uncomfortable for her.”

He stares at her, then gives her a slightly firmer pat. Cami suddenly starts wailing, wriggling in his grip, and all of the colour drains out of his face. He

shoves her back into my arms. “I can’t,” he rasps, “I can’t do it.”

“But—”

He jumps to his feet and hightails out of the room, leaving me with a very fussy baby and a lot of questions. I stare at his bedroom door as it swings shut, then turn back to Cami.

“What is his issue?” I murmur into her ear, patting her back. She squirms, pulls a face, and spits up down my back, then flops happily against my shoulder, snuggling into me.

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EIGHTEEN

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SEBASTIAN

I shut my bedroom door behind me and lean against it, my head reeling. My heart is beating too hard. My right hand is tingling. I remember slapping Cami on the back, and horror curls up inside me.

Beth acts like it's a simple thing to do, to pound a fragile little baby with just the right amount of pressure. But I don't know how to do it. I can't hit my daughter. I'll accidentally go too hard. I'll *hurt* her.

I cross the room to my office area and slump into the desk chair, looking out of the window but seeing nothing. Tears of frustration burn my eyes.

I'm just so fucking exhausted. I dragged Cami's cot in here last night—there was no way I was leaving my baby sleeping in the lounge, where I might not even hear her crying if she needed something.

I don't think either of us got more than thirty minutes of consecutive sleep the whole night. I didn't even finish working until 1AM; when I eventually crawled into bed, my head splitting with an oncoming migraine, she started crying at the top of her lungs. And she wouldn't stop.

Nothing I could do would settle her. She wouldn't eat. She spat out her dummy. Hugging her just made her mad. Eventually, at four in the morning, she accepted her bottle, glugging down half of it and finally dropping off for a few minutes. I had to be up at six, so I just gave up on sleep and jumped into the shower, leaving the door open so I could hear her.

I'd just gotten dressed when she started screaming again. I realised that she needed her nappy changed, so I did that, dressing her in a new little romper. As soon as I did the last button up, she started shrieking—and then threw up all over her clothes. I cleaned her up with baby wipes as best as I could, then dressed her in a new romper. I had just enough time to make a cup of coffee before she started screaming *again*. I gave her the last half of her bottle. And then she filled her nappy again. And then she spat up on both our clothes

again and burst into tears.

I ended up sitting with her in bed, numbly holding her as she screamed and sobbed, getting angrier and more frustrated as every minute went by. I didn't know what to do. I had a meeting in forty minutes, my suit was stained, my head was bursting, and nothing I could do would make my baby stop crying. Eventually, at six in the morning, Jack just strode into my bedroom and took her off me, leaving me to head back to my ensuite bathroom to throw up my painkillers.

The thought of doing it all again every night for the next six months makes me want to pull my hair out.

My phone buzzes on the desk, and my stomach sinks. It's my boss. Of course.

I've been overloaded with work ever since Jack and I started Trinity Games. Unlike Jack, I never quit my old job at RedPress Software, which means I've been working about sixteen hours a day for the last year. Before Cami came along, I liked the challenge; I didn't have much else to do, other than work. But now it's becoming completely impossible.

Sighing, I swipe to answer the call.

"Bright," my boss barks. *"We need you in the office for the budget meeting with Marcellus. Where the Hell are you?"*

I frown, racking my brain for the name. "Marcellus? You mean the investor?"

He sputters. *"Of course I mean the bloody investor. You know any other pains in the neck called fucking Marcellus?"*

I swallow back a groan. Marcellus is a recent investor in the company. Apparently, he lost a lot of money after some startup he bought into failed last year, so now he's decided that he's going to oversee our financial decisions personally.

Which would be fine if he knew anything about finances. Or economics. Or computers. As is, he's completely useless; all he does is ask stupid questions, but he's so goddamn rich that we're not allowed to say no to him.

"You didn't tell me about any budget meeting," I tell him.

He growls. *“I sent you an email about this last night. Are you telling me that you haven’t done the presentation?”*

“I’m telling *you* that you haven’t told me about any presentation,” I bite out. “I can’t read your mind. I’m not bloody telepathic.”

There’s a long pause. *“Check your email, Bright. And then get the fuck over here. Bring last quarter’s tier three education budget report. You can write the presentation in the car.”*

The line goes dead. I swear, opening up my email and scanning my inbox. I could swear he didn’t send me a message last night.

He did. I need to be in the office in twenty-five minutes, and it’s a twenty-five minute drive.

“Motherfuck,” I swear under my breath, jabbing the button on my printer and loading up the budget report. The printer starts spewing out paper, and I pull open the door to my wardrobe, changing into clean clothes. My hands are shaking as I button my shirt. I can hear Cami giggling outside my bedroom, and the sound makes me wince. God, my fucking *head*. I lurch for the drawer under my desk and yank it open, patting around for a packet of ibuprofen. I’m pretty sure you’re only meant to take two, but I pop three out and dry swallow them, rubbing my throat as they stab the inside of my oesophagus. The printer beeps, and I grab the papers, pushing out of my bedroom.

I immediately trip over something. I get the vague impression of Beth sitting on the floor with Cami, surrounded by toys, before the papers go flying and I sprawl onto the ground. Pain sears through my head, stabbing like an ice pick behind my eye.

“Oh my God,” Beth says, jumping up. “Shit, are you okay?” She touches my back.

I shake her off me, sitting up and squeezing my eyes shut as I wait for the pain to fade. “Did I mess up my papers?” I ask tightly, rubbing my temple.

“Um... yeah, they’re kind of everywhere,” Beth says apologetically.

I groan, looking around me.

The room is a tip. The floor is littered with squashy pink cubes, spread haphazardly over the lino. My papers are mixed in with them, scattered and

disorganised. In the middle of it all, Cami lays on her belly on a pink mat, watching me with big eyes.

Shit.

“For God’s sake,” I snap. “Would it kill you to not trash our flat? This is a bloody mess.” I gather up my papers, stacking them together. God knows how long it will take to get them in order again. Probably half an hour. Which I just *don’t have*. I run a hand through my hair, panic flushing through me. I’m so screwed.

I stand, blinking back the starburst of pain behind my eyes. “Can you clean this up, please?” I get out through gritted teeth, bolting for the door.

“Sorry,” Beth says from behind me. Her voice sounds oddly quiet. “I—I’m sorry. I’ll clean it up.”

I barely hear her, grabbing my briefcase and heading out of the flat. It’s going to be a shitty day.

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NINETEEN

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BETH

Later that evening, I curl up on the sofa, watching Cami sleep. It's almost nine o'clock. I know I should go home, but I just can't bring myself to. I want to see Sebastian again before I leave. To make sure we're on okay terms, and he's not just going to step back into the flat and immediately fire me.

I really need this job. If I get fired, I'm absolutely screwed. I'll have to move out. I'll probably have to sell all my stuff, too. I won't even be able to afford a storage unit.

Just the thought floods me with anxiety. I've spent the whole afternoon and evening a nervous wreck, although I've managed to channel most of the stress into housework. Sebastian certainly can't complain about the mess now; I've tidied away all of Cami's toys, hoovered, cleared the countertops, done the dishes, and even cleaned the kitchen. The flat is sparkling. So he can't be mad anymore, right?

I stiffen when I hear a key in the lock. The front door pushes open, and Sebastian steps inside. He looks exhausted: his tie is hanging loose around his throat, and his collar is unbuttoned. He shuts the door behind him and blinks, confused, around the room.

I know immediately that I've messed up. I've taken it too far. He's weirded out. What kind of loser gets shouted at by their boss, and responds by deep-cleaning his house?

His eyes finally alight on me. He looks stunned. "Beth—"

I stand up, forcing a smile onto my face. "Cami took a while to get to sleep. She's just dropped off now." I head to the front door, slipping on my shoes. "She only ate about half of her dinner, so don't be surprised if she needs an extra feed in the night."

He doesn't say anything, staring around the room with wide eyes. I lace up

my converse, then straighten. “Well. See you tomorr—”

“Beth.” He grasps my wrist, and I freeze. “You didn’t have to do all this. You’re not a housekeeper. I just didn’t want all the stuff on the floor.”

I nod, not looking at him.

He frowns, loosening his grip. “Beth, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you. I just... mess stresses me out. And those papers were really important.”

I yank my hand free. “She’s a baby,” I say, my voice coming out sharper than I intended. “Babies make messes.”

His mouth falls open. He looks completely taken aback. I grab my keys from the dish by the door and cast one look back at Cami. “See you tomorrow,” I mutter.

He nods, and I leave.



The next day is miserable. The guys mostly stay out of my way, although I notice Jack tossing me some concerned looks. Every time our eyes meet, I remember his lips on mine. His hands on my cheeks. His blush as he told me, *I have a crush on you.*

God. Why do I have to make everything so bloody complicated? This is the first time I’ve had a steady job in over a year, and I’ve already snogged one boss, and fought with another. It’s like I want to be unemployed and starving.

I try to just focus on keeping my head down and getting my work done, but it’s a struggle. By the time my shift is over, I’m so flustered and stressed out that I can’t handle it anymore. So, I do what I always do when I need advice: I tuck myself up in bed and call Benny.

Unfortunately, he’s not very helpful. In fact, he mostly seems to find the situation funny.

“Wait, wait. Your neighbor kissed you, and you ran to hide in the loo?” he squawks down the line.

“Stop laughing!” I demand. “It’s not a joke.”

“Yeah, okay, Sister Ellis. Don’t get your wimple in a twist.”

“You think I’m being dumb?” I ask, incredulous. “You know I don’t date!”

“Yes, and I respect your decision to remain single. But I don’t know where you got the idea that kissing equals dating. What are you, a fifth-grader? If you hold his hand, do we have to plan a wedding ceremony for you both in the playground? Can I please be the flower boy? I’ll make you a dandelion bouquet and chuck leaves at you as you walk down the aisle.”

I consider this for a few moments, my heart sinking. “I’ve overreacted, haven’t I?”

“The boy you fancied kissed you, and you ran away like he was a murderer,” he says cheerfully. *“I’d say that you did, yeah.”*

I groan, flopping back onto my bed and plucking at my quilt. “It’s just... he said that he had a *crush* on me—” I break off as Benny wolf-whistles deafeningly, directly into the receiver, “Yes, okay, thank you—and I’ve fancied him for ages.”

“So, what? You think you won’t be able to snog the man without falling for him? I think this is a good thing. If you don’t want a boyfriend, ease yourself into it. Go on some dates. Kiss some faces. Have casual sex. You won’t be this pretty forever.”

“Thanks.” Guilt churns in my stomach as I remember Jack’s worried expression this morning. Benny’s right. Running away from the kiss was dumb, and avoiding him afterwards was honestly downright mean. Damn it. “I think it’s kinda too late now, anyway,” I sigh. “The ship has sailed.”

“No it hasn’t. Drag the ship back. Anchor it in your harbour. Then shag it.” I pull a face. There’s some rustling noises, and I hear a muffled shout in the background. *“I’ve gotta go now. Thanks for making me feel better about my own shitty sex life. In comparison to you, I’m Hugh Hefner.”*

“You’re welcome?”

“You’re still on for Friday night, yeah? I need to buy tickets for the club before they sell out.”

“Sure.”

“Sweet. Love you.” He hangs up. I drop the phone onto my stomach and lie there, staring up at the ceiling.

I'm such a loser.



I spend most of Thursday morning working out a new routine for Cami. Since Sebastian apparently can't handle mess, the activities we can do together are quite limited. During tummy time, I lay out a mat in the middle of the floor, then we both sit and survey her toy boxes.

"What do you fancy today?" I ask Cami, bouncing her on my knee. "Remember, nothing messy."

She reaches for the blocks, flopping over in my lap. She loved playing with them the other day. We built a whole city, and then I held her up while she stomped through it, sending all of the soft cubes flying like some kind of baby Godzilla. I don't think I've seen her laugh so much since I've met her. It was so relieving to see her let loose and have some real fun. It was a milestone: it meant, despite her complete shift in environment, that she now felt safe enough here to relax completely.

But of course, her dad didn't see it like that. All he saw was the mess in his way, and the disruption to his work. I do feel bad that he tripped, but he came running out of his room without looking where he was going. What did he expect?

Honestly, if he was any other parent, I would probably just play normally and make sure that the clutter was cleaned up before he got home. But I'm worried. Since he got Cami, I haven't seen Seb make one move to touch her of his own initiative. I'm so scared he'll get mad and decide to send her away.

Cami babbles, grabbing at the pink cubes, and I sigh, shaking my head. "Nope," I tell her cheerfully, reaching for a big light-up ball. "If you dad comes out of his room and sees you playing with those again, he'll probably fire me."

Cami's face crumples. My heart hurts. I pull her up to my chest and smush her against me. "Don't cry, baby. You've got lots of toys to play with. Look!" I show her a rattle, shaking it around.

She reaches for the blocks again, and I sigh, moving them out of sight. "We

can't, honey. Some other time."

She doesn't like this, and we spend most of tummy time with her being incredibly fussy, crying and smacking the crinkly play mat with her hands. Eventually, I just give up and heft her back up into my arms. "Maybe you just need a nap," I mutter. I pop her down in her cot, then pick up the room and get to work on the dishes, cleaning up the remnants of her lunch. I've just settled down with a cup of tea when Jack emerges from his room, rubbing his eyes. He smiles at me weakly. "Hey."

"Hey," I say, suddenly nervous. "Um. Kettle's boiled, if you want some."

"Yeah. Thanks." He makes his own cup, then stands awkwardly by the couch. "Can I join you?"

"It's your sofa."

He nods and sits down. I steel myself. Now is the perfect moment. I need to come clean and apologise. I take a deep breath.

"I'm sorry," we both say simultaneously.

He frowns. "Wait, what? What are *you* sorry for?"

I bite my lip. "For avoiding you yesterday. For not speaking to you after... what happened in the coffee shop. It was immature."

He shakes his head fiercely. "You have nothing to apologise for. It was my fault. I shouldn't have kissed you." He grimaces. "I can get stuck in my head sometimes. I'm not always the best at reading other people. So if I read any signals wrong, I am so, so sorry. It'll never happen again. I—"

"I have a crush on you, too," I blurt out, cutting him off.

I don't plan on saying it. The words just fall out of my mouth without approval from my brain. I snap my jaw shut as he stares at me, his blue eyes wide.

"I'm sorry, *what?*"

I set down my mug. My heart is beating so fast I can feel my pulse in my skin. "You don't need to apologise, Jack. And you didn't misread any signals. I really, really like you. I've, um, fancied you for a long time as well, if we're being honest."

He looks at me like he can't believe a word I'm saying. "But you seemed so upset yesterday."

"Yeah. It was nothing to do with you, though. I promise." I twist my fingers together. "I'm sorry I ran away. I just freaked out, I guess. I don't really do relationships."

"It was just a kiss," he says softly. "I didn't mean to pressure you into anything serious. I swear, I wasn't trying to trick you into a date by taking you to the cafe and paying for your drink. Shit, I guess it kind of looked like that, huh?"

I shake my head. "I overreacted. You have nothing to be sorry for. I actually," I swallow down my pride, embarrassment flooding through me. "I really enjoyed the kiss. You know. Before I ran away."

He blinks, surprised. "You did?"

My cheeks flush. "Yeah."

"Seriously?"

"Yup."

"Oh." He turns and looks out of the window. "Huh."

He's silent for a long time. I squirm in my seat, wishing that I was anywhere else. Eventually, he clears his throat.

"So you don't do relationships."

"Nope."

He looks at me sideways. "But do you date casually? No-strings-attached?"

My stomach flutters. "I could," I say, trying to play it cool. "Maybe. If there was a guy I liked enough."

His mouth quirks. He leans in slightly, so our arms are brushing together. My blood thumps through me. Holy shit. He's flirting with me. He wasn't turned off by me being a socially awkward weirdo after all. "If I kissed you again," he says slowly, "would you run and hide in the loo? Because the lock is kind of tricky. Don't want you getting stuck in there."

"Dunno," I whisper. "Try it and see." My hands are sweating.

His smile widens. He reaches out to cup my face, giving me time to pull away.

I don't. I press into his touch. His lashes dip. Very tentatively, he leans forward, brushing his mouth over mine.

I kiss him back, hard.

He responds instantly, wrapping a hand around my neck and pulling me closer, crushing our lips together fully. I twist a hand in his shirt and soften against him.

The kiss goes from zero to one hundred, fast. Months' worth of pent-up frustration is heating up my body, lighting me up like fire under my skin. His big hands slide around my waist, and we both rock into each other. My fingers stroke under the hem of his t-shirt, and he shudders, the muscles in his chest tensing.

“Beth—” He gasps against my mouth. “I—”

A wolf-whistle pierces the air, and we both yank apart as the flat's front door bangs open.

TWENTY

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BETH

Cyrus leans in the doorway and looks between us, smirking. He's obviously just been to the gym; his dark hair is damp, and he's dressed in a light grey tank top soaked with sweat. I very pointedly don't look at his hard, gleaming biceps.

"I thought you were home," Jack comments, drawing a circle on my thigh. I try to scoot away from him, embarrassed, but he just tightens his grip on me, his eyes heating.

Cyrus kicks off his shoes. "Got called out for a party. I crashed at the girls' place for a few hours." He dumps his gym bag on the floor, stretches, then looks down at us both. "Room for one more?" He asks, eyes twinkling cheekily.

I blink. "Sorry, what?"

Jack sighs. "God. Don't start. That's what got us into this whole mess in the first place."

"And we got the cutest baby alive out of it. I'd call that a win, personally." He yawns, rubbing a hand through his hair.

I frown. "I'm sorry, did I miss something?"

Cyrus crosses the room and slumps down onto the sofa next to me. Jack huffs as he drops his head in my lap, stretching his legs across the sofa cushions. "Can you show me how to make that apple mush, sugar?" He mumbles into my thigh. Heat rolls through me, making my stomach flip.

Jack squeezes my shoulder and stands. "More tea?" He asks, taking my mug.

"Um. No, thanks." I turn to Cyrus. He's pressed his cheek into my bare thigh. "You don't really need to do anything, you just boil apples and blend them up."

Cyrus mumbles something I don't even understand. His eyes flutter closed. I stare at him as he falls asleep, a few pieces of dark hair curling over his forehead.

"Uh," I say. "You okay?"

No response. His breathing deepens and evens out. "Um. Cy is asleep on me," I say to Jack.

"Technically, you're in his spot. He loves sleeping on the sofa. Just roll him off you, if you don't want him there."

"I wouldn't say *that*." It's quite nice having him draped across me. Like having a pet cat curled up in my lap. "Does he go out every night?"

Jack hesitates. "Most of them. Five or six nights a week, probably."

"*Jesus*. How does he have the energy?"

Cy shifts slightly, and I automatically start running a hand through his hair. It's probably the nicest hair I've ever seen on a guy: thick and silky, so black it's almost blue under the light. I brush some away from his forehead and notice him smirking up at me.

"You're not even bloody sleeping, you knob."

"I will if you keep petting me." He stretches luxuriously, looking up at me through his long lashes. "You're really comfy, sugar."

I glance up at Jack, concerned. Oddly, he doesn't seem annoyed or jealous at all, smiling as he roots around in the cupboards. That's weird, right? I mean, I kissed him less than sixty seconds ago, but he's okay with his roommate burrowing into my thigh like a sleepy kitten?

Then again, Cyrus is clearly very tactile. Maybe he's like this with everybody. He might not even be flirting.

"Do you want to go on a date tonight?" Cy says lazily, reaching up to tug one of my curls.

Nevermind, then.

I stare at him. "I... with you?"

He snorts. "I'm not asking for Jack. Although he can come if he wants."

Jack raises his mug. “Thanks, mate. I’ll take you up on that.”

“Never say I’m not generous.” Cyrus stretches in my lap, rolling out his shoulders with a small, pleased sound.

I sputter, looking between the two men. “I—are you serious?”

“As a heart attack.”

“You’re asking me on a double-date... but with only me?”

“I guess so.” He tosses me a sideways glance. “You can say no. I won’t be offended. Well, no, I will, but somehow I’ll persevere through the pain.”

“No!” I say, too suddenly. “I mean, yes!” Both guys crack up. “I mean. I don’t get it.”

“What’s there to get?” Jack asks, casually sipping his tea. “You’ve been on dates before. It’s the exact same thing, but with twice as many men.”

“But—”

Cami whimpers a few feet away in her cot, and Cyrus finally sits up. “It’s okay, ladybug,” he calls, looking around. “Where’s your bunny?”

“She doesn’t want the bunny,” Jack argues. “She’s missing her lion.”

“Where’s Cami’s bunny, babe?” Cyrus asks, ignoring him.

I pass it to him and watch blankly as he leans over me, tickling Cami’s face with its fuzzy tail. I’m being so stupid. I totally forgot about Anisha. They all slept with her. ‘Simultaneously’, according to Cyrus. So I guess the guys are used to sharing.

Is that what they’re suggesting now?

The thought sends heat flushing up to my cheeks. Images flash through my mind. Me sitting in Cyrus’s lap, kissing Jack. Me sprawled across my bed, wedged between them both. Me kneeling on the floor, one man in my mouth, and one with his face between my legs.

Fuck.

Cyrus shifts next to me. I’m suddenly aware of how close we are. His muscled arm is pressed against mine. “Don’t overthink it,” he says quietly. “Do you want to go out with us both?”

“Yes,” I say immediately.

“Great.” He leans forward and brushes his hot lips lightly over my cheek. “That’s settled, then. We’ll pick you up at eight, yeah? Seb will be home by then, he can babysit.”

“You can’t babysit your own child,” I point out. “He’s her dad. He *should* be looking after her.”

“God, you’re cute.” He presses another kiss to my cheek, then stands, heading over to Cami’s crib. “Come on, ladybug,” he says, heaving her up into his arms. “I need help picking out my outfit for tonight. I bet you’ve got a great fashion sense, huh?”

She wraps her arms around his neck, kicking her legs. I watch him leave, my heart pounding. Anticipation curls in my stomach.

I am very much looking forward to tonight.



Unfortunately, the rest of the day doesn’t exactly go to plan.

I first notice something’s wrong when I get Cami up for dinner. She wakes up teary-eyed and fuzzy, and immediately starts crying. When I pick her up and press my lips to her cheek, I frown. Her skin feels too hot. I touch her cheek, then her forehead, then carry her into the hallway and knock on Jack’s bedroom door. “Jack?”

“Yeah?” He calls, his voice muffled by the wood.

“Do you guys have a thermometer?”

There’s some clattery sounds from inside his bedroom, and then his head pops out. “What?” He runs his eyes over my face. “Are you not feeling well?”

“I’m fine. But Cami’s feeling a bit warm to me. I think she might have a little fever.”

His eyes widen. He falls out of his bedroom door and practically sprints over to the bathroom, pulling open the cupboard over the sink. He stirs around inside, then hands me an infrared thermometer laser gun.

“Fancy.” I hold it over her forehead and press the button. When it vibrates, I check the reading. 38. “Yeah, she’s got a fever. But not a really bad one.” I kiss her head. “Poor baby. You don’t feel too good, huh?”

“*Fuck*,” he swears, then shoots me an apologetic look. “Shit. Sorry.” He takes Cami from me and pulls her into a tight hug, rubbing his cheek against hers. She mewls. “What’s wrong with her?” He demands.

“She doesn’t have any other symptoms, and she’s eating fine. She’s just fussy and a bit tired.” I kiss her cheek. “It’s probably just a cold. She might have picked it up at the paediatrician’s.”

“Can you stay tonight?” He pretty much begs. “Please? I know we planned to go out, but—”

I’m already nodding. “Of course. We can reschedule for some other time.”

I’m sure Cami will be fine; between babysitting my foster siblings and nannying, I’ve looked after countless babies with fevers, and only one ever needed medical treatment. But I have a strong feeling that if I leave the boys with Cami, they’ll be calling an ambulance before the hour is up. Not that I can blame them. All new parents panic when their kids get sick.

Still clutching at Cami, Jack pulls out his phone and starts typing frantically on the screen.

I rub my eyes. “Please tell me you’re not googling it—”

“It says if they have a fever and they’re under six months you should call a doctor!”

“And she’s not under six months,” I point out patiently.

“Only by a few weeks! What difference will that make?” He keeps scrolling, and his mouth drops open. “It says fevers can cause *seizures* in babies—”

“Febrile seizures, yeah. They don’t tend to be dangerous, honey.”

“But they can be, right?”

I take his phone off him. “Don’t look at that. It’s very unlikely that will happen to her, and even if it does, I’m trained in infant first aid, remember? If she needs to go to the hospital, I will tell you. But it is incredibly likely that she just has a cold. There’s no point subjecting her to a hospital waiting

room, and a bunch of strangers and jabs, if she doesn't need all of that.”

He nods, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah. Yeah. Okay.”

He still looks unconvinced. I slide my arms around his waist and hug him tight, feeling his heart pound against my cheek. “She'll be okay,” I murmur into his shirt.

He hugs me back. Cami wriggles between us, snuffling, and he kisses her cheek.

“I'll call Cyrus,” he says. “He's going to be disappointed. He was really looking forward to tonight.”

“Me, too,” I tell him honestly. “But we can postpone.” We pull apart, and I tickle Cami's cheek. “Now let's get this little ladybug some medicine, huh?”

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TWENTY-ONE

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CYRUS

“I’m really sorry,” Beth says, when I get back from the gym that evening. She called and told me about Cami, and I quit lifting weights right in the middle of my session. My trainer got pissy with me, but I don’t give a shit. I just wanted to see with my own eyes that Cami’s okay.

God, no wonder parents are exhausted all the time. Are they just permanently terrified something will happen to their kids? We literally have a hired professional watching our baby, and I still can’t stop my heart racing as I stroke Cami’s hot little cheek. She snuffles in her sleep, and I kiss her forehead.

“Not your fault,” I murmur.

“We could reschedule for this weekend?” Beth offers. “I’ll be off work then, anyway, so the timing would probably be better.”

I shake my head. “Jack and I are both going away this weekend. There’s a tech convention up in Edinburgh.”

She frowns. “Both of you?”

“Why so surprised?”

“Well, you don’t work, right? I figured, since Jack and Seb work weekends, you’d take over with Cami when I wasn’t here.” Her lips curve. “You’re gonna leave her all alone with Seb? He’ll probably forget about her in the middle of a conference call, or something.”

I drop my hand, hurt flashing through me. “Why do you think I’m unemployed?” She only met me a few days ago. Why would she assume that? Do I just exude *lazy sponger* vibes?

She looks taken aback. “Sorry, I didn’t realise you had a job. I just... I’ve been here every day for a week. And you’re usually napping or working out,

or whatever.”

That hits me like a punch in the gut. She thinks I’m just a lazy layabout. That I lie around doing nothing all day.

She frowns. “It wasn’t meant to be an insult. There’s nothing wrong with not having a job, I literally *just* got one after a year of searching—” She trails off at the look on my face. “I didn’t mean anything by it, Cy.”

I bite my tongue. “It’s fine. Sorry.” I force myself to smile at her. “Yeah, I do public events for Trinity Games.”

“Why?” She looks confused. “You weren’t involved in developing the app, were you?”

“Nope. But I have a skill vital to the company that neither of the others have.” I pause for effect. “I’m sexy.”

Jack rolls his eyes. “He’s a *performer*,” he corrects, and I nod.

“At conventions, they have to give talks. Speak with investors. Maybe go on fancy dinners. Would you ever buy anything Seb tried to sell you? He has the social skills of Siri. And *this* nerd,” I jab my thumb at Jack, “has stage fright. He’d run right offstage if I wasn’t there to help him.”

Jack nods self-deprecatingly.

Beth looks disappointed. “Okay. Next week, then.”

“Nope.” I shake my head. “We can still do tonight. We’ll just have the date here. Leave it up to me.” Balancing Cami in the crook of my arm, I take Beth by the shoulder and nudge her towards the flat door. “Be back here at eight. Wear something pretty.”

She laughs. “It’s only six. My shift hasn’t finished yet.”

I shoo her away. “I’m letting you off early. Go home, before you get sick of us and decide to cancel.”

“But—”

“Go.”



When I finally convince Beth to leave, I settle Cami down, then head out to a local Italian restaurant to place an order.

Nerves bubble in my stomach as I wait at the restaurant's takeout counter. Which is surprising. I don't remember the last time a woman made me nervous. I don't even remember the last time I took a woman on a date. I'm usually pretty easygoing when it comes to women; if I meet a pretty girl at a bar, and we click, then I'll take her home. If she's not interested, I move right on.

But Beth is different. I want to impress her. I want her to want me, as well as Jack.

God, it's been over a year since we shared a girl. I forgot how much it turned me on. When I walked in on the two of them kissing, my dick practically turned to stone.

A server hands me my order, packaged up in a big paper bag, and I tip him absentmindedly, heading out into the sunny London streets. My thoughts wander as I walk home.

I was kind of disappointed that we couldn't all go out tonight, but maybe it's better this way. A formal date would've felt too romantic. I've learned the hard way that women don't really want me for romance. I've tried to have real relationships in the past, but the general feedback seems to be that I'm good for sex, and that's about it.

Which is fine. I'm good at sex. I like it. It's more than enough for me.

So I'm not exactly sure why I go back to the flat and start setting the food I ordered onto plates on our living room floor. I don't know why I'm covering the linoleum in blankets and cushions, or arranging electric candles, or pouring glasses of wine. I have absolutely no idea why I start the record player spinning a vinyl, and dim the lights to a low, ambient glow. All I do know is, when I'm done, the effect is even more romantic than a restaurant. The atmosphere doesn't scream *let's have sex*. It screams *I really like you and want you to like me too*.

Shit.

Jack steps out of his bedroom, dressed in a pair of dark jeans and a tight black t-shirt. Normally I'd gripe at him for not making an effort, but for him, that's

practically white tie. He surveys the room, his eyebrows raised. “Wow. You weren’t kidding about the date thing, huh?”

I grunt, opening a packet of breadsticks.

“You know, she told me she didn’t do relationships.” He glances across the plates. “Maybe this is a bit much.”

“Does it look like I’ve dropped an engagement ring at the bottom of her wine glass? This isn’t a *relationship*, it’s just dinner.”

He worries his bottom lip. “I just don’t want to scare her away.”

I arrange the breadsticks in a bowl. “You like her. I like her. She likes us both. What’s the best outcome of tonight?” He doesn’t say anything. I sigh. “You can’t just drop a threesome on a girl. Especially since she’s our nanny. She might end up feeling... I don’t know, used, or some shit. Besides.” I unpack a box of olives, setting it on the blanket. “I get the feeling that she’s not used to people taking care of her. She deserves it, after spending the last week taking care of us. Don’t you think?”

“Of course *I* do,” Jack says. “I just can’t believe that you do, too.”

I frown. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

He shakes his head. “Come on, Cy. This isn’t exactly how you treat your one-night-stands.” He tilts his head, studying me. “She doesn’t want a boyfriend. Don’t blow this into something it will never be.”

I glare at him, but before I can think of what to say, there’s a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Jack calls, and Beth opens the door.

“How is she?” she asks, her gaze immediately going to Cami.

“The same,” I say, standing. “Check on her?”

She gives me a soft smile, stepping forward into the flat, and I can’t stop my eyes running down her body. She looks incredible. She’s dressed in a little white lace dress that trails down to her mid-thigh. Her red curls are pulled up behind her head in a soft bun, tiny tendrils hanging around her face, and she’s fastened a black ribbon choker around her slim throat. With her freckle-spangled skin glowing in the candlelight, she looks fucking angelic.

She crosses the room to Cami's cot and checks her temperature again, then nods. "She's fine. It would have to be a lot higher before we need to worry about a doctor." She looks around the room, taking in the food, and I shift my weight, suddenly embarrassed.

"Wow," she says softly. "This is incredible. Did you guys do all this for me?"

"It was all Cy," Jack says, and I fight the urge to scowl at him. Beth looks up at me, her brown eyes gleaming like cinnamon under the soft lights. I don't think I've ever met a redhead with brown eyes before. It's a surprisingly striking combination: spicy and fiery and warm.

"Thank you," she whispers.

I don't know what to say, so I just grin, nodding to the picnic. "Are you hungry?"

She nods, twisting her fingers together anxiously. We sit down on the pillows, and Jack starts to pour the wine as I open up all the takeaway containers. Beth is stiff as we dole out the food, sitting ramrod straight. Her eyes keep flicking between me and Jack, like she can't believe what's happening.

I slide a hand over her shoulder. "Hey," I say quietly.

She jumps. "What?"

"You're all tense." I squeeze her shoulders, feeling the stiff muscles ease under my hands. She leans into my touch, her body swaying into mine. The gentle scent of apples washes over me, making my mouth water.

"Sorry. I've just never been on a date with two guys before. It's odd."

"As far as I can tell, you've not been on a date in a while, period," Jack points out, handing her a glass of wine. "Why is that, by the way? Are you getting over an ex, or something? Bad breakup?"

She hesitates. "I guess..." She swirls her wine thoughtfully, stalling for time. "I just don't like who I am, when I'm dating someone."

I frown. "What does that mean?"

"Like..." Heat rises to her cheeks. "I realised a few years ago that whenever I date someone, I end up changing myself to fit what they like. If they like

quiet people, I talk less. If they like loud people, I get more bubbly. If they like football, I'll learn to like it too. I find all the things that make them happy, and I mould myself into that person. I don't notice myself doing it, until we break up, and I realise that I'm nothing like the person that I was before. All of the things that *I* like and dislike just get swallowed up."

I stay silent. That was the last thing I expected her to say. Beth's sweet, but I certainly wouldn't call her a pushover. She's taken charge ever since she met us, and she's had absolutely no problem telling off Seb.

Beth takes a gulp of wine, embarrassment all over her face. "It's the part of myself that I'm most ashamed of. I'm like a chameleon. And I hate it. I hate that I'm not strong enough to just be myself. I hate that I'm such a people-pleaser that I'll change my whole personality just to be liked; but for the life of me, I don't know how to stop it. It just happens." She shrugs awkwardly. "When I'm alone, I'm myself. I get to be me. So I think I'm better off alone. At least until I work out how to stay true to myself."

"When did you last date?" Jack says quietly, reaching over to plop an ice cube into my wine.

"When I was twenty-two. So about four years."

My eyebrows fly up. "Shit, Beth. That's a long time."

"Yeah." She looks uncomfortable. "That's what Benny keeps telling me." She smiles weakly. "Even before that, I never really *dated*. I just met a guy and we sort of... fell together. I don't think anyone's ever done anything like this for me." She waves over the food. "It's really sweet."

So I was right, then. She's not used to other people taking care of her. The thought makes my chest ache. She spends all day looking after other peoples' children, but she's never had someone who wants to look after her.

An odd wave of emotion surges up in me. *I* want to be that person. The person cooking her dinner and massaging her feet and kissing her when she's sad. *I* want to take care of her.

I crush the feeling down. I fuck girls. I don't do emotional connections with them.

But God, right now, I wish I could.

“Okay.” I take a massive bite of pasta, then set my fork down, pushing my plate away. “Why don’t we play a game? Loosen you up. Since you’re so out of practice.”

She blinks. “Like, a drinking game?”

“Sure. Get to know each other better.”

“Truth or dare,” Jack offers, winding some spaghetti around his fork.

Beth perks up a little. “Okay.” She glances between us. “But this is kinda unfair. You’re both just gonna grill me. I’ll get twice as many questions.”

“We’ll take turns,” Jack offers, and she nods.

“I’ll start,” I decide. “Have you ever fantasised about fucking two guys at once?”

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TWENTY-TWO

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BETH

I stare at Cyrus, my heart pounding. He just smiles slowly, not taking his eyes off me.

“I—” I look down, feeling my cheeks flush.

The answer is *yes*. I have fantasised about it. There’s something about the idea of being completely surrounded by men, hemmed in and filled on all sides, getting touched *all over*, that makes my stomach throb with need.

I never thought it would happen, though. I never even entertained the idea. And now, I have two incredibly hot men sitting next to me, giving me very clear *we want to spit-roast you until you can’t walk or speak for a week* signals, and I have no idea how to react.

A flash of heat washes over my whole body. I can feel my dress sticking to my skin with sweat. My heart is beating so hard it hurts.

“Hey,” Jack says softly, sliding a little closer on my right side. His arm presses up against mine. I breathe in the clean scent of his detergent, feeling a fluttery pinch between my legs. “Is this too much?” He asks, quietly. “If we’re making you uncomfortable—”

“No,” I blurt out. I’m not uncomfortable. I’m *overwhelmed*. I’ve been overwhelmed since the second I walked through the door. The energy in the room right now is fucking electric. These boys are offering me a sex dream on a platter, and I just can’t process it.

I take a deep breath. I need to pull myself together. “I’m fine,” I insist. “Um, what’s the dare?”

Cyrus’s dark eyes meet mine. “Strip,” he commands.

I freeze.

He laughs, a low, rich sound. “I’m just kidding. Well, no. I’m not.” He slides

his hand up my back, cupping his palm behind my head. His fingers play with the clip in my hair. “Take this off,” he says quietly.

I lick my dry lips. “Take my hair down? That’s not a very good dare.”

His eyes sparkle in the candlelight. “Figured I’d start you off small.”

Oh God. “Am I going to be naked by the end of this game?”

“That’s generally my main goal, yeah.” He rubs the nape of my neck. I tip my head back, letting him slide his fingers into my hair, and he finds the clip, unclasping it. Curls fall down around my face, and he sifts through them, making me shiver. “Your turn,” he murmurs.

I take a deep gulp of wine, thinking. “Um. Okay. What’s your biggest regret?”

He flinches. “Jesus, woman. You’re meant to ask if I’ve ever shagged someone in an aeroplane, or had an orgy, or something.”

“You said you wanted us to get to know each other,” I point out. “And I already *know* you’ve had an orgy.”

He looks disgusted. “I think you’re misunderstanding. I don’t fuck *Jack or Seb*. Just whatever pretty lady we happen to be sharing.” He grimaces. “God. I’m way out of their leagues.”

“Hey,” Jack says mildly.

“Mate, no offence, but dressing like an extra off *The Big Bang Theory* isn’t exactly doing you any favours. Buy a tailored suit and I’ll think about it.”

I snort, picking up a breadstick. “I don’t have a tailored suit.”

“Honey, you could dress in a bin bag and I’d fancy you.”

I smile, sopping up some sauce. “Either way, I’m sticking with my question. I don’t want to know about your sex life. I wanna know about *you*.”

I really do. Cyrus is still an enigma to me. It’s funny; out of the three men, he seems to be the most open. He’s chatty and flirty and tactile. But even though he’s easy to talk to, all of our conversations have been surface-level. Whenever I ask him a serious question, he brushes it off with a joke or an innuendo. Earlier today, when I assumed he didn’t have a job, he was obviously hurt, but he still didn’t tell me what he does for a living. I think

maybe, underneath his shield of charm, he's the most secretive of them all.

He looks taken aback. "Dare," he says.

I consider. "Drink a whole bottle of Cami's formula milk."

He frowns. "*Babe*. You're shit at this game. You're supposed to pick something *sexy*." He nods at the dish of olive oil by the bread basket. "Want me to take my shirt off so you can rub that into my abs?" He offers enticingly.

I stand. "I'll warm up her bottle."

"Oh, *God* no." He catches my hand and tugs me back down, pulling me against his side again. "Fine. Jesus." His face darkens as he thinks. I pop an olive in my mouth, watching. "I guess... fighting with my family?" He says eventually. "I fell out with them a few years ago, and. Well. If I could undo that, I would."

"What happened?" I ask quietly.

He picks up his wine glass and takes a deep swallow. "You can't ask two questions," he reminds me. "Jack?"

Jack smiles at me. "Why did you become a nanny?"

Cyrus throws up his hands in exasperation. "Why do neither of you understand that Truth or Dare is basically just foreplay?" He complains. "It's an excuse to talk about what turns you on, and gradually remove items of clothing. That's why it was *invented*."

"I wanna know," Jack insists.

"Well." I think. "I told you that I grew up in the foster system." Cy stiffens on my left. I look down at my plate. "I was raised with a lot of other children, and I've helped to look after babies ever since I was a kid. It just seemed natural to make a career out of it."

Jack nods, eating another mouthful. "That makes sense. You're a natural with Cami."

Cyrus tugs at the hem of my dress. "I didn't know you were adopted," he says quietly.

"Fostered," I correct, reaching out and patting his hand. "And it would be a

bit weird if you did.”

He twists his hand, pressing our palms together and lacing our fingers. It’s such a sweet gesture my stomach flips.

“Um.” I shake my hair back, flustered. “My turn, right?” I turn to Jack. “So, um. How did you get started with this foursome thing?”

He cuts into his pasta. “It was back in university. We met in Com Sci classes, and we were all living in a shared apartment.”

“You went to uni together?” I didn’t know Cyrus had a degree. “All three of you?”

“Yep. Even me,” Cy says, a hint of sharpness in his voice. I frown, squeezing his fingers, and he relaxes again.

“We met a girl the year we graduated,” Jack says. “She was called Chloe. A trainee nurse. She was kind, and sweet, and gorgeous, so naturally, we fell in love with her.” He shrugs. “It just worked out well. Seb and I were working such long hours. I’ve had girlfriends complain before, that they’re not getting enough attention. And it always made me feel shitty. The last thing I want is to neglect my partner. But at the same time, it’s just the way my brain works. When I’m in that coding zone, I need to stay there for a solid few hours.” He takes a sip of wine. “The same thing was true for Sebastian. And Cy—”

“I just like watching girls get off,” Cyrus chips in by my shoulder.

I blink at him. “Really?”

He smiles. “Girls tend to be a lot more... stimulated, when they have multiple guys focussing on them. It’s *very* nice to watch.”

“Ignore him,” Jack says drily. “He was more in love with Chloe than any of us.”

Cyrus tosses him a black look.

I take a bite of pasta. “So what happened?”

“Nothing terrible,” Jack says. “She had a pregnancy scare. For a couple of months, we thought we were going to have a kid.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Shit.”

He nods. “We agreed that, when the kid was born, we’d all share parental duties. We’d all act as the kid’s dads. It only seemed fair, since we were all dating her.”

“But she wasn’t pregnant?”

Jack shakes his head. “False positive. According to the doctor, a medication that she was taking was screwing up the tests. But the whole ordeal made her realise that this isn’t what she wanted, long term. She wanted a regular nuclear family. One dad, one mum, two-point-five kids and a dog. It hurt like shit to let her go, but we couldn’t really begrudge her that.”

I’m confused. “She didn’t want to pick one of you?”

“That’s just not how the relationship worked. The dynamic needed all three of us to balance each other out.”

“My raw sexuality is too potent undiluted,” Cyrus explains. “It could probably strike a girl dead.”

I snort, twisting the last bite of linguine around my fork. “I see. That’s very thoughtful of you.” I eat my last mouthful, then stretch out on the cushions, fully satisfied. “That was *great*,” I mumble. “I think I need a nap now.”

Cyrus’s lip twists. Jack leans across the blanket and picks up a white bakery box I hadn’t noticed. “Room for dessert? Cy got cannoli.” He flips open the lid of the box, revealing twelve rolls of pastry bursting with whipped cream and pistachios and chocolate chips. My mouth immediately starts watering. I sit up.

“Yeah, well, maybe I have *some* space,” I decide, and they both laugh. Jack picks one up and offers it to me.

“Careful. It’s messy,” he murmurs. His eyes have darkened to inky blue, dancing in the candlelight. In the background, the Beatles croon ‘Something’ over the scratchy record player.

Slowly, I lean forward, letting him feed me from his fingers. The hard pastry cracks under my teeth, and warm, sweet cream explodes into my mouth.

At the same time, Cyrus dips closer, pressing his lips to the crook of my neck. Heat floods through me. He smiles against my skin, blowing a warm breath over my ear, and I gasp, pressing my thighs together. It’s probably the

most sensual moment of my life.

I'm so distracted, I don't even hear the heavy footsteps sprinting down the hallway, or the jangle of keys in the lock.

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TWENTY-THREE

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BETH

The door flies open, and I jerk backwards from Jack, almost head-butting Cyrus in the chin.

Seb practically falls into the room. He's a mess; his hair is sticking up, and his collar is undone. He looks like he ran the whole way home.

"I take it you called him," Cyrus mutters to Jack.

"She's his kid," Jack points out. "He should know this stuff." He takes a bite of my cannoli, closing his eyes. "Christ, this is good."

"Seb?" I sit up, frantically licking cream off my lips. "Are you okay?"

He ignores me, tossing his keys onto the counter and storming across to Cami's crib. He reaches out like he's going to pick her up, then pulls back his hands. "Jack says she has a *fever*." He says 'fever' like most people would say 'malignant tumour'. "Why haven't you called a doctor?"

"Just a little one," I soothe. "She'll be okay. Calm down, you'll wake her—"

"Calm down?" He says incredulously, spinning on me. "*My daughter is in pain.*"

"Your daughter has a *cold*," I correct. Jesus, when I signed up for this job, I didn't take into account that I'd have to deal with three times as many new-parent freakouts. At this rate, I'll be looking after the guys more than Cami. "Getting sick is how she'll develop her immune system. You can't protect her from it."

Seb's face is pained. He glances across at us, his eyes finally focussing on our set-up. "What's all this?"

"We're wining and dining your nanny," Cyrus says, reaching over to wipe a smudge of chocolate off my bottom lip. "Feel free to join us." He licks the chocolate off his thumb.

I stare at him, wide-eyed. What the Hell does he think he's doing?

Sebastian studies us for a few moments, his jaw working, then turns back to the cot. "I'm taking her into my room," he says stiffly. "Can someone help me move her?"

Jack jumps up and carries Cami into Seb's bedroom as Seb pushes the cot behind him. I wait for them to get out of sight, then glare at Cy. "Why would you tell him that?" I hiss.

"Relax. We're just eating dinner."

"On a pile of pillows, with bottles of wine and candles everywhere?"

He waves me off. "I'm known for being extra. He won't think anything of it."

Jack reappears, pulling Seb's door softly shut. I hear low murmuring on the other side. "He's reading her a story," he says, looking amused.

"Seriously?"

"Well. It's a chapter from a textbook about international copyright law. I've told him he has to at least do funny voices to keep her interested, but he refuses." He sits back down on my other side, even closer than before, and sets a hand on my thigh. "Now," he smiles. "Where were we?"

"Beth was confused about threesomes," Cyrus supplies, sliding his fingers down my spine.

"I'm not *confused*," I argue. "I'm just—" I turn to Jack. "Like, if I kissed Cyrus—you wouldn't care? *At all*?"

"He'd probably be watching," Cyrus drawls, "taking notes about my kissing technique."

"I'd definitely be watching," Jack murmurs, sliding his hand up my knee. "Wouldn't be focussing on Cy, though." I stare at him stupidly, and he smiles. "You're really struggling to get your head around this, aren't you?"

"I'm not judging, or anything!" I say quickly. "It's just... weird to think of, I guess. I don't think I'd like someone I was dating to get with other women."

Mostly because I'd definitely just get dropped immediately. I have a great track record for rejection. If I agreed to share a guy with multiple women, I'm sure I'd be out on the pavement so fast I'd find asphalt up my ass-crack.

“I’d never ask you to share us, sugar,” Cyrus purrs, picking up his glass. I swallow, my heart pounding faster in my chest.

“How about we make it easy?” Jack asks, leaning back. “It’s your turn, I think. Truth or dare?”

I think of Cami’s formula. “Truth,” I say quickly.

“You’re really gonna wanna pick *dare* on this one, babe,” Cyrus says lazily, swilling his wine in his glass.

“Uh. Okay. Dare?”

Jack nods at his friend. “Kiss him.”

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TWENTY-FOUR

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BETH

My mouth drops open. “Wh-what?” I stutter.

Jack shrugs. Cyrus smiles, then lays his head on my shoulder. His hot breath steams against the curve of my throat. “You’re so cute when you blush,” he murmurs.

My head is spinning. “Right now?”

“Are you more of a third-date kiss kind of girl?” He strokes a finger under the strap of my dress. “That’s okay. I don’t mind.”

“But I—”

I snap my mouth shut. Why am I protesting? I *want* to do this. Cyrus looks at me, his eyes crinkling, light from the electric candles shimmering over his face.

Shutting down the little voice niggling in the back of my brain, I lean forward and kiss him.

He kisses me back immediately. His lips are hot and soft, and they taste like the sweet wine he’s been drinking. The flavour is intoxicating. I twist my fingers into his collar, pulling him closer, and he groans into my open mouth. His tongue flickers against mine, slipping between my lips. What started as a gentle peck soon devolves into a slow, fiery makeout session, our bodies pressing together.

When I pull back, I’m gasping, like I’ve just been dragged out from underwater. My skin is hot and shivery. Blood is pounding almost painfully between my legs. I’m gripping the front of Cy’s shirt like it’s a life-ring keeping me afloat.

I lean back slowly and turn to Jack. He’s frozen, holding his wine glass half-way to his lips. His blue eyes are dark, his pupils blown. Our gazes meet, and

he licks his lips, setting down his glass and shifting uncomfortably. My eyes flick down to his crotch, widening at the very notable bulge in his pants.

He really wasn't kidding. This gets him off. Holy shit.

Without thinking, I crawl forward and press my lips to his, kissing him hard. He tenses against me, his arms automatically coming to draw me into his lap. We kiss deeply, passionately, our tongues swirling hotly against each other.

Behind me, I feel Cyrus's hands stroking my hips. Sliding up my arms. Tracing the thin straps of my dress. My breasts feel full and swollen and achy, and I sigh with relief as Cyrus tugs the neckline of my dress down, letting them spill out over the top. His thumbs pinch my scrunching nipples, rolling them and tugging them away from my body, and it feels so good I moan, my hips jerking against Jack's rock-hard erection. Heat pools in my core, and I pull away gasping, clamping my thighs together under my lace dress. I'm so turned on I can't even sit still.

Jack smiles at me, his cheeks pink. I stare back at him. I don't know what to do next.

"You want more, honey?" Cyrus asks by my cheek, his voice deepened to a low rasp. His fingers trail gently over my skin, tugging my dress back into place.

You shouldn't, a voice whispers in the back of my head. *This is going too far.*

But why, though? I want to do this. And I am so sick of being the good girl. Always worried about being liked. Always being polite.

"Yes," I whisper, honestly. I think I'm going to spontaneously combust if someone doesn't touch me soon.

Apparently, that's all Cyrus was waiting for. Without another word, he slips his arms around me and stands, lifting me as if I weigh nothing at all. "Are you a gymnast, or something?" I ask, clinging to his neck as he carries me into the hallway, kicking open the door to Jack's room.

He laughs. "What?"

"How the Hell did you pick me up and stand without losing your balance? That's some Olympic-level stuff."

He doesn't say anything, laying me carefully on the bed.

“Oh, Cy has a lot of experience chucking women around,” Jack says cheerfully.

Cyrus glares at him, then opens a bedside cabinet and pulls out a strip of gold, shiny squares, ripping one off and tossing it to Jack. “Quit talking and help me undress her,” he orders, climbing onto the bed behind me and pulling me into his muscled arms. His fingers find the zip at the nape of my neck and tug. Jack quickly obliges, crawling onto the mattress and slipping his fingers under the hem of the dress. Cy unzips me, and together they peel away the white lace clinging to my skin, until I’m lying sprawled on Jack’s sheets in just my underwear. Jack sits back on his haunches, staring at my pale pink bra and thong.

“Christ,” he mutters, running a hand through his hair. “Jesus, Beth. You are —” he reaches out to touch my thigh. “You’re perfect.”

On my other side, Cyrus slips a hand under my arse, running it between my legs. I twitch against him. He groans. “Honey, you are *soaked*,” he purrs. “You really need this, huh?”

I nod and squirm on top of his fingers as he slowly teases my panties down. Jack reaches forward, and his breath touches my cheek as he reaches behind me, deftly unclipping my bra. It falls away, and I sit up and tug at the blonde’s t-shirt. That goes first, and then his jeans, then his boxers, until he’s sitting in front of me, completely nude.

I stare at his cock. He’s already hard, his thick length swollen and rigid. And he’s *huge*. “You were hiding *that* under your jeans?” I say incredulously.

Jack looks down, smiling bashfully as he rips open the shiny condom wrapper.

“Can I?” I ask, holding out my hand.

His jaw stiffens. He nods, passing it over, and I reach for him, running my fingers lightly down his length. His lips part, and his eyes fall closed as I palm him, slowly. When I wrap my hand fully around him, squeezing, his dick jerks hard.

Cyrus laughs, tugging his own pants down. “You’d better stop teasing him, Bethie. The poor guy hasn’t had sex in ages. He won’t be able to handle it.”

Jack's face flushes. I smile and roll the rubber on, and Cyrus pulls me back against his chest, so I'm sitting between his legs. He's undressed too; I can feel his balls crushing against my ass. I grind backwards experimentally, and he groans.

Jack slides off the bed and stands between my legs, wrapping my thighs around his hips. His hard tip rubs gently between my folds, the rubbery condom sticking to my wet skin.

“Ready?” He asks.

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TWENTY-FIVE

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BETH

I nod frantically. I can feel a little tickle of arousal deep inside me, like a feather brushing against my inner walls. I need him to get inside me, to rub it and soothe it away. I'm desperate for it.

Cyrus starts massaging my neck. "Loosen up," he murmurs in my ear. "Don't be nervous. It's just us." His thumb rubs out a knot at my nape, and I relax as Jack eases into me slowly. I can feel my channel stretching to accommodate him. Fuck, he's *big*; as he bottoms out, filling me all the way up to his hilt, I lose my voice. I feel rammed-full, stretched and aching in the best possible way.

"Good?" Cyrus asks, his grip on me tensing.

"Tight," Jack says, his face strained. "God, you feel amazing, Beth." He strokes my thigh. "You okay?"

"I'm *great*," I practically purr, and both men laugh. Jack bends to kiss my knee, then rolls his hips slowly. His thick length moves slickly inside me, sending sparks flickering through my centre.

"Oh!" I buck, and he starts to pick up the pace, thrusting into me harder and harder.

Cyrus's hands slide down from my shoulders to my tits. He starts palming them, rubbing them, and I can feel my core blooming and wetting around Jack in response.

At first, it feels odd having two sets of hands on me, but I soon sink into the sensation, allowing it to carry me away. Jack lifts one of my legs, squeezing my foot gently. The new angle makes my eyes fly open as he slams deep inside me.

I remember Benny had a threesome once, and he said the whole thing was sort of awkward; none of them knew where to put their arms and legs, and

someone was always getting left out. Clearly, practice makes perfect, though, because these guys *definitely* know what they're doing. They're practically professionals.

My head falls back as Jack thuds deep inside me again, sending bolts of lightning flying through my core. Cyrus tightens his hands on me, holding me down. I like that a lot. The feeling of his weight against me as his best friend fucks me. It feels wrong, but in a very, very hot way. I shiver as he tips my face gently to the side and starts kissing me, hard. His hot tongue curls against mine as we move together, both getting rocked in time with Jack's deep, plunging strokes. God, he's such a good kisser. He bites my bottom lip softly, and I gasp against his mouth. It feels like electricity is shooting all throughout my body, oversensitising my skin. Between Cyrus's kisses and Jack steadily pounding inside of me, I can't keep still. Jack makes a low growling noise in the back of his throat as I pull back and cover my face, trying to catch my breath.

"Flip her?" He asks.

"Fuck yeah," Cyrus says, and as one, they both flip me over onto my hands and knees. I don't bother resisting. I like the way they're taking control, manipulating my body. Jack keeps jackhammering into me from behind, his big hands spreading and squeezing my asscheeks as he fucks me doggy style. Cyrus kneels on the mattress, lining his dick up by my mouth. "Can you take it, honey?" He asks quietly, stroking strands of sweaty hair behind my ear.

In answer, I lean forward, locking my lips around his fat tip. He groans, fisting a hand in my hair as I start bobbing my head jerkily up and down his shaft. I roll my tongue over his smooth head to suck up every drop of his pre-come, and he hisses, cupping a hand around the back of my neck and pulling me closer, pushing himself further down my throat.

"God, honey. Your mouth is so hot. So fucking warm and wet." His hips jerk as I lick into his slit, sucking hard. "*Shit*. Can I come in you? Mess up that pretty mouth? Fill you up inside?"

I moan, writhing as Jack digs his fingers into my hips, slamming deep inside me over and over again. Sweat drips off my skin. My body is twisting between the two men, my thighs shaking, trying to hold me up. Cyrus's hand tightens around my throat. "Can I?" He repeats, his voice trembling.

I nod eagerly. He must have been holding back, because he immediately tenses, going off like a bomb in my mouth. His thick load spills inside my throat, and I swallow, drinking him down, draining him dry. He groans, his muscled thighs shuddering over me as his climax wracks through his strong body.

When he's finally spent, he sags against the bed. I lean forward, pressing my hot face into his sweaty, muscled chest as I feel the pressure between my legs reaching a peak. "I can't," I gasp, pushing back into Jack. Heat climbs up my body, and I know I'm right on the edge of coming. "I can't hold it back anymore."

"Not gonna be a problem," Jack grunts behind me.

"Come on me," I whisper, so low I can barely hear the words myself. But somehow, both of the men hear me just fine. They both freeze. My cheeks heat.

"Yeah?" Cyrus says, wiping my lips with his thumb. "You want that, sugar?" I squeeze my eyes shut. He tuts. "Nope. Look at me. Say it."

Jack rolls his hips behind me, mercilessly drilling into my most sensitive spot until my whole body spasms.

"Jesus. *Come on me,*" I gasp.

Cyrus's thumb presses against my bottom lip, and I open my mouth, sucking it inside. His eyes darken as I scrape my teeth lightly over the pad. "God, you're pretty," he mutters. "You heard the lady, Jack."

I feel a quick kiss on my hip, and then Jack's pulling out of me, slipping his fingers inside of my aching entrance and rubbing his thumb over my swollen bud. His movements are fast and frantic, and I jerk myself back into him, trying to push him even deeper as the tingling in my belly builds and builds to an unbearable level.

"*Fuck!*" Jack suddenly cries out. I feel him explode, coming over my back in thick, molten-hot stripes. His come drips down my waist, slipping onto the sheets, frothy and creamy and hot.

It's too much for me. I shout as my climax hits me like a freight train. Jack's fingers flutter inside me, massaging me from the inside as Cyrus pinches my

tits, licking and kissing the curve of my neck. I shake between them, my fingers curled tight into the bedsheets, strangled, inhuman sounds falling out of my mouth as I screw down hard over Jack. I keep rubbing myself against him, letting the waves of blistering-hot endorphins roll through my brain and send me flying.

When the pleasure finally fades, I'm still shaking hard. Both men are kissing me, stroking me. I feel Jack slowly pull his fingers out of my soaked core, and can't help the high-pitched keened that gets drawn out of my mouth. Slowly, I roll over, feeling the warm liquid slipping off my back and pressing into my skin. I lie there, in the wet, stained sheets, panting and dripping with sweat. Cyrus collapses onto his knees next to the bed and starts pressing frantic kisses across my chest, sucking at my heaving tits until I bat him away again, gasping for breath. I feel Jack squeeze my ankle, and then something cold and wet presses against my thighs. A baby wipe, I guess. The soft strokes feel good on my overheated skin, and I shiver, closing my eyes as the boys sit me upright and slowly clean me up. When they're done, Jack kneels down in front of me and pushes back my hair, his blue eyes sparkling. "Truth or dare?" He murmurs, pressing his lips to mine.

"Truth."

"Did we live up to your expectations?"

"You surpassed them so much you shot into a different freaking stratosphere."

He smiles against my mouth. Cyrus nuzzles the nape of my neck. "Your turn," he says in my ear. I wriggle as I feel my belly tighten again. Jesus. How can I still be turned on?

"I dare you guys to clean me up properly." I nod to the bathroom. "I want you to be *very* thorough."

"Oh, I think we can do that."

TWENTY-SIX

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BETH

I wake up slowly and squint around me. It takes me a second to remember where I am; then I spot the *Space Invaders* poster on the wall, and last night comes flooding back.

Oh my God. Oh my *God*.

I fucked two of my neighbors. Simultaneously. And it was the best sex of my life.

What the Hell?

I try to sit up. Next to me, Jack mumbles something incomprehensible, pulling me closer. I smile. I've not had a lot of casual sex in my life. I wasn't sure how much cuddling it involved. Luckily, at least according to Jack, it's completely acceptable to violently snuggle your partners the morning after.

I tuck myself closer to him and look around the dark room. My heart sinks when I realise the other side of the bed is empty. "Did Cyrus get up early?" I murmur.

Jack makes another garbled sound into my shoulder.

"What was that?"

"Gym," he repeats. "He's probably at the gym." He kisses my back. "Shh. 'M sleeping."

I relax. At least Cy didn't just slink away in the middle of the night. That would be embarrassing. I twist to check the clock on Jack's nightstand and swallow a sigh, sitting up. "I need to go."

Jack groans, rolling onto his back to look up at me. I do *not* look my best in the morning, but his eyes are hot as they trace my bare body and makeup-less face. "Stay," he rasps, reaching up to touch my hair.

“I have work.”

“You don’t start until eight,” he points out. “It’s ten-to.”

“I need to shower.”

“I have a shower. Right here.” He nods at his ensuite and yawns, sliding his hand up my thigh. “You feel okay? Not sore?”

“You mean, from your giant dong? You know human growth hormones are bad for you, right?”

He buries his face into my waist and groans, and I laugh. “Nope. I’m fine.” I pause. “But I really need to get changed. I’m not working here all day in a mini dress and heels.”

“Please?” His hands slide over my hips. “You look so nice in them.”

I bat him off. “You’re a lot flirtier when you’re tired.”

“Mm.” He touches my wrist. “Pretty,” he murmurs.

I look down. He’s got a finger hooked under my baby bracelet. It’s simple: just a fine gold chain with a bar-shaped charm. It has *Bethany Ellis* engraved on one side, and *you are my sunshine* on the other.

“Thanks. My mum gave it to me.”

I’ve been wearing the bracelet ever since I was big enough to keep it from sliding off my wrist. I never take it off; not to sleep, or shower, or go swimming. Never. It’s always with me. There were times, when I was a kid, where it was the only thing getting me through the day. A reminder that my mum still loved me, even if she couldn’t take care of me.

Jack’s sleepy eyes are soft as he looks over my face. “Did she die?” He asks quietly.

I lay back down next to him, and he pulls me closer. “No. She got pregnant when she was fifteen. She couldn’t look after me.” I rub my thumb over the gold charm. “My grandma, her mum, took me in for a few years, but when I turned four, she couldn’t handle me anymore. So she put me in care.”

His eyebrows furrow. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “No one ever told me. I assumed my grandma must

have gotten sick, or something.”

“Have you spoken to them since?”

I shake my head. “I’ve been looking for my birth mum ever since I was old enough to use a computer. Not as often now, but I still search for her name every so often. I’ve never found any trace of either of them.” I twist my wrist, watching the bracelet flash gold. “I used to think my Nonna would come back for me. When she got better.” Saturday was visiting day at my old care home, and every single weekend I’d wait by the window for my grandma’s car to pull up in the drive outside. It never did. It was hard, but I don’t blame my mum or my grandma for giving me up. The cards were stacked against them. I believe they would have kept me, if they could. I have to believe that.

“And you never got adopted,” he says softly.

“Nope. Stayed in the system for fourteen years, until I got kicked out at eighteen.” I pause. “The funny thing is, if my Nonna had just given me away immediately, my chances of getting adopted would have been so much higher. She kept me long enough that I wasn’t a cute little baby anymore, then gave me back.”

Jack rolls over and kisses me softly. His warm, stubbled cheek brushes mine. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I know it doesn’t mean anything. But I am.”

“It means plenty.” I say honestly, kissing him back.

There’s a sudden lusty cry from the living room, and I pull away. “I need to go,” I whisper, giving him one last peck. “And *you* need to pack for Scotland.” I pat his chest, sliding out of bed. “Don’t leave it until tomorrow morning.”

He groans, flopping back onto his pillows, and I leave to get ready for the day.



I’ve heard the term ‘sex glow’ before, but I never really understood what it meant until now. After last night, I’m so happy and full of endorphins that I’m walking on air all day. I’m humming as I change Cami’s nappies. I’m dancing as I make her afternoon snack. I’m practically skipping across the apartment as I pick up her toys.

It's a beautiful day, so after dinner, I take Cami out to the local park. Apparently my good mood is infectious, because she laughs and bounces the entire way, looking around at the flowers and groups of passersby with huge, excited eyes. No less than four women stop us to coo at her, and I chatter happily with them, soaking in the bright sunshine and warm spring air. Eventually, though, Cami gets tired, so we head back home, me beaming all the way.

We've just got into the flat when Cyrus's bedroom door opens. He steps into the kitchen, stretching, then rubs the sleep from his eyes. He's dressed in a pair of boxers and a wrinkled t-shirt.

My stomach buzzes at the sight of him. I've been waiting for him to re-emerge all day. What will happen now that we've slept together? Will his flirting get even worse? Will he kiss me like Jack did? Hug me?

I smile at him shyly as he stumbles towards the coffeemaker. "Hey."

He jumps like he didn't even notice me standing here, then nods. "Hey," he says stiffly.

"Sleep well?" I ask.

He nods noncommittally.

I gesture at the cupboard. "Want a coffee?"

"Yeah, um." He squints at the machine, then glances back at me. "You know what, never mind," he mumbles, turning tail and heading back into his room without another word. I stare after him, my hopeful bubble bursting and withering.

Oh. Okay, then.

Cami wriggles in my arms. I look down at her. "Did I say something?" I whisper.

She blows a raspberry in my face.

A door creaks in the corridor, and Jack steps out of his bedroom, yawning. "Finally fuckin' finished," he mumbles, then spots Cami. "Um. Finally friggin' finished," he corrects himself.

I laugh, sitting on the sofa with Cami on my lap. Jack squeezes in next to me,

and I stiffen, not sure what to do. He wraps an arm around my shoulders, tugging me against his chest, and I happily snuggle up to him.

“Thanks,” I mumble into his t-shirt.

He smiles. “For what?”

“Not being weird about last night.”

He sifts a hand through my hair. “I’ve been wanting to do that for ages, Beth. You don’t need to thank me.”

I smile and cuddle closer, my worries about Cyrus slowly dying away as I relax against him. Cami reaches up and curls a hand in his shirt as she drifts off, blowing a bubble between her lips. Jack practically glows with pride.

None of us move for a long time. I can’t remember the last time I felt this comfortable. With a tiny baby on my lap, and a man’s arm around me—it’s almost like having a family cuddle.

Of course, the baby is only borrowed, and the man is my neighbor, but I’ll take what I can get. I’m on the verge of falling asleep when my phone buzzes with a text from Benny.

B: I’m in the lobby. Brought wine. Let’s get MASHED

I check the clock. Shit, it’s already past seven. “I have to go. Benny and I are going clubbing.”

Jack pulls back. “Okay. Stay safe. I’ll probably be working late, so if you need a ride, or anything...”

“It’s fine. We’ll get a taxi.” I stand, popping Cami into her bouncer and brushing down my skirt. “Have a good trip to Scotland.”

He stands too, and I hesitate. Do I hug him? Kiss him? Turn and leave?

Jack smiles, nudging his knuckle under my chin and tipping my face up for a kiss. “I had fun last night,” he says against my lips.

“We should do it again sometime.”

His smile widens. He nudges our noses together. “I would love that.”

There’s a footstep in the hallway, and I look up to see Cyrus loitering in his

bedroom doorframe, watching us. There's an odd expression on his face.

"Bye, Cyrus," I call. "Enjoy your convention."

He nods awkwardly, hanging back.

I grit my teeth. Whatever. *He* was the one who asked me on a date. *He* was the one who initiated the sex. If he's going to be weird about it now, that's his problem, not mine. I blow Cami one last kiss, then head out of the flat. I have a wine-and-whine session waiting for me downstairs.

It's time I told Benny everything.

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TWENTY-SEVEN

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BETH

“Are you fucking *kidding me?*” Benny shouts half an hour later, his slice of pepperoni pizza forgotten halfway to his mouth. I wince, winding another strand of hair around my curling iron. We’re both in my bedroom. I’m sitting cross-legged on the floor, getting ready to go out, and he’s sprawled across my bed.

He leans so far forward he almost falls off the mattress. “*You shagged both of them?!*” He squawks.

I glance up at the ceiling. “Can you keep your voice down?” I hiss. “Apparently, they can hear into my flat.”

He raises his voice. “YOU SHAGGED TWO OF YOUR NEIGHBORS, AND IT WAS THE BEST SEX YOU’VE EVER HAD? YOU’RE DYING TO DO IT AGAIN? YOU’RE RUINED FOR SINGLE-HOLE SEX FOR LIFE? YOU—*ow!*” He breaks off when I throw a dough ball at his face. “Babe, I can’t believe this! You never take my advice! I’m so proud of you!”

I let the curl fall, bouncing around my face. “How was this your advice? You only told me to shag Jack.”

“I told you to have sex. Ergo, I can take credit for any sexual activities. Wow. I am *such* a good friend.” He finally remembers his pizza, shoving it into his mouth. “What about the last one?” He mumbles around the mouthful of dough. “You gonna get the full set?”

I set the curling wand down, flicking it off. “The last one?”

“The other guy in the flat? He’s *really* hot. Kinda looks like Henry Cavill.”

“Sebastian? How do you know what he looks like?”

“He buzzed me in once. Are you gonna fuck him, too? Maybe he wants to join.” He wiggles his eyebrows at me.

I hesitate, looking at myself in the mirror. My shoulders droop.

He frowns. “Hey. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. We got in kind of a fight the other day.” If by *fight*, you mean *I sat there like a loser while he yelled at me like an unruly child*.

“Oh no!” He shuffles closer. “What happened?”

“I was playing blocks with his baby. He came running out of his room, tripped on one of them, and then just went off at me.” I lower my voice. “*Would it kill you to not trash our flat? This is a bloody mess.*” I reach for my makeup bag, pawing through it. “I get that he’s stressed, and whatever. But I really don’t think he has a right to yell at me like I’m a bloody idiot, when I’m looking after his kid for him.”

“Not at all,” he agrees. “He’s your employer. He shouldn’t be treating his workers like that.”

“It’s not really what he said that upset me, though.” I pick up a lipstick tube and stare at the label on the bottom. *Badass Bitch*. Yeah, right. “I didn’t stand up for myself. I didn’t say anything back. I just apologised, then I cleaned his entire house. I did a bunch of chores for him, Benny. It was like being ten years old again, trying to impress some knobhead foster parent.” I sigh, putting the lipstick down. “I just hate when I do this. I don’t understand why I’m so completely incapable of standing up for myself. I’m so *weak*.”

“You’re not *weak*,” he scoffs. “The care system can screw you up in a lot of ways, but one thing it won’t make you is *weak*.” He takes a swig of rosé, then looks at me from over his wine glass. “You’re solid diamond, babe.”

“Since when? Literally name *one* time when someone was rude to me, and I didn’t shrivel into a fucking *raisin*.” I *hate* this part of myself. I’m not a scared, shy kid anymore, I’m a grown woman. But I’m still so desperate for people to like me. At any sign of conflict, I just become completely subservient. It’s gross.

There’s a sudden, authoritative rap on my front door. I frown, looking at Benny. “You didn’t order more pizza, did you?”

He shakes his head. Shrugging, I stumble over to the front door and yank it open. Sebastian is standing in the hallway, dressed in a navy suit and holding

a sleeping Cami in her carrier.

“Oh. It’s you.” I lean on the doorframe, my head spinning slightly from the wine. “What’s this?”

“I’ve got an emergency meeting.” He puts the carrier in my arms. “I need to go into the office.”

I stare down at Cami. She’s dressed in a little pink babygrow with a sheep on it. As I watch, she stirs sleepily, opening and closing her mouth like a little guppy fish.

My first instinct is to say *yeah, of course, no problem, see you later*. But Benny makes an enraged noise from behind me, and I remember myself. I shake my head. “I’m not looking after her tonight.”

Sebastian looks taken aback. “What?”

“I’m busy.”

He stares at me. “This is an emergency. You can’t cancel? I’ll pay you, obviously.”

Irritation sparks in me. “It didn’t even occur to you to ask me first, did it?”

“Well, I—” He looks over my shoulder at Benny. His face goes cold. “What are you doing that’s so important?”

“I’m going out.”

“Beth. We’re having a real problem with an investor. If I don’t fix this, he might pull out of the project completely.”

I shrug. “Great. That doesn’t have anything to do with me though, does it?” I hand the carrier back to him. “I have a life, too. And I’m not looking after a baby when I’m drunk.”

“You’re *drunk*?” He says, horrified.

That just pisses me off even more. “Why are you making me feel guilty over this? I’m off the clock! I don’t just sit around in my flat, on-call and waiting for you to snap your fingers at me!”

“But—”

“I’m your employee from eight-to-seven, five days a week,” I say firmly.

“After that, you don’t get to tell me what to do. If you need me to work extra hours, you need to tell me in advance, and *ask* for my help. You can’t just knock on my door and *demand* I work overtime without any warning. I’m not your wife. This kid is not my child. Just because I live conveniently in your building, doesn’t mean I’m your full-time servant. Take some responsibility for your own daughter, for God’s sake.”

He stares at me, open-mouthed. I bend to press a kiss to Cami’s cheek, then straighten, glare at him, and close the door in his face.

“What a prick,” Benny says from behind me. “I no longer think he’s hot.”

“He’s an arrogant bastard.”

“So arrogant,” Benny agrees. “Bet he winks in front of the mirror. Bet he winks at his reflection after he comes.”

“I appreciate that you’re trying to support me emotionally, but I really don’t need to think of my boss jerking off.”

He rolls over onto his stomach and studies me. “You like him,” he says softly, curls falling over his face.

The realisation crashes over me like a wave. He’s right. Sebastian is hard, and cold, and rude. And I still somehow fancy him.

“Well. I do have a habit of liking people who treat me like shit. I’m probably one rude email from falling in love with him.” I lean against the door, a weird mixture of guilt and self-hatred twisting in my gut. “I’m pathetic.”

Benny makes a sad noise in the back of his throat. “Come here.” I cross over to the bed, and he pulls me into his muscled arms, hugging me tightly. “You’re not pathetic. I love you.”

“I really like you, too,” I whisper, and he snorts, pushing me towards my wardrobe.

“Alright. Have another drink, put on a pretty dress, and then let’s go out. Trust me: in one hour, you’ll have forgotten all about that prick.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

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BETH

Forty minutes later, we step off the tube and out onto the wet London pavements.

It's Friday night, which means the clubbers are out in full force. The streets are packed with drunk students shouting and laughing, clutching beers and kebabs. Benny takes my hand and leads me down a couple of streets, to a flashy nightclub I've never seen before. It looks surprisingly swanky: the walls are mirrored, and the entrance is sectioned off with red velvet ropes. A bright blue neon sign hangs over the building, shining the word TEASE out over the street.

We join the small queue of girls lining up outside. When it's our turn, the bouncer flashes his torch over our IDs.

"You here for the show?" He grunts.

Benny nods, producing some print-off tickets from his pocket. I try to lean over and peek, but it's too dark to read what they say. The guy nods, stamps both of our hands, and lets us through the door.

"Show?" I ask, as we step into a dark hallway thronging with women in tiny dresses. "Is there live music, or something?"

He gives me a droll look and presses me through the cloakroom. "Trust me. This will cheer you right up."

I want to ask more questions, but I know Benny isn't giving anything up. So I just pay a quid, hand my coat over, then let him usher me into the main club.

At first, I don't really understand what I'm seeing. For the most part, *Tease* looks like a normal club; a large dark room with an illuminated bar running down one wall, and a dance floor made up of panels of coloured lights. The walls are practically vibrating with Rihanna's 'Bitch Better Have My Money', and bright lasers cut through the crowd.

Unlike a usual club, though, most of the dance floor is covered with seating. All around the room, groups of chairs are arranged around small round tables covered in white tablecloths. Girls sit in little groups, taking selfies, talking excitedly, and sharing fishbowls of radioactive-looking glowing drinks. All of the tables face the front of the room, where a massive stage has been erected. Projected onto the back wall are the words MAGIC NIGHTS: THE MOST HANDS-ON SHOW IN LONDON.

“Hands-on...?” A champagne bottle pops a few feet away, and I turn to see a nearby table of girls cheering as a shirtless waiter in a bow tie fills their glasses. Dread drips through me. “Shit. Benny, is this a *strip show*?”

“You liked Magic Mike, didn’t you?” He takes my hand and leads me to the bar.

“Y-yeah, but—”

“Relax. I’ve seen some videos online, it’s not sleazy or anything. It’s a proper show. You want some Magic Dollars?”

He points at a bright yellow ATM. A woman with a pink *Bride to Be* sash and an inflatable penis on her head is pushing coins into a slot, and it’s dispensing stacks of brightly coloured fake cash, like full-sized monopoly money.

She notices me looking. “You can throw them at the guys,” she explains, shouting over the music. “Make it rain, stick ‘em down their boxers—” She giggles. “It *really* increases your chances of them picking you for a private dance.”

“Oh,” I say weakly. “Good.”

Benny snorts, muscling to the front of the bar queue. I tug on his sleeve. “Is the person you wanna hook up with a *stripper*?” I hiss.

“Not exactly,” he hedges.

Before I can press him, a handsome bartender spots us and grins, coming to take our order. Like the waiter, he’s naked from the waist up, although he’s apparently decided against the bow tie. “Benny!” He shouts over the music. “You came!”

“Hey, Antonio,” Benny says, shaking his curls out of his face. “We’ll have a

pitcher of something that will make us wish we were dead tomorrow, please.”

Antonio laughs, tipping his head back. His white teeth gleam under the blue lights. He’s supremely hot; sculpted and tanned, with dark wavy hair and sparkly eyes. Go Benny.

“Yeah?” He asks, reaching for a bottle. “You like cherry, babe?”

Benny sputters, turns red, and reaches for his wallet. “I… uh. How much?”

I elbow him in the side. “You got the tickets. I’ll pay.”

Antonio suddenly registers my existence. His smile dims slightly. “Ah. Who did you bring?”

“I’m his super-platonic friend,” I say. “In fact, we’re biological siblings. I’m happily married to my childhood sweetheart. We’ve got three kids, and a baby on the way.” I pat my stomach. “I love going to strip clubs with my platonic best friend brother, who I would never, under any circumstances, date.”

Benny stamps on my foot. Antonio’s smile gets wider. “Okay. You can stop now.”

“Thanks. I’m not actually pregnant, please give me alcohol.” I’m going to need it if I have to sit here and watch a bunch of oiled-up men gyrating to ‘Candy Shop’. Don’t get me wrong, I like the idea of strippers in *theory*. I just don’t think I’ll be able to sit in a room with real life men tossing their goods around, and not burst out laughing. It sounds so cheesy.

“Coming right up.” Antonio grabs a massive plastic fishbowl and starts pouring shots and soda into it. I watch, mildly concerned, as amaretto, flavoured vodka, bourbon, and sours all get sloshed into the drink. He tops the bowl off with a handful of maraschino cherries and slides it across the counter to me.

“On the house,” he gives me a little wink, then goes back to staring at Benny’s tattooed collarbone. “You, uh, staying for the full show?” He asks casually.

Benny stutters. “I, ah—I don’t know?”

I frown up at him. He’s frozen to the spot, his dark cheeks flushed. I’ve never seen him like this. Benny is usually the smoothest, most confident person I

know. He can barely leave the house without getting some girl or guy's phone number.

"Well," Antonio shoots him a smile. "I get off before it ends. Eleven. Maybe you'll catch me before you leave."

"Maybe," Benny forces out. "I, uh, yeah. I'll probably leave before the end. Not that I don't like watching men get naked! But, yeah, if I get bored, or, um—yeah. I'll see you then, probably. Yeah."

Jesus Christ. I give Antonio one last smile, then grab my useless friend and drag him away before he can embarrass himself any further.

"What the Hell was that?" I hiss when we're out of earshot of the bar. "Did you have a stroke? Did you temporarily forget English?"

"Yes to both," he groans, running a hand over his face. "God. I don't know what it is about him. I haven't even kissed the guy yet, for fuck's sake."

I stop dead in the middle of the club floor. The square panels under our feet glow, lighting up his face a soft blue. "Seriously?"

He grimaces and pulls out a seat at a random table, plonking down our glasses. I sit next to him, stunned. Benny does not date. He meets people on apps, takes them out for one drink, and then brings them home. I've never seen him get this frazzled over someone. "How long have you been talking to this guy?"

"Like, two months?"

I gape. "Wow. Okay. Shit." I glance over my shoulder. Antonio is shaking up a mixed drink and staring at the back of Benny's head. He quickly drops his gaze when he sees me looking. "So what's the game plan, tonight? Are you trying to get with him?"

Benny looks frustrated. "I don't know! Flirt with him? Stare at him? Just be in his general vicinity and bask in the light reflected off his cheekbones?"

"They *are* sharp," I agree.

He groans. "He's so hot he breaks my brain." He glances back over his shoulder. "Like—Jesus, the man has *arms*."

"Most men do, Benny. Is that your only requirement?"

“And he’s *nice*,” he practically moans. “Do you know how hard it is to find a nice, *hot* man?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Piss off. You just had group sex with your neighbors.” He gets one of the straws between his lips and takes a massive gulp of our drink. “I don’t know. He’s just... nice. I like him. A lot.”

I have about fifty more questions, but before I can probe him further, all of the lights in the club change colour, flashing from blue to white. Everybody quietens down as a man saunters onto the stage, wearing tight leather pants and a flashy silver jacket.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” he purrs into his microphone. “Thank you all for joining us tonight.” A scream goes up from the crowd. A few feet away, a very drunk-looking girl whoops, jumping onto her table and tottering dangerously in her heels. Three of her friends rush to catch her as she starts to fall.

The announcer laughs. “My name is Seth, and I’ll be your host for tonight. Are you all ready to see some *sexy men*?” Another cheer. He beams at us. “Then please put in your last drink orders and take your seats, because the *Magic Nights Cabaret* is about to commence!”

“We are talking about this later,” I mutter to Benny. “But for the record, if you get lucky, I am more than capable of ordering myself an Uber and going home alone.”

Benny frowns at me. “But I am a big strong man, and you are a frail tiny woman. I don’t trust you to order your own car service!”

I flick a cherry at his face, and he grins as the lights suddenly go black. A scream rises from the audience; hundreds of drunk, horny women cheering and whooping. Despite myself, I feel anticipation curl in my stomach as music starts to play.

TWENTY-NINE

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CYRUS

I stare at my reflection in the dressing room mirror, taking in the bags under my eyes and the stubble on my cheeks. Half-naked men wander around me, chatting, spraying deodorant, lifting dumbbells. The walls are practically vibrating with the music they're playing on the club floor—some sort of electro-pop song that's getting the crowd riled up for us.

Normally, I'd be buzzing by now. Fixing up my costume, or tossing back a shot, or oiling myself up. But right now, I just can't be bothered. I feel like shit. My thoughts keep floating back to Beth.

I feel like I've lied to her.

I mean, technically, I have, even if it's just a lie by omission; I've made her think that I'm not a stripper. And now I can't shake the feeling that I tricked her into having sex with me last night.

It didn't really cross my mind at the time, but when I woke up this morning and saw her curled up with Jack, the realisation hit me over the head like a fucking sledgehammer. The two of them looked so cute together, spooning, their heads on the same pillow. The computer nerd and the girl-next-door. They both just *fit*. Neither of them strips off for money, or swings their genitalia around in other peoples' faces to get bank notes shoved down their underwear. Some of the guys here might not agree with me, but I feel like what we do here is a kind of sex work. Would *Beth*, our sweet, gentle, child-loving, apple-pie-scented nanny *really* want to sleep with a sex worker? She probably wouldn't want to touch me with a barge pole if she knew the truth.

I should have just left her and Jack alone when I saw them kissing on the sofa yesterday, but of course, I had to crowbar myself between them. Because I'm a selfish prick.

I groan internally, rubbing my eyes. I have to do it. I have to tell her about my job. And then she's probably going to hate me, and she's never going to

come back to the flat again, and Cami will be heartbroken, and Jack will be crushed, and—

A hand slaps onto my shoulder. “You alright, Romeo?” Someone calls over my head. I glance up to see Harrison, aka Hunky Harry, checking himself out in my dressing room mirror. He’s already ready for the performance, dressed in baggy firefighter pants and fluorescent orange suspenders. His naked chest is shimmering with glitter.

I turn back to my reflection. “Shut up.”

He laughs, slumping down in the folding chair next to mine. “Real talk. How much more body glitter do you reckon I can get away with?”

“None. Buy a bottle of baby oil like the rest of us.”

“Why do you think *Twilight* got so big, man?” He insists. “Girls love this shit.”

There’s a muffled scream from the club floor. I can hear people stamping and shouting over the thudding house music.

“What’s the crowd like today?” I ask, reaching for some hair gel. “Sounds excited.”

“We’ve got five hen dos. Apparently security has already had to yank a couple girls off the stage. They decided to put on their own bicurious show for the club.”

“Jesus.” I run my fingers through my hair, slicking it back so it won’t fall in my face while I’m dancing.

My phone buzzes on my dressing table, and I glance across at it. My little sister, Lucy, just sent me a photo message. I swipe to open it, and am confronted with a picture of my giant extended family crowded around my parents’ dinner table. Everybody is there: all of my siblings, my cousins, my aunts and uncles, my grandparents. My mum is sitting at the head of the table, smiling widely. A birthday cake is set in front of her, decorated with lit candles.

Lucy follows up the picture with a text.

L: Help. She’s making us watch all the family baby videos again.

L: U were a hideous toddler omg

L: You look like a brown shrek

I snort, tapping back a reply.

C: did mum get my flowers okay?

There's a long pause.

L: She sent them back :(

L: told the delivery guy she didn't want them

I rub the back of my neck, heat climbing up my face. Seriously? She's that disgusted with me, she won't even accept a bunch of damn flowers?

C: she defiantly thinks they'll give her herpes

L: oh, defiantly

C: piss off. definitely

L: Wish you were here :(

L: R u working tonight

L: Pls give Hunky Harry my number, I am literally begging you

L: i will do ANYTHING for that man

C: no

C: its for your own good, hes a nitemare

C: Shows starting, ive got 2 go

C tell mum happy bday from me

C: love you

L: Awwww I love you TOO <3 <3 <3

L: give Harry my number or i'll defiantly fight you

I roll my eyes and jump out of my seat. We have a pull-up bar installed in one corner of the room, and I hop up onto it, doing a couple reps. In my experience, there's a very obvious correlation between tips, and how pumped I get before the show. It's why I spend so much time in the gym. These biceps pay my rent.

Harry watches me, his eyes narrowed. "Seriously, man. You good? You look like shit."

"Lot of weird stuff going on at home," I mutter.

"Well, perk up." He looks meaningfully at my boxers. "We're on in five."

There's a knock on the dressing room door, and the show's announcer, Seth, comes into the room. He's wearing a shiny silver jacket and sunglasses. He looks like an absolute wanker.

"Alright, boys," he shouts, flashing a Crest-white grin around the room. "Line up. The girls look *hungry* tonight. Give them a good show, okay?"

I sigh, dropping off the pull-up bar and taking my spot at the end of the line. Seth opens the door, and we all file through the corridor, heading out backstage. It's dark here, and the music is pounding unbelievably loudly, shaking the walls. The crowd is chanting for us to come out. Harry claps me on the back and gives my navy-blue policeman's trousers a pointed look before stepping out of the wings.

We get into position, posing across the dark stage. Before the lights come up, I reach under my boxers, grab the end of my dick, and give it a tug. The last thing I'm thinking about when I'm onstage is sex, so it helps to wake the little guy up.

That's a weird misconception about male strippers—that we're horny while we're performing. When I'm dancing, I'm not thinking about sex. I'm thinking about the performance. The music. Giving the audience what they want. Even when we bring girls up to the stage for lap dances, I never get turned on. I'm not *humping* these women, I'm essentially using them as props to dance with. I don't think anyone expects a female dancer to be getting wet while she's swinging around a pole, but when it's a guy, people assume we're just sex-crazed nymphos who picked this job because we want to fuck everything that moves. I have girls propositioning me every single night,

trying to pay me to go home with them. I never have, though. I never sleep with clients. That's a hard line.

Seth starts introducing the dancers. One by one, spotlights flash down over each of us, illuminating us to the audience.

"Next up, ladies, we have Hunky Harry!" he bellows. "Raise your hand if you find yourself getting hot tonight, and this strapping fireman will be sure to hose you down until you're nice and wet!"

The audience screams as a spotlight shines down over Harry. He grins, winking at the crowd, then unravels a length of rubber hose from around his waist. He holds it suggestively between his legs and squeezes a hidden pump attached to one end. Water comes spurting out, showering the first few rows of guests, and the squeals reach a new crescendo.

I can't help the dumb grin that swipes over my face. Despite my shitty mood, the adrenaline in the room is infectious. This is why I like stripping, more than ballet or hip-hop or all the other kinds of dance I used to do. Stripping doesn't take itself too seriously. It's a laugh; campy and cheesy and just freaking *fun*.

Harry tosses one last wink at the crowd, and Seth comes to stand by me. "And last, but *definitely* not least: you've seen him around town. Maybe you've spotted him on one of our fliers. Perhaps you've stared at one of his Underground billboards on your 7AM commute. Well, now's your chance to turn your wildest fantasies into reality. He's the Magic Nights Poster Boy, the sexy stud you all know and love: give it up for *Randy Romeo!*"

The final spotlight cracks down over my head, and I grin, grabbing my shirt and ripping it open. Buttons scatter across the stage floor. The screams get even louder as I do a backflip in time with the music, then skid across the floor on my knees, landing right on the very edge of the stage. A girl in the front row ends up with my crotch about two inches from her face. Her eyelashes flutter, and I vaguely wonder if she's about to pass out as I wrap my arms around her waist, tugging her up onto my lap. I start grinding my hips into her, keeping beat with the music, and she moans loudly, clinging to me and giggling. Her friends cheer and whoop as I flip us both over, rolling her onto her back and sliding my body over hers, thrusting into her missionary-style.

Seth laughs. “Okay, boys, get back in line, we’re just getting started.”

I wrap my arms around the girl again and gently slide her back off the stage. She grabs a handful of Magic Dollars from her seat, shoving them down my pants.

I laugh. “Thanks, babe,” I call over the music. She grabs at me as I pull away, pawing at my waistband. I kiss her hand, then jog back into formation. Seth is still talking as all of the guys get into position for our first dance.

“Remember—those Magic Dollars are your key to getting *lucky* tonight, so keep them raining on the stage.” Seth pauses for effect. “Oh. And one more thing. If you girls are *really nice* tonight, and you shout *really loud*, these young men will probably take their pants off.”

As one, we all grab the legs of our velcro rip-away pants and tear them away from our bodies, revealing identical Union Jack-patterned jockstraps.

The crowd loses it. Money starts showering the stage. Women jump out of their seats. Red, white and blue strobes flash across the stage, cutting through the plumes of dry ice streaming from the fog machines.

Steve waves the crowd down, laughing. “Okay, okay, enough introductions. Boys, take it away!”

The first few beats of ‘Pump it’ start beating through the speakers, and the lights above the audience flash on, illuminating the girls’ faces. Immediately, my eyes focus on a mess of bright red curls, and I stumble over my own feet.

It’s Beth. She looks unbelievable, in a tight red dress that clings to her curves. She’s *here*, at one of the guest tables, holding hands with a hot black guy I’ve never seen before, a drink raised halfway to her mouth.

And she’s staring right at me, her red-painted lips parted in horror.

Well, shit.

THIRTY

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BETH

Oh my God.

I stare at Cyrus in shock, and he stares right back, his eyes wide and stricken, like a rabbit caught in headlights. For a second, I think he actually might run. He looks like he wants to disappear off the face of the planet. Which is odd, because as far as I'm concerned, he's never looked hotter.

Standing under the bright lights, his cut, muscled body shining in oil and dripping with sweat, wearing nothing but a pair of tight briefs... my mouth is watering. My underwear is damp. My thighs are clenched together. I can't look away.

The lights flash, and Cyrus slips effortlessly back into his flirty persona. He struts forward, winking at the crowd, then throws himself backwards into a flip, tumbling across the stage like some kind of pro cheerleader. The other men grab the crotches of their pants, bucking along with the music, all perfectly synchronised as they dance.

Benny whoops next to me, and I lean back in my seat, take another sip of my drink, and let myself get lost in the show.

The next forty-five minutes pass in a blur. I have never had so much fun on a night out, ever. It's a pretty long set; I count at least seven songs. Sometimes all the guys dance together, and sometimes there are solo acts. For one number, called *Get me Wet*, they actually bring a female dancer out onto the stage. She and one of the guys perform a practically pornographic dance in a square pool. Water streams down over their almost-naked bodies as they throw each other around and grind against one another. They end the number soaked and gasping. As does most of the audience.

"Shit," Benny mumbles, as they stand and take a bow. "I want to fuck them both?"

I don't say anything, my eyes glued on Cyrus as he saunters back onstage dressed in a pair of tight leather pants.

The finale, of course, is 'Pony'. As soon as the crowd recognises the tune, everyone goes wild. The guys pull out all the stops. Some are rubbing baby oil over their naked abs. Some are doing flips. A few drop down into the front row and start grinding on the girls. There's a shirtless guy hanging from a swing, gyrating with the music as he's lowered from the ceiling. Lights are flashing, strobes are flickering, smoke is floating across the stage in big plumes. When the last beat of the song finally fades away, I'm hot and flushed. My whole body is singing. I pick up my drink and roll it over my chest, then press it against my cheek.

The announcer jogs back on stage, grinning around at us. "Alright, ladies!" He calls. "That's half-time! Order some more drinks, call your boyfriends, and do your best to cool off. We'll be back in a few!"

"There's another act?" I ask, half-horrified. I don't know if I can handle any more. Benny just snickers next to me. The house lights come up, and the men scatter. Some of them head backstage, and others disperse into the audience, coming to join the seated women.

Cyrus stays on the stage, scanning the rows of tables. Our eyes catch again, and the expression on his face makes my stomach cold. His charming smile has fallen, and now he looks worried. Upset. *Anxious*.

Guilt floods me. Shit. I've messed up. I shouldn't have stayed to watch him dance, I should've gone home. There's a reason he kept his job a secret from me; he doesn't want me to know he works here. It's one thing to strip in front of a bunch of strangers every night, but it must feel completely different when it's somebody you know. If this scenario was flipped, I'd be terrified of his reaction. I'd be terrified of him telling other people, or judging me. And it's not like he could've just left the stage when he saw me. Which means I've essentially just forced him to do something that made him feel really uncomfortable. Crap.

As I watch, he turns and walks into the wings.

"I'm gonna go to the bathroom," I murmur to Benny, standing. I need to talk to him. I need to clear this up.

Benny nods. "I'm gonna... get another drink."

"I bet you are."

I push through the dark, thumping club, slipping through the tables and the clusters of girls clutching their drinks. As I pass by the stage, one of the dancers mingling in the crowd catches my hand and smiles at me winningly, drawing my fingers teasingly towards his abs. He sparkles under the low lights. I'm pretty sure he's covered in glitter.

"Um, sorry, maybe later," I babble, then bolt for the nearest door.

It leads out into a dark corridor with black-painted walls. Girls in tiny dresses and stilettos queue in line for the bathroom, fixing up their makeup and chattering loudly about the show.

"Did you see that Romeo guy?" I overhear as I try to slide past them all. "He's the guy from the posters, right?"

Even though I feel bad, I can't help the giggle that bubbles up inside me. I can't believe Cy's stage name is seriously *Randy Romeo*.

"He's sooo hot," the girl continues. "Like, all the guys can dance, but he just has, like, charisma, you know?"

"It's his *smile*," another girl sighs. "I hope he picks me for the private dance. I'm gonna grab his bits."

I squeeze past them to the door at the very end of the hall. There's a muscly security guard standing in front of it, flicking through his phone. I peep past him. The door has a sign which reads EMPLOYEES ONLY tacked to the wood. It's cracked slightly open, and I can hear the chatter of low male voices coming from inside.

I smile at the guard. "Um, is this the dressing room for the guys?"

He sighs, crossing his arms over his chest. "Look, miss, I've heard it all. I know you're not dating any of them, and even if you were, we don't *really* want you giving your boyfriend a blowie in the employee showers."

My face turns red. "Oh, I don't want to sneak in! Or, um, give any blowies. I'm just looking for Cyrus."

The man's face creases. "Cyrus?"

“Yeah?” A voice comes from inside the dressing room. My heart lurches.

The guard turns. “Fuck, is that your real name?”

“Well, it’s not fucking *Randy Romeo*, is it?” Cyrus sounds bitter. “Dude, I’ve worked here for years.”

The guard sniffs. “Whatever. There’s a girl who wants to see you.”

There’s a pause, and then I swear I hear a low groan. The dressing room door pushes open, and Cyrus steps out. He’s changed into a new outfit: a grey suit and white collared shirt. A silky tie hangs around his neck, and his hair has been combed back. My mouth practically waters. He looks like some kind of *Fifty Shades*-inspired wet dream.

And he doesn’t look happy to see me.

“Beth,” he says flatly. “Fancy seeing you here.”

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THIRTY-ONE

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BETH

I lick my lips, forcing myself to focus. “Uh. Hey. Can we talk? Do you have time?”

He shrugs, resigned. “Intermission is fifteen minutes,” he mutters, wrapping his hand around my wrist. “Come in.”

He tugs me into the dressing room. I squeak, covering my eyes—but not before I get an eyeful of abs, biceps, and bare, muscly thighs. I’m pretty sure I saw a penis.

“Hey!” someone calls. “What the Hell? You didn’t let me bring my girl in here!”

“Sorry!” I call, keeping my eyes squeezed shut as Cyrus drags me through the room. “I’m not looking!”

A chorus of low laughs echoes through the room.

“She’s cute, man,” a deep voice says. “Nice one. Y’all need protection, or...?”

“Shut *up*,” Cyrus snaps. “She’s my neighbor. I just need to talk to her.” A chorus of wolf-whistles go up. Cyrus tightens his fingers on me. “Guys. Don’t. Seriously.”

I wave at them as he yanks open an unassuming-looking door and pulls me inside, slamming it shut behind us. I look around. We’re in a storage cupboard filled with shelves of plastic bins. I examine the label on one. *Sexy firefighter, XL. Includes jockstrap.*

Nice.

“What a pretty broom cupboard,” I say, looking up at Cyrus. “Thanks for bringing me here.”

He doesn't smile, leaning against the wall. His mouth is pressed in an angry line. "Did you follow me here?" He demands. "Did one of the guys tell you where I worked?"

My eyes widen. "What? No! No, I swear, my friend bought me a ticket. I had no idea you even had a job."

"Right. Great." He runs a hand through his hair. It has some sort of styling product in it, so when he messes it up, it sticks straight up in a ruffled, tousled mess. My fingers itch to fix it.

"Go on, then," he sighs deeply. "Give it to me."

"Give what to you? I just wanted to check you were okay."

"This is my job," he says, deadpan. "Of course I'm okay. Just really fuckin' embarrassed."

I wince. "I figured. But you shouldn't be. You were incredible up there."

He tenses. "*What?*" He asks, incredulous.

"You were great. I really liked it." I twist my fingers together. "And I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable, or whatever, watching. I should have thought that it might embarrass you. I can leave, if you wa—"

He takes a step closer to me. My breath stops in my chest.

"You *liked* the show?" He asks. His voice seems deeper than a second ago, rumbling through him.

I nod jerkily. "I really liked it," I whisper.

He studies me silently for a few seconds, his brown eyes almost black in the low light. "And you don't mind?" He says eventually.

"Mind what?"

"That I take all my clothes off in public?" I just stare at him. He takes another step closer. "That I strip off and oil myself up for money? That there are hundreds of videos of me body-rolling in a G-string online? That I give strange women lap dances and grind them halfway to climax five nights a week?"

Oh, Jesus. "You do? When?"

“Second act.”

I bite my lip. “Why would I mind?”

“Because most people mind, Beth,” he snaps, anger infusing his tone.

“Really? Who?”

“My parents. Most of my ex-girlfriends. Pretty much every woman I’ve ever liked.” He gestures at the waistband on his pants. “I just shook the same dick you sucked last night in front of a crowd of other women. Doesn’t that piss you off?”

“I don’t remember signing an exclusive rights agreement before putting it in my mouth. Pretty sure your dick is still yours to do what you want with.” I swallow thickly. “I think your show was really hot, Cy.”

He doesn’t say anything, his eyes burning into mine like he’s searching for the lie. I can barely breathe. It feels like this tiny cupboard is getting smaller, closing in around us like an Indiana Jones booby trap.

A sudden, heavy knock on the door breaks the building tension, and I jump out of my skin.

“Five minutes, man,” someone calls through the wood. “Get a move on.”

“Piss off,” Cyrus calls back, not taking his eyes off me. I can feel my blush seeping over my skin.

“Um.” I reach for the door handle. “I guess I should, uh, get going. Um. I’ll see you tomo—”

He takes another step closer, pinning me up against the wall. His spicy scent floods my senses. A strangled moan falls out of my throat, and his Adam’s apple bobs.

“You think it’s *hot*?” He demands.

“W-well yeah? That’s kind of the point, isn’t it? I—” I stutter into silence as he takes my hand, running his finger over the lines of my palm.

“And you don’t mind?” He asks, his voice softening.

“I think we have established that I don’t give a fuck if you shake your dick around in public, yes. It would be pretty hypocritical, considering how much

I enjoyed watching.”

“But what about Cami?” He protests.

I blink. “Um. What about her?”

“When you first came to our flat, you wanted to take her away,” he reminds me. “Obviously, you can’t do that, since she’s not mine, but... will you still let me, like, play with her?” His thumb strokes over the inside of my wrist.

I stare at him like he’s an idiot. “I can’t stop you playing with Cami, Cy. And there’s no way I ever would.” He looks uncertain, like he doesn’t believe me. My throat hurts. Does he really think his job makes him so morally deviant that he shouldn’t be allowed around children? “Tons of parents strip, usually to *support* their kids. That doesn’t make them bad parents. As long as you’re not bringing her here for ‘take your daughter to work day’, I don’t see how your job has anything to do with Cami.”

He doesn’t say anything for a few seconds, still running his fingers over my palm. Then his grip closes around my wrist. With his dark eyes still locked on my face, he dips his head and presses his lips to mine.

It’s a hard, hot, sudden kiss, and it short-circuits something in my brain. My mind goes blank. I sag against his front as he pulls me closer, crushing us together. I can feel his heart pounding in his chest. I lean into him, wanting more, but he pulls away before I fully register what’s happening. “You liked the dance,” he mumbles against my open mouth.

I nod, gasping, and he bends so his lips are brushing my cheek. “You want the full package?” He asks quietly, his breath warming my hair.

“Yes,” I whisper. Heat is thudding between my legs. I don’t even know what the full package is, but this man could do pretty much anything to me at this point, and I’d probably beg for more. My skin feels like it’s on fire. I’m trembling against him.

He smiles slightly, then reaches out and unlocks the door, pushing it open. Taking my hand, he tugs me back into the dressing room. Thankfully, everyone is fully clothed now, all in identical grey suits. We get a few catcalls as Cyrus leads me to the corridor, but we both ignore them. Maybe I’m just being a total sap, but the fact that he’s holding my hand in front of all his colleagues is making my heart flutter.

We step out into the hallway, and he grabs my hips, pulling me to a stop. “One last question,” he says, his eyes sparkling. I nod stupidly. It’s hard to believe this is the same man I was talking to ten minutes ago. It’s like a cloud has been lifted from over his head—all of the hardness and defensiveness has been blown away, and he’s his flirty, charming self again.

He leans closer. “What kind of underwear are you wearing?”

“I... um, what?”

His hand slides up the curve of my hip, squeezing my waist. “I plan on chucking you around a bit. Don’t want you flashing any of the audience. That’s my job.” Through the fabric of my tight dress, he finds the wispy lace of my thong, running his fingers over it like he’s checking that it’s really there. He tuts. “These feel pretty flimsy. I guess I’ll have to improvise.”

My mouth falls open. He grins, bending to press a kiss to my slack jaw. “See you soon,” he murmurs. “I’ll miss you.”

THIRTY-TWO

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BETH

I make my way back to my table on shaky legs. Most of the guests are already in their seats, chattering, taking photos, sipping drinks. All of the dancers have left the seating area, and the stage has gone dark again.

Benny's busy texting under the table. I slump into the seat next to him and grab the fresh drink sitting in my spot, stirring it with the straw.

"Did Antonio send a nude?" I ask, conversationally, taking a sip. The drink is cold and sweet, slipping down my throat and chilling my insides. I take another gulp, then just hook out an ice cube and stick it in my mouth. I need to cool down.

He sputters, almost dropping the phone. "What—no!" He looks up at me, and his eyes narrow. "What happened to you?"

I try to look innocent. "What do you mean?" I wipe some cold condensation off the glass and press it into the hollow of my throat.

"You're bright red." His eyes trail down my body, and I shift uncomfortably. "All over."

Sometimes, I hate my white-freckly-ginger genes. I blush with my whole body. "I'm just hot," I try.

His eyebrow lifts. "You look like you've got a fucking sunburn, Beth. What happened?"

"Nothing happened!" I protest. "I just, um—" I flounder for an excuse. "I...."

Luckily, before I have to follow through, the floor lights go down. I lean back in my seat, sighing in relief as the darkness hides my red cheeks. Unfortunately, I only have about two seconds to relax before the stage re-illuminates, and my heart starts to pound in double-time.

The men are all back in position, lined up in their identical suits. This time,

though, they have props; each guy is sitting backwards on a black wooden chair, their arms draped over the backs, grinning out at us. My eyes are drawn to Cyrus like he's magnetised. He's looking right at me. As I watch, he blows me a kiss.

"I think that one on the end fancies me," Benny whispers loudly.

The screams start up again as the announcer bounces back into the spotlight, his silver jacket shining. "Helloooo, ladies!" He calls. Everybody shouts back, and he grins. "I hope you're all refreshed and ready for the second act. The boys are going to need some lovely assistants for this part of the show. Any takers?"

The crowd goes wild. There are women climbing on the tables, chanting and stamping and yelling. A group of girls near the stage yank up their shirts, flashing the guys.

"Remember," the announcer calls. "Those Magic Dollars you purchased at the bar are your ticket to one of these first-class seats." He smacks the chair Hunky Harry is leaning on. "So make it rain, girls!"

The lights flash, and 'It's Raining Men' suddenly starts pounding through the speakers. The men all jump up from their chairs and start posing and dancing as banknotes rain down on them.

One guy struts towards the edge of the stage, encouraging women to stuff money down his pants. Another starts doing push-ups on the back of the chair. A third looks like he's humping the floor.

Benny and I collapse into laughter. "Dude, this is so *fuckin' funny*." Benny shouts over the music, choking on his drink. "Bet you're glad I got you a ticket now, huh?"

I can't answer. I'm laughing too hard to breathe. I always thought a strip club would be kind of seedy and awkward—but this is crazy, and sexy, and *funny*. So much better than a regular club night.

The boys start picking out women and slipping off the stage to help them up. Most are from the front few rows; either the desperate fans tossing money at them, or the girls in the *Bride-to-Be* or *Birthday Girl* sashes. Quite a few are getting shoved forward by their very drunk friends. Cy ignores them all, jumping right off the stage and making a beeline through the tables. Women

scream and reach for him, running their hands over his chest and tugging at his belt as he strides past. He walks through them as if they don't even exist, his eyes locked on me.

"Holy shit," Benny says. "Oh my God. Is he looking at *you*?"

"I would say so," I squeak, clutching my drink like a lifeline.

He drops a hand to my knee. "Are you okay with this? You can say no."

I know why he's asking. This is not my thing at all. I don't like being the centre of attention. I don't like being touched by strange men. But Cyrus is hardly a stranger. I think we passed that point when I practically sucked his soul out of his dick.

"He's Cyrus. My neighbor," I whisper.

Benny's eyes widen. "The guy that you—"

"Oh, absolutely."

He's frozen for a second. "Well, go get it, then!" He grabs the back of my chair and practically tips me out of it, just as Cyrus pulls up by our table. I fall right into his waiting arms.

Cyrus smiles, pushing my hair out of my face. "This okay?" He asks quietly.

I take a deep breath, then nod. He rubs his freshly-shaven cheek against mine. "C'mon, Bethie," he says, right in my ear. "I'll take care of you."

And then he tosses me over his shoulder. I gasp as the bright lights of the club whirl around me. He puts a hand on the backs of my bare thighs to steady me, and I cling to the collar of his shirt as he jogs back up to the stage.

The music is louder up here, the beat pounding through the walls and floor. Cy leads me to an empty chair, right in the middle of the stage, and gently drops me into it. His cheek brushes mine as he leans in. "Okay, love?"

I nod. I'm breathing hard; a mixture of adrenaline, nerves, and arousal. I'm so turned on. He smiles, pulling back so he's standing in front of me, and takes my hand, kissing my knuckles. On either side of me, other dancers are doing the same, stepping back and taking their partner's hands. The music changes to something slow and sensual and throbbing. The bright lights soften to a gentle pink. A hush falls over the crowd, like they're holding their breath in

anticipation.

“Now remember, ladies—” the announcer calls into the microphone. “You can look all you want. You can *touch*—” The beat thumps, and the lights flash red. Each man drags his partner’s hand down his chest. I gasp as I feel my fingers trailing over Cyrus’s heated muscles. I can feel them, hard and thrumming, even through the thin fabric of his shirt.

The announcer chuckles. “You can *touch* anything that your lovely gentleman lets you. But don’t grope our poor boys, okay? Or we’ll have to tie your hands down. You don’t want that, do you?” More screams.

“That rule doesn’t apply to you,” Cyrus murmurs, his dark eyes not leaving mine. “You can touch absolutely *anything* you like.”

I just look up at him, heat pounding through me. My stomach is squeezing. His expression flickers, pain flashing over his face.

“Fuck,” he mutters. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“I can’t help it,” I hiss back. “I’m dying.”

His lips twist, and he tightens his grip on my fingers as the dance finally starts. Beyonce’s ‘Drunk in Love’ starts to play, and my mouth goes dry as he guides my hand to his shirt, helping me slowly unbutton it. Inch by inch, his ripped, oiled-up chest is revealed.

Next, he unknots his tie, drawing it out slowly from under his collar. I watch as the slip of fabric slides against his bare throat. He leans forward and drapes it around my neck, smoothing the fabric over my hot, oversensitized skin. I take a deep breath as he walks around the chair, coming to stand behind me, running his hands down my arms. He bends and nuzzles the curve of my neck, then braces his hands on the back of the chair and pushes himself forward. I watch the ropes of muscle in his biceps tense as he flips elegantly over the back of the chair, straddling my lap smoothly and winding his arms around my neck.

Oh. My. God.

My thoughts stop altogether as he starts to grind his hips into me, matching the heavy tempo of the music. His stiff erection rubs between my legs, deep and firm. My mouth falls open as arousal rolls through me. He’s practically

fucking me through our clothes. I can't stop myself from pushing back into him, my hips jerking uncontrollably against his.

He groans, a low, deep sound, tipping his head back. Sweat glistens in the hollow of his throat, and I just barely keep myself from leaning forward and licking it up. In perfect synchronisation with the other dancers, he slides off the chair, grabs my hands again, and brings them to his waistband, hooking my fingers under his leather belt.

“TAKE IT OFF!” A girl screams.

“GET HIS KNOB OUT!” Another joins in.

I can barely breathe. I feel like I'm about to pass out. I look up at him. He's breathing hard, his eyes unnaturally dark. The stage lights beam around us, trapping us in a bubble of light.

“You heard them,” he says, his voice lower than I've ever heard it. “Take it off.”

Swallowing hard, I unclasp the buckle, sliding the thick leather belt from his belt loops and letting it fall to the ground. He takes my hands again, stroking his thumbs against my sweaty palms. My blood pulses under my skin as he guides my fingers down his naked chest, between the ridges of his hot, sweaty abs, over the fine little happy trail of dark hair—and towards the waistband on his pants.

“Pull,” he orders.

I do, giving it a gentle tug.

“Harder.”

I pull harder. There's the sound of ripping velcro, and his tight grey dress trousers fall away. My mouth falls open as I come face to face with his rock-hard erection.

THIRTY-THREE

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CYRUS

I can practically feel Beth's breath on my balls as I stand in front of her, her lips inches away from my fabric-covered crotch.

Slowly, watching her face, I guide her hand over the bulge in my boxers.

Fuck. That feels good. Too good. I'm about to pull her away when she tightens her fingers slightly, gripping my hard-on.

Holy shit.

My hips buck, and I yank away from her.

“WHIP IT OUT! WHIP IT OUT!” Filters into my ears, and I remember the audience. I turn back to them and grin, slipping my hands under the waistband of my boxers, teasing them down a few inches. A girl on the front row screams so hard her voice gives out.

When I turn back to the chair, Beth's looking up at me, her pupils blown wide, her chest heaving under her tight dress, her lips a little, bitten rosebud. I reach out and brace my arms on the back of her chair, thrusting my hips. For this part of the song, I'm meant to grind into her face, but I can't make myself do it. Partly because it just feels wrong, and partly because I've never had to dance with a stiffy before. Even the thought of Beth's soft lips accidentally brushing me through my briefs is too much to handle. I'd probably come in my pants like a fucking teenager.

Instead, I bury my hand in her burning red curls and tug her mouth roughly to mine. She melts under me, her chest shuddering in a gasp. Around me, I hear screams from the crowd. Shouts. Cat calls. I don't give a fuck. Beth's lips are hot and sweet, and they taste like cherries. I feel like I'm getting drunk off her as coloured lights spiral over us and music thrums through our bodies.

Eventually, the song crescendos. As the final beat rings out through the club, I kick the chair back onto one leg and spin us around to face the audience,

giving them one last grin before the lights go down. The crowd goes wild. I feel banknotes and confetti fluttering down over us as we're showered in cash.

I ignore it all. Bodies brush past me as the guys jump off the stage, heading to the wings to change costumes. Someone claps a hand on my back. I barely feel it. All I can think about is Beth sighing and pulsing against me, clinging to my shoulders like a little limpet.

"You liked that?" I rasp. I barely even recognise my own voice.

She moans right in my ear, and I have to close my eyes, gritting my teeth to control the wild sweep of arousal that rushes through me. I'm painfully hard. I press my lips to her throat, and her whole body trembles against mine.

Screw it.

Wrapping my arms around her, I lift Beth right off the chair and carry her offstage, heading for the bar. I'm not in the next number, so I have a few minutes to spare. "The act lasts another half an hour," I shout over the music. "Wait for me?"

She nods as I settle her into an empty barstool. Antonio, one of the bartends, looks up from the till and frowns.

"I'm about to get off shift," he tells me. His eyes fall on Beth. "Shit. You okay? Need some water? I didn't think I made your fishbowl *that* strong."

"Um—" she starts.

"She's fine," I cut in. "Just too turned on to walk."

"Speak for yourself," she points out, looking pointedly at the bulge in my tight black boxers. I run my hands down her arms and kiss her neck, loving her soft little gasp. Antonio raises an eyebrow at her, looking amused.

"So, I suppose I don't have to worry about taking your friend home and leaving you stranded, huh?"

She groans. "Benny's right. You *are* nice."

He laughs.

I don't know what they're talking about, and I don't care. "Get her whatever she wants," I tell him. "Put it on my tab." I glance back at the stage. A big

bamboo cage has been brought out, and Harry and Lei are both wrestling inside, dressed in ragged loincloths. I really need to get changed for the next number. “Gotta go,” I mumble, popping a kiss on Beth’s cheek and jogging back towards the wings.

The rest of the show goes by in a blur of lights and sweat and money. I’ve done this routine so many times it’s practically drilled into my skull, which is useful, because my head won’t stop swimming. All I can think about is Beth’s soft thighs clamped around my hips. Beth’s little fingers stroking down my chest. Beth’s red lips, a whisker away from my junk.

It’s the hardest show I’ve ever done.

When it’s finally all over, I head back to the dressing room with the other guys. I’ve barely just got in when Seth corners me. On stage, his shiny jacket, fake tan and box-dye black hair look flashy; here, under the harsh fluorescent lighting, he looks like a washed-out game show host.

“What was that?” he demands.

“What?” I ask, yanking on my jeans.

“You *kissed* a guest,” he says, disapproval clear in his voice. “Who is she? Your girlfriend?”

“Nope.” I grab a bottle of water and crack the lid, drinking half of it down in one long gulp.

“But you know her?” He insists.

“She lives in my building.” I grab my shirt and shrug it on, leaving it unbuttoned, then try to dodge past him out of the room. I don’t wanna leave Beth out there all alone at the bar.

Seth steps in front of me, blocking my path, and I grit my teeth. “We’re supposed to be selling a fantasy, Cyrus,” he berates.

“Yeah. Sorry.” I try to step past him. “Excuse me—”

“It kind of ruins the image if women come here, and you completely ignore them for some girl you’re crushing on,” he continues, not moving.

“I don’t think so,” Harry says cheerfully from his stool. He nicks some wipes off my station and starts cleaning glitter off his abs. “If anything, it’ll get

them more wound up if they think we're picking women out of the crowd to snog."

"He missed half of the dance moves," Seth points out, crossing his arms.

I shrug. "Felt weird to do them on her. Sorry, man. I messed up. Won't do it again." I nod to the dressing room door. "Can I *please* go? I have somewhere to be."

He sniffs. "I'm taking your tips for tonight."

"Sure. Whatever." I was so distracted, I probably don't deserve them anyway. Dumping the rest of my shit in my locker, I grab my phone and head out.

The club is slowly emptying when I step back into the main room. The dance floor is still pretty full, but a lot of the girls have either moved onto the next club, or are headed home to bang the brains out of their boyfriends. I spot Beth hanging by the bar, nursing a Coke. She sticks out in the crowd of sweaty, loud clubgoers like she's being picked out by a floodlight; her white skin glows against her bright red dress, and her fiery curls are all lit up around her face like a lion's mane. For a second, I just stand still, taking in the sight of her. She's easily the most beautiful girl in the room.

I still can't believe that she's okay with my job. I've literally never met a girl who was. It's why I've learnt to stay away from romance. Women like the idea of fucking a stripper—but only once. They sure as Hell don't want to get serious with one.

And Beth doesn't seem to care at all.

As I watch, a guy ordering a drink next to her steps closer, saying something to her. Beth smiles, nodding then turning away. The creep apparently doesn't get the message, dropping down into the stool on her left. Their legs brush as he leans in to talk some more. Beth shakes her head and edges off the side of her stool.

My teeth grit. I push through the crowd towards them both, pulling up right beside Beth and winding my arm around her waist. She looks up at me, her cheeks flushed pink, then leans closer, her soft hair brushing my chest. My heart jumps a beat.

I turn to the guy, who's looking at me like a piece of dog shit he's just stepped in.

"She's not interested," I say flatly. "Learn to read the body language, man."

His eyebrows raise. "I'm sorry, what?"

I point at Beth. "See how she's practically falling out of her stool to get away from you? She wants you to piss off." I pause. "So piss off."

The guy sputters, looking me up and down. For a second, I think he's about to get rowdy — but luckily, he decides it's not worth it, sliding off the stool and slinking away. I watch his back disappear into the crowd.

I hate guys like that. Guys who can tell a girl isn't into them, but keep trying anyway. It's gross. Why the Hell would you want to *convince* someone to shag you?

Beth looks up at me. "Hey," she says quietly. "You didn't have to do that. He wasn't really bothering me. He was just flirting."

"Yeah, well, that bothers me." I frown, looking around. "Where's Tony?" I left her with him so he could keep an eye on her.

She points towards a dark corner of the room. I squint. Antonio is getting pinned against the wall by her tattooed friend, and they're going at it like teenagers. "I wingwoman-ed him," she says, sounding smug.

"Huh. Okay, then." The DJ starts playing some souped-up, sexy Ariana Grande song, pumping up the bass so loud it's vibrating through my teeth. Beth leans closer, dragging her hand down my arm.

"Why is your skin so soft?" She murmurs, squeezing my bicep.

"I oil myself up every night."

She considers that. "Maybe I should try it."

Fuck. That's a pretty picture. Beth all oiled up, her soft white limbs slippery and glistening. "Maybe you should," I breathe, sliding my hand over the curve of her ass. "It can be hard to reach all the nooks and crannies. I can help you with that."

She looks at me with wide eyes, then buries her face in my chest.

I run a hand through her hair, letting the silky strands fall through my fingers.
“Want to go home, baby?”

She bites her lip, then shakes her head. Pressed against her like this, I can feel her squeezing her thighs together under her dress.

I close my eyes, trying to keep it together. I should call us a taxi. We should drive home, and go back to the flat, and shag in a bed like adults. Beth deserves that much.

But then she shifts closer, twisting her hands in my shirt. “Please,” she whispers.

Screw it.

“Come with me,” I say, and take her hand, helping her off the stool and leading her through the crowd.

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THIRTY-FOUR

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BETH

Cyrus pulls me behind the bar, through a doorway I hadn't noticed. There's a *No Entrance* sign hanging over the knob, but he ignores it, yanking the door open and pushing us into another store room. This one is thankfully bigger than the broom closet in the dressing room; it's dark and bare, full of shelves of lighting and crates of bottles. There's a rickety-looking table pushed up against one of the walls, and a stack of black chairs near the doorway.

"Is this okay?" I whisper, crossing my arms over my chest. I've never had sex in a public building before, but I'm more than ready to start now. I don't think I've ever been so turned on in my life. Sweat is slicking my body. My pants aren't just damp, they're flat-out soaking.

Cyrus grins. "It's a club, Bethie. People fuck in clubs. Jesus, Tony's probably giving your friend a handy in the bathroom right now." He locks the door behind us, then crowds me forward, pressing me into the table. I sit on it, kicking off my heels, and he looks at the pink nail polish sparkling on my toenails. "You are," he says, "so cute."

I frown. I don't really want to be cute right now.

I want to be hot.

Cyrus steps closer, coming to stand between my legs. "You liked the act?" He murmurs, setting his hands on my knees.

"God, yes." I swallow hard as he runs his palms up my thighs, squeezing slightly. "I especially liked the bit where you—ah." I wave at his crotch, blushing furiously.

He frowns. "Where I what?"

"You know." I vaguely mime a rubbing motion.

I still cannot believe that he actually had me touch his dick during the

performance. It was through his boxers, but still. My stomach flips as I remember his strong fingers guiding my hand over the fabric. The hot, solid heat of his hard-on cupped under my palm.

I squeeze my hands shut at my sides.

He blinks innocently. “I have no idea what you mean. Sorry.”

I narrow my eyes. “It’s *your* routine.”

“I have a really bad memory. Can you show me?”

Rolling my eyes, I reach forward and press my hand over the bulge in his crotch, stroking him slowly through his pants. A low purr of satisfaction rumbles out of his chest. His eyes fall shut as I give his shaft a squeeze.

“I’m glad you liked it,” he murmurs, hitching up the skirt of my dress and pressing even closer. His hard package pushes between my legs, and my eyes flutter. Hot lips nudge my ear. “But I’m afraid you didn’t get to see all of it.”

“What?” I gasp, my voice embarrassingly breathy.

He leans forward and licks a line down the side of my throat. “There’s one move I didn’t do tonight.” He explains, running his hands up my thighs, slipping them up my dress. I squirm uncomfortably as his soft fingertips trace the lace lining my underwear. “I didn’t want anyone catching sight of *these*.” He hooks his fingers under my briefs, giving them a teasing tug. I lift my hips, and he drags them right off my legs, crumpling them in his hand—and then buries his face in them. I gape. It’s one of the hottest things I’ve ever seen.

He balls up the underwear and shoves it into his pocket, then wraps his solid arms around me, pulling me close.

“Show me,” I pant. “The move.”

He grins, nips my bottom lip, and then in one swift movement lifts me right off the table, flipping me upside down. I gasp as the room spins and blood rushes to my head. “Wha—”

He foists me up, hooking my thighs around his head, and I’m brought face-to-face with the bulge in his pants. My legs squeeze around his throat, and he groans. I feel his hot breath on the inside of my thighs, and shock pounds through me. There’s no way. Right?

“Cy—” I start.

He buries his face into my wet, throbbing sex, and proceeds to eat me out ferociously. I’m surprised the scream that comes out of my mouth doesn’t send any of the security staff running to find us. My whole body wriggles and twists, swinging from Cyrus’s shoulders like a pendulum. I can’t help it; there’s no way I can stay still. The way that he’s eating me is absolutely fucking filthy. He sucks at me, he licks at me, he blows hot air over my entrance. His cheeks rub against me like he’s burrowing between my hot, damp folds. I feel a slight press of teeth against my clit and almost pass out. I can’t believe that he’s holding me up like this. It’s like a standing 69—except there is absolutely no way I have the core strength to suck him off while hanging upside down like Spiderman. Not that he seems bothered. He’s fully occupied where he is.

The first bolt of an oncoming climax jerks through me, contorting my body. I flail forward, grabbing the shelf in front of me, and just about manage to pull myself horizontal as his tongue starts fucking into me, licking inside my entrance. The wet heat of it feels unbearably good. He’s groaning into me, rough, rumbling sounds that vibrate through my swollen, sensitive tissue. I’m sobbing, my legs burning, my arms shaking, as my climax finally crashes over me in one deafening wave. Maybe it’s the position—hanging upside down, with all of my blood pounding in my head—but my vision blacks out, hot spasms of stifling pleasure wracking me over and over as my body twists and warps and shakes. Cyrus doesn’t stop. He sucks me hard right through it, until I feel the pressure in my stomach spike again, even sharper and harder than the first time. I come again almost immediately, gasping desperately for breath, clinging onto the shelf for dear life as my head swims and my muscles scream. I’ve never felt anything so intense. Tears flood my eyes, dripping onto the stone floor. I shake like every nerve in my body is fritzing. Pleasure roars through me, burning me up like wildfire, until I can barely remember my own name.

Eventually, the contractions fade, and I feel the world turning as I’m flipped right-way-up again. Cyrus gently holds me up against him, and I cling to him like a little koala, my legs locked around his hips and my wet face lodged in the curve of his neck. Tears streak against his sweaty, oil-sticky skin. He strokes my back as I slowly come back to earth.

“Holy *shit*,” I hiss against his neck. He laughs breathlessly, catching my lips for a deep kiss. I can taste myself on him, musky and sharp. He moans into my mouth as I suck on his tongue, and I shift my weight, feeling the press of his erection nestled in the crack of my ass. He’s hard as stone.

“Rubber,” I order, and he pulls one out of his pocket and passes it over, laughing.

“Won’t take long, honey.”

“Oh, yeah?” I rip the package open. “Get your pants off.”

Holding me up with one arm, he does as I say, easily slipping off his trousers and boxers as I cling to him.

“With you wriggling against me like that?” He growls. “You’re lucky I didn’t just come over your face.”

“I would’ve liked that,” I say honestly, and he groans, balancing his hot forehead against mine. “Not sure the cleaners would, though.” With an impressive amount of dexterity, I manage to reach down and roll the rubber on. He shudders at the touch. He’s so hard it looks almost painful; his dick is flushed and weeping, and his balls look swollen and heavy. He can barely wait for me to pull back my hand before he pushes me up against the wall, the cold stone cooling my bare back, and shoves inside me in one solid stroke. My mouth falls open in a silent moan as he starts plunging into me, setting a punishing pace that makes my eyes cross and my muscles clench. My fingernails bite into his back so hard they probably hurt, but he doesn’t seem to care. He’s desperate for release; I can feel it in his frantic thrusts and rhythmic grunts. Our skin slaps together as he fucks me into the wall. My hips twitch, and he hefts me up even higher, lifting my thighs and slamming into the sensitive spot deep inside me.

My eyes open wide, and I choke as sparks stream through my body. “God, oh, *fuck*, Cy. Right there.” I can feel my third release already brewing, getting stronger and stronger with each hard pound, and I scrabble at his back, desperate to reach it. I can already see the signs of him starting to fall apart. His legs and arms are shaking, and his heart is beating wildly against mine. A bead of sweat rolls from his temple, tracking down the side of his face, and I lean forward to lick it up. Apparently, that’s enough to send him over the edge.

Cyrus's eyes close, and his grip on my hips tightens. "*Fuck*," he shouts, shoving himself in to the hilt and exploding inside of me. His body shudders over mine, his head dropping to my shoulder. Seeing the strong, muscled man suddenly so weak is so damn *hot* it sets me off again, and I cling to him, squeezing my eyes shut and grinding myself against him. The ripples of pleasure stream through me for almost a minute, flooding my body with warmth. When they finally fade away, we just stay there, gasping.

I shift, suddenly feeling the soreness in my arms and the uncomfortable hardness of the wall behind me. Cyrus looks up at me, his brown eyes burning with some emotion I can't read. Warmth glows in my chest, and I push back his dark hair, curling it behind his ear. I open my mouth to say something—

"Shh," Cyrus says. He gives me one last quick peck, and then sets me gently back onto the floor, bending to pick up my shoes. "Let's go home, sugar. I want you in my bed tonight."

We make out in the taxi the whole drive home. I can see the driver giving us disapproving looks in the rearview mirror, which I would normally find mortifying; but right now, I don't care. I couldn't keep my hands off Cyrus if you paid me. When we finally stumble back up to the boys' flat, all of the lights are off. Cami's cot isn't in the lounge.

"Where's the baby?" I mumble, kicking off my heels.

"Seb sleeps with her in his room," Cy whispers, sliding his hand down the curve of my waist.

I'm surprised. "What? Every night?"

"Ever since the second day we had her, yeah. Poor bastard never gets any sleep."

"And he does her nappies and bottles and stuff?"

He cups my butt. "Yep."

A creak and a muffled curse comes from one of the bedrooms, and I freeze. "*Shit*. Do you think she woke up?" I *really* don't want Sebastian to come out of his room and find his roommate feeling up his nanny in the middle of the

night.

“That’s not Seb, it’s Jack.”

I check the clock. It’s almost three. “Why is he still awake?! Don’t you guys have to catch a train in a couple of hours?!”

Cyrus kisses the side of my throat. “He won’t sleep for the next six weeks, probably. He’s too stressed about the new game.”

“Isn’t it almost done?”

“Technically.” He licks my earlobe, making me shiver. “Mm. You’re so *sensitive*.” He nuzzles into me. “It’s Jack’s whole thing. He needs the game to be perfect. Every negative review completely guts him.”

“Why? The last game did so well. Surely he can relax a bit now.”

“He’s like a kid. Terrible self-esteem. He needs other people to pat him on the head and tell him he’s smart.” He finds the zipper on my dress and jangles it with his finger. “Last release day, we had to confiscate all his electronics to stop him obsessively refreshing the sales and review pages.”

I frown. That doesn’t make any sense. Jack’s a little awkward, but he’s always come across as confident to me. Why would he be so insecure when it comes to his work?

Cyrus gets impatient and starts to tug the zip down.

I grab his hand. “Don’t undress me in the *living room*,” I hiss.

“Fine.” Without another word, he picks me up again, tossing me over his shoulder and carrying me into his bedroom, where he proceeds to show me some more of his special, secret moves. And now that we don’t have to worry about some poor cleaning lady, he has no qualms about coming on my face.

THIRTY-FIVE

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BETH

I wake up at five AM to an alarm beeping frantically. I groan, rolling over as the two warm bodies I'm sandwiched between start to shift.

I frown. Two? That's not right, is it? I distinctly remember only shagging one man last night.

I force my eyes open. "Jack?" I whisper, watching the blonde man roll out of bed, rubbing his stubbled jaw. "When did you get here?"

He smiles down at me, bending to kiss my cheek. "Heard you guys come back in," he says, in a raspy, sexy morning voice. "And I missed you." He tries to straighten, but I grab his hand, trying to tug him back onto the mattress.

"Come back. Stay."

"I can't, honey. Cy and I are going up to Edinburgh, remember?" He yawns massively, covering his mouth with the back of his hand.

I groan, flopping down onto the pillows. Two deep laughs rumble over my head.

"Jesus," Jack mutters, "she looks *wrecked*. What the Hell did you do to her?"

"Shagged her," Cyrus says. I hear the hiss of a deodorant can. "What do girls look like after *you* sleep with them?"

"Cyrus danced for me," I say dreamily. "Then he ate me out upside down."

Jack chuckles. "I see." He brushes my hair out of my face, trailing his fingers down my cheek. "Go back to sleep, Beth. We'll see you on Monday."

I want to sit up and kiss them both goodbye, but my eyes are too heavy, so I just nod. "Kay," I mumble, mashing my face in the pillow. "Have a good trip."

I feel two warm mouths kiss my cheeks, and then I'm out again.

I wake up naturally just before eight, and lie in Cyrus's empty bed, looking around me sleepily. With the sunlight sifting through the window, I can finally see the inside of his room. It's pretty; his sheets are deep red and silky, his lampshade is made of orange glass, and he has a big gold-framed mirror opposite his bed. His blinds are saffron-coloured and translucent, turning the morning sunbeams into warm yellow light. The whole effect is sultry and exotic.

A soft baby's cry sounds from somewhere in the flat, and I sigh, sliding out of the bed and tugging the silky covers back into place. My rumpled red dress lies on the floor, and I grimace as I wriggle back into it. I may as well get my walk of shame over with. I can't hide in here all day.

I look in the mirror and wince at my bedraggled appearance, then use some tissues and water to wipe off the makeup smeared around my face. It doesn't help much. I still look like a total wreck.

I sigh, setting my shoulders, and head out into the living room. Sebastian is awkwardly carrying Cami out of the bathroom, his hair mussed around his face. He pulls up short when he sees me. "Beth?" He asks incredulously. "Why are you here?"

"I..." I clear my throat. "Cyrus... invited me to stay the night."

He blinks a few times, staring at me as if he's not sure I'm real. "Oh," he says slowly.

My cheeks burn. I push my chin up. "I understand if... that poses an issue," I say levelly. "If you want to find someone else—"

"No, no," he says, looking slightly stunned. "That's fine. I knew he was interested in you." He looks down at Cami. She pouts up at him sulkily. "Are you staying?" He asks hopefully.

"I'm taking the weekend off," I remind him, heading to the door and slipping on my heels. "I put some homemade baby food in the fridge. Her feeding and nap schedules are on the kitchen table, and her tummy time mat is folded on top of the toy box."

He nods, rubbing the back of his neck. I don't know if it's because he's just woken up, but the man looks completely out-of-sorts. Like he barely knows what's going on.

I sigh. After last night, I really don't want to offer to stay on call all weekend; but since the other two will be gone, I know he might struggle to look after Cami alone. "Look, if you need help—"

"If I need help, I will call a different nanny," he cuts me off. "There won't be any repeats of last night." He meets my eyes, his face sincere. "It was rude to barge in on you like that. I apologise."

Something twists in my stomach. This is the third time he's apologised to me. I wish he'd stop. It's making being firm with him much more difficult.

"Alright. Good, then." I look down at Cami. "See you Monday, jellybean."

She reaches after me, leaning out of Seb's arms. I blow her a kiss, give Sebastian one last awkward nod, and then turn to leave.



The weekend passes slowly. I've gotten used to my days being jam-packed. With Cyrus and Jack gone, and no adorable babies to cuddle, I feel lonely and useless. I spend most of my time lazing around in bed, watching Netflix and waiting for Monday to roll around again. Cyrus and Jack text me a few times: mostly photo messages of them at the convention, getting food or hanging out at the different stalls. Cy sends me a video of Jack wearing a VR headset, beating up the air with a pair of nunchucks, and I almost piss myself laughing.

I'm really glad that they're taking the time to talk to me. I wasn't sure what would happen after we all slept together. I thought it might be awkward. But they're sweet and flirty and charming in their texts, and I can't help smiling like an idiot every time a notification pops up on my screen. Benny's right—I have been seriously missing out, thanks to my relationship ban. If this is what casual dating is like, then I am a big, big fan.

On Sunday evening, I'm curled up in bed, eating ice cream and watching a bootleg performance of *Wicked* when my phone rings. I glance at it. Sebastian's number. I automatically go to answer the call, then pull my hand

back.

Ignore it, a voice says in the back of my mind. It's your day off. Stop rolling over for him whenever he talks to you. He said he'd call someone else if he needed help.

But this isn't just about him and me, it's about Cami. Sighing, I pick up the phone. "Yes?"

"Come here," Sebastian rasps. *"I need you."*

I grit my teeth. For God's sake. How hard would it be to say, *'sorry to disturb you, can you come and help me?'* Why does it always have to be a bloody order? Would a 'please' kill him?

"Do you, now?" I ask drily.

He doesn't respond. I can hear Cami wailing in the background. She sounds distraught. "Jesus. Have you tried burping her?"

"Come here," he repeats, his breath shaky against the receiver. *"Now."*

My grip on the phone tightens. "We've been over this. These aren't work hours. You don't get to order me around."

There's a long pause. Cami's sobbing continues, getting even louder.

"Please," he gets out eventually. His voice has dropped to a whisper. *"Please. I wouldn't be calling you if I thought I could look after her myself. I—I can't look after her properly right now. She needs to be safe. Please come."*

I sit up, alarm running through me. "What do you mean, she needs to be safe? Sebastian, why isn't she *safe*?"

He doesn't respond. Cami's cries reach a screaming pitch, and I swear, ending the call and jamming the phone in my pocket.

THIRTY-SIX

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BETH

When I pull up outside apartment 5A, I'm starting to panic. Cami's shrieks and sobs are so loud I can hear them from the corridor. It sounds like she's in *pain*. I knock at the front door, but there's no response. When I try the handle, it opens smoothly. Someone left the door unlocked. Dread crawls down my spine as I push it open and step inside. It's dark: all the blinds are drawn, and the lights are off. I walk cautiously into the lounge.

"Sebastian?" I call.

He doesn't answer. Worry grips me. Is he okay? Is he *hurt*? I follow Cami's shouting to his bedroom, pushing the door open hesitantly.

Sebastian is sitting hunched on the floor, propped upright against his desk drawers. He's clutching Cami tightly to his chest as she squeals. His eyes are closed, his face is dead white, and his shirt is sticking to his skin with sweat. His chest is rising and falling erratically. He looks like he's about to pass out.

"Oh, Jesus," I mutter, running forward. "Shit. Give her to me." He lifts her, and I scoop her away. She screams in my ear, furious, and I press a kiss to her cheek. "It's okay," I murmur, cuddling her hard. "It's okay, I'm here, you're fine, baby. God, Seb, are you okay? Did you fall? What happened?"

Sebastian shifts slightly at my feet. "I can't make her stop," he chokes out.

I bend down to examine him. "Are you okay? Do you need an ambulance?" Seb can't be older than thirty, but he's such a damn workaholic that I really wouldn't be surprised if he collapsed from a stress-induced heart attack.

He winces and tries to pull away from me. "No. I'm fine. Go."

I frown, pushing his hair back from his face. His expression is tight with pain. "Open your eyes," I say, quietly. He shakes his head minutely, then groans and twists, pressing his forehead against the metal drawer he's leaning against. His fingers claw at his trousers. Something is really, really wrong.

I look at the screaming baby in my arms. “Migraine?” I guess.

He grunts.

Shit. Okay. I stand, settling Cami on my hip, and check her nappy. She’s good. “Is she hurt?” I ask. He shakes his head. “Hungry?” Another head shake. “Just angry?” He nods. “Okay.” I wipe her red face. “You and I are going to go on a little walk,” I tell her.

I take her out into the main room, shutting Seb’s door behind me. I don’t like the idea of leaving him writhing on the floor in agony, but if he’s got a migraine, I need to stop Cami screaming before I can help him. She’s so het up, the only thing I think could soothe her is a change of environment. So I wrap her up, pop her in the baby sling, and take her downstairs, ignoring the neighbors’ stares in the lobby as I carry her outside.

It’s a warm night, and the air is breezy and balmy. Cami shatters the calm streets with her cries, but I just keep walking, bobbing her up and down in my arms and chattering quietly to her as she screams. I think she probably got scared when Sebastian stopped responding to her. God knows how long they were both stuck on the floor.

I rub her little arms and legs as we walk around the block, pointing out dogs and trees and bushes. Eventually she calms back down, her screams turning to little sad gasps. She buries her face in my chest, snuffling, her eyes dropping shut. I wait until she starts to fall asleep, then carry her back inside the building and up to the boys’ flat, settling her down in her cot. She squirms and frowns as she dreams, flexing her tiny fist.

Leaving her to sleep it off, I straighten and open the door to Seb’s bedroom. He hasn’t moved, still sprawled on the floor. Concern pangs through me. I hesitate, then sit down next to him. His eyes are still closed, and he’s breathing hard. I push sweaty hair off his forehead. “You need to get to bed.”

He mutters something.

“What?” I lean in, putting my ear right by his mouth. Our cheeks brush. His skin is hot, like he has a fever.

“I can’t get up,” he enunciates.

“Oh, sweetheart.” The words fall out of my mouth without thinking. I can’t

help it. He's in so much pain, and my heart aches. I stroke back his hair again. "Do you need to throw up?"

"No."

"You can't stay on the floor. You need to sleep." I slide my arm around his trim waist. "Lean on me. I'll help you up."

"You know how small you are, right?" He grits out. "You're like a troll doll."

"Less insults, more standing, please."

He looks like he wants to protest, but I ignore him and tug at his waist, levering him to his feet. As soon as he gets upright, he freezes, gasping. Somehow, his face gets even paler. He wavers where he stands.

"Sorry, sorry," I whisper. He's still for a moment, his fingers clenching tightly into the waist of my t-shirt.

"Fine," he grates out, eventually. I push him gently towards the bed, and he pretty much collapses onto the sheets, rubbing his eyes hard. I reach for his neck, unknotting his tie so he won't choke in his sleep. He grimaces as I undo his collar and try to push some pillows behind his head, aimlessly swiping me away. "Stop."

I sigh and sit on the edge of the mattress. "How can I help?"

"You can go."

"Nope. Wrong answer. Try again." I remember when I was a kid, one of my foster mums had hormonal migraines every month. I used to sit with her in bed and rub her temples while she waited for her painkillers to kick in. I shuffle up to the head of the bed, manoeuvring myself behind him and gently pulling his head into my lap.

He groans. "Beth—I'm—"

"Shh. You can be stoic and manly later, promise. And don't worry about puking on me, I'm used to it."

He flinches, grimacing as another wave of pain hits him. "Oh, *fuck*."

"Shh." I touch his temples. "Where does it hurt?"

"My fucking *head*," he growls.

“Yeah, I got that, genius.” I start drawing little circles on his temples, pressing firmly. “Move my hands. Does it help if I put pressure on it?”

He hesitates, then reaches up and wraps his hands around my wrists, moving my fingers a few millimetres closer to his hairline. I start massaging him, and his whole body immediately loosens. His breathing evens out.

“It’s okay,” I find myself whispering. “You’re okay.” He doesn’t respond.

A few minutes pass in silence. I keep rubbing circles over his temples, trying to dull the pain, and slowly, the tension drains out of him, his face going slack. I’m just starting to wonder if he’s fallen asleep when he speaks up again.

“I’m sorry,” he mutters roughly.

“For what?”

“Calling. Didn’t want to.” His voice is soft and slurring. He sounds almost drunk.

I shake my head. “Sebastian, you have done plenty of things that you could apologise for. Needing help when you’re in chronic pain is absolutely not one of them.” I look around the dark room. “Do you have medication you can take for this? Do you want ice, or something? Water?” I try to pull back, but he leans forward, pressing his face into my stomach. I stiffen. “Sebastian?”

He mumbles something incomprehensible. I lean closer, and a lock of my hair falls into his face. He catches it and examines it fuzzily. “Pretty,” he mumbles.

“Oh. Uh, thanks. I always thought it was a bit carrot-y.”

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met,” he slurs, winding the curl around his finger.

I freeze. “Um. What?”

THIRTY-SEVEN

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SEBASTIAN

Shit. Did I say something stupid? I close my eyes, trying to think past the searing pain in my head. It's no use. I can't remember. Hell, I can barely form full thoughts.

"Sorry," I mutter. "Can't think straight."

Another wave of pain washes over me, bursting behind my eyes. I groan, my hands clenching in the bedsheets, and feel Beth's small fingers press against my temples again. I want to push her off, but it feels too good. Besides, I'm not sure I can lift my arms.

I should have known this would happen. I could feel the migraine coming on this morning, flickering at the edges of my vision, pressing down on my brain, but I just took some pills and tried to ignore it. What choice did I have? I had work to do and a baby to look after.

Cami woke up in a bad mood, and cried pretty much all day. I tried everything to make her happy. Reading her a book. Singing her a song. Holding her. Everything just made her more and more angry. She refused to eat lunch, and wouldn't go for her afternoon nap. No matter what I did, I couldn't calm her down.

The pain got worse and worse as the day went on, until it finally came to a head this evening. I was holding Cami down, trying to change her nappy, when the first wave hit me. I just about managed to get her in a clean babygrow, and then I came into the bedroom and pretty much just fucking collapsed, still holding her.

I was so scared. Through the pounding in my head, the only thought in my mind was *I'm going to hurt her*. I was going to hurt Cami. I was going to drop her, or bang her against something. I was going to pass out, and she'd lie on the floor starving until the others came back tomorrow. She was going to get hurt, and it would be *my* fault.

I didn't know what to do. So I called Beth.

Beth, the sweet, gentle woman my daughter is completely in love with. Beth, the pretty girl-next-door both of my roommates are crushing on. Beth, who hates my *fucking guts*.

I've thought about her a lot this weekend. I can't get her face out of my head. I can't forget the wide-eyed, hurt, confused expression she was wearing when I shouted at her over the spilt toys. I groan at the memory.

I scared her. I know I did. That's why she cleaned up the whole flat after I yelled at her. I never meant to upset her, but I did, because I'm so clumsy and harsh I can't even leave the house without losing my temper and scaring some poor girl shitless. Beth has done nothing but help us. We'd have been utterly screwed if she hadn't let Jack drag her up to our flat last week. And I've just hurt her. Like I hurt everyone.

And now I'm lying here, completely incapacitated, while she's forced to look after me and my child.

I'm a useless dad. Cami's better off without me.

"Shh," Beth says softly, pushing back some of my hair. "It's okay."

I crack open my eyes. She's perched on the mattress behind me, her phone in one hand. The light from the screen washes her pale skin in blue.

"What?" I ask. It comes out more like a grunt.

She gives me a little smile. "Whatever you're thinking about. It looks painful. It's gonna be okay." She checks her phone, then slides out from under me, slipping off the bed and padding across the room. "One sec," she murmurs, heading out into the lounge.

I can hear her moving around in the kitchen, rooting through cupboards. My head starts to pound again, and I rub my eyes. It feels like someone is trying to hammer them out of my skull from the inside. I try to sit up, but my vision blurs so badly I have to lay back down.

Frustration floods me.

I really tried this weekend. After Beth told me off on Friday night, I realised that she was right. For as long as I have Cami with me, I need to prioritise her over my work. I can't just hire a nanny and ignore my own child. All

weekend, I focussed on Cami, leaving my work until the night-time when she was asleep. I really tried to look after her, but I literally, *physically* couldn't.

Which only means one thing. I'll have to give her away.

My stomach churns. The thought is so repulsive I think I might actually throw up.

My bedroom door cracks open again, and Beth slips back inside. "Here," she whispers, setting a glass of water and a pill bottle on my bedside table. "Take these."

I groan. "Beth. Please. I'm fine. Stay with Cami."

"I texted Cyrus. He says you need to take your meds and sleep it off." She cracks open the pill bottle and shakes out a tablet, offering it to me. "Here."

I close my eyes. "No."

There's no way. Those painkillers mess with my brain. They make me fuzzy and uncoordinated. There's no way I could take them while looking after a baby. I'd probably drop her, or fall asleep and forget to feed her, or try and run her a bath and end up burning her. So many awful scenarios flash through my mind.

No. I can't take the pills.

Beth sighs, running a hand through my sweaty hair. "Seb, come on. There's no reason for you to be in this much pain."

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

"*Why?*"

"I'll hurt her," I mumble, rubbing my eyes. "Won't be able to control myself."

She goes still. "What?" I don't reply. She touches my wrist. "Sebastian. Seb, look at me."

I do. For the first time this evening, I really *look* at her. She clearly ran here as soon as I called; she's wearing a t-shirt with a stain on it, and her shiny

hair is pulled into a bun that's sliding down one side of her head, hanging by her cheek. Her full lips are dry, like she's been biting them, and her eyeliner is smudged.

She looks an absolute mess. I don't think I've ever seen a woman more beautiful.

"I'm sorry I scared you," I blurt out. "When I yelled at you." I take a deep breath. The room spins slowly around me. I feel like I'm drunk.

She looks confused. "What are you talking about? You didn't *scare* me. You pissed me off."

"You were hurt." I remember that. I remember the look on her face. Like I'd just slapped her. Guilt throbs in my stomach. I never meant to upset her. I can't help it. No wonder my own daughter screams whenever I try to hold her. "Sorry. Wasn't personal. I hurt everyone."

"You *didn't* hurt me." She leans closer. "Why do you think you hurt everyone?"

I shake my head. "Is Cami okay?" I mumble.

"She's sound asleep." She narrows her eyes. "Why are you so scared of holding her? What do you think is going to happen?"

"Don't want to hurt her."

"But *why* would you hurt her?" She pauses. "Do you *want* to hurt her?"

"No! I'd kill anyone who tried!" I clench my jaw. Sweat drips down the back of my neck. "I was so mad when I saw her. In the car seat. Could've killed someone then."

I haven't been so angry since I was twelve years old, when I punched my mum's boyfriend Steve in the face. Maybe the pain is messing with my head, because the memory is so vivid I can almost feel the warm blood on my fingers.

Steve glares at me, fuming. "That kid's rabid," he mutters, spitting out a tooth I knocked loose. "Fuck, Ellen. I'm done with you."

My mum's eyes are huge. "Steve, please... I'm so sorry... for God's sake,

don't leave me! It's not my fault he hit you!"

Steve marches to the door. Mum scurries after him, and he slams it in her face. She wheels on me, her eyes blazing.

"What have you done?" She shrieks.

I grit my teeth. "He was yelling at you."

"What the hell is wrong with you, you stupid boy? Do you have any idea how important he is to this family? Everything you have—your trainers, your TV, your bike—all of that came from him."

"I don't want that stuff. I want him to go away."

"Well, you've got your wish, kid. He'll never want me, now." She shakes her head, furious. "I had him right where I wanted him!"

I frown. "You wanted him to call you a whore?"

Tears streak down her face. "I'm sending you away. I can't deal with you. You're a menace. How am I meant to live my life, with a son like you?"

"Sending me away?"

"Boarding school. Summer camp. The military. I don't give a shit, I can't take care of you anymore!"

Beth's soft voice jerks me back to reality. "Come on, honey. Take the pills."

"Why d'you call me that?"

"Because you're so sweet," she says dryly, trying to hand me the tablets.

I pull away. "Is Cami okay?"

She sighs. "Of course."

"I'm gonna check on her." I try to sit up.

She puts her hand on my shoulder and pushes me back into bed. "Nope, you are not."

"She's okay?" God, my *head*. I sink into the pillows. The darkness in the room presses down on me. My ears feel like they're full of static.

“Do migraines affect your memory?”

I nod and instantly regret it. “Why?”

“That’s like, the tenth time you’ve asked me if she’s alright.”

“I *know* that,” I groan, rubbing my temples. “It only takes a second for something to happen to her.”

She hesitates, like she’s trying to think of what to say. “Okay. Hang on.” She pats my chest and slides off the bed, heading back out of the room. I squeeze my eyes shut, gritting my teeth against another wave of pain.

I hate this. Lying in bed like a damn invalid, while my *nanny* flutters around me with painkillers and glasses of water. You’d think *I* was the kid she’s looking after, not my daughter.

My daughter.

Every time I even think those words, I feel like I’ve been jabbed with a cattle prod. I have a daughter. A child. I’m a dad.

I want to cry.

God, I can’t do this. I can’t do this at all. I want to rip my own head off. The pile of baby books I bought online sit on my desk, laughing at me.

The bedroom door opens again, and I hear Beth’s light footsteps approach the bed.

“Here,” she says softly. “You want to hold her?”

I squint my eyes open. She’s holding a very sleepy-looking Cami. My baby is frowning around the dark room, her tiny pink lips parted. I feel a wrenching tug of emotion in my ribcage. She’s so gorgeous I can hardly look at her.

“So much,” I whisper, reaching for her. Beth passes her over, and I pull her carefully against my chest, wrapping her up in my arms.

Cami blinks up at me sleepily. Her mouth turns down, and I brace myself for her to start crying again. Instead, she just yawns, fists a hand in my shirt, and cuddles into me, her heavy eyelids drooping shut.

I curve a hand behind her head, holding her close. My heart is hammering. Tears blur my eyes, and I can’t even pretend I’m crying because of the pain.

Beth perches on the edge of the mattress. “I don’t understand you at all, Sebastian.”

I press my cheek against Cami’s head, breathing in her scent. She snuggles into me, her fat cheek squished against my shirt, and my heart breaks.

I’m going to have to let her go. I can’t look after her. It’s the right thing to do. But, God, I don’t think I’ll ever get over it. I’ll miss this kid until the day I die.

“I love you,” I tell my daughter. Tears roll down my cheeks, melting into her hair. “I’m so sorry. I wish I could keep you. I wish I could do it.”

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THIRTY-EIGHT

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BETH

Sebastian doesn't emerge from his room until two PM the next day. Which is kind of my fault. Before I retired to the sofa last night, I texted Jack and told him he needs to call Seb's work and tell them he's taking a sick day. Then I snuck back into Seb's room, confiscated his phone, and stole his alarm clock. I hid it on top of the fridge.

I yawn widely as I finish burping Cami. Between looking after her and her father, I barely got an hour of sleep. Not that I minded helping out.

In fact, I'm mostly just confused. All this time, I've been assuming Seb doesn't want Cami. But the man I saw last night was not a man who doesn't care about his daughter.

He loves her. He loves her to *bits*. After I brought her to him, he cuddled her for over an hour, mumbling soothing nothings into her hair as she slept. He only let her go when I forcibly took her off him.

He's clearly so desperate to connect with her. So why did it take so long for him to do it?

"What is going on with your dad, huh?" I ask Cami, fixing her pigtail. She yawns, flopping against my chest.

Sebastian's door finally creaks open, and I look up as he steps into the lounge, blinking blearily. He looks exhausted, but much better than last night. There's colour in his cheeks, and he's changed out of his sweaty suit and into a pair of blue jeans and a tight black t-shirt. He looks amazing in casual clothes.

"Hey. Are you feeling better?" I ask quietly.

He nods and leans in the doorway, his eyes flicking over me and Cami. "Where's my alarm clock?" He rumbles, his voice still rough from sleep.

“I destroyed it.” He squints. I sigh. “You can have it back when you’re a regularly functioning human again.” I nod at the stove. “I made soup for lunch. There’s fresh bread. Or lucozade and grapes in the fridge, if you’re not up to that.”

He blinks at the fridge, like he’s struggling to keep up. “You went shopping?”

“I wanted to try Cami with some vegetables tonight. The lady at the corner shop adores her.”

He walks towards the stove, examining the saucepan. “You didn’t have to do this. I’m not sick.”

I roll my eyes. “Just eat the soup.”

He nods slowly and turns the stove on, opening the cupboard for a glass. He fills it at the sink, but ends up knocking it over, spilling water over the counter.

I frown. “Are you okay?”

“Fine.” He reaches for the paper towels, dabbing up the mess. “My brain usually runs on half-speed the day after. But I feel fine.”

My chest squeezes. Part of me wants to sit him down at the table and get his food ready for him, heating up the soup and cutting the bread. But I have a *very* strong feeling he wouldn’t appreciate that, so I turn my attention back to Cami, playing with her hands. Seb moves quietly through the kitchen, pouring himself a bowl of soup and sitting down at the counter to eat it.

“It’s good,” he says, after his first spoonful.

“Of course it is.” I chuck Cami under the chin. “I had an excellent sous-chef.”

He looks at the baby, narrowing his eyes. “How...”

“She mostly provided moral support,” I admit. “But it was very effective.”

We don’t say anything else as he eats. He finishes his food, puts his bowl in the dishwasher, and then just stands awkwardly, watching us.

I look up at him. “Yep?”

He swallows. “I don’t know how to say thank you.”

“You managed pretty well just then. You’re welcome.” I pat the sofa. “Can we talk?”

He hesitates, then nods, sitting down next to me.

“Here.” Before he can freak out, I reach over and plop Cami in his arms.

His whole body stiffens. “I don’t know how—”

“You know how to hold her,” I say. “You held her fine last night, and you could barely see straight. Just do what feels natural.”

He swallows and slowly re-arranges her in his arms, laying her cheek against his chest. She snuggles easily against him, smacking her lips. I reach up a hand and squeeze his neck. “Relax,” I remind him softly.

His muscles unclench. He holds Cami a bit closer and clears his throat. “What did you want to talk about?”

I decide to just dive straight in. “Why are you so conflicted about Cami? Last night, you wanted to hold her so bad, but when you’re not drunk on pain, you barely touch her.” I shake my head. “I don’t get it. You freak out every time she cries, but you refuse to cuddle her. You jump to make her bottles, but you won’t play with her. What’s going on in your head?”

He doesn’t say anything, curling a bit of her hair around his finger.

I sigh. “Is this to do with what you were talking about last night?”

He tenses. “What did I say last night?”

“You don’t remember?”

“Not much. I remember you putting me to bed. And…” His high cheekbones colour slightly. “You were stroking my hair. I don’t remember what we spoke about.”

“You said you were worried you were going to hurt her. And that you scare everybody you talk to.”

He blanches. “Oh, *Jesus*.” He runs a hand through his hair. “Could I maybe convince you to visit a hypnotherapist and wipe the last twelve hours from your memory? I know a great one near Hyde park.”

“We coooould,” I say, drawing the word out. “Or, you could tell me what’s

wrong, and we can find the solution that's best for Cami. Because right now, this," I wave a finger between him and her, "is unfair to your daughter."

He hesitates for a long time. So long, I think he's going to refuse. Eventually, he takes a deep breath. "When I was younger," he says slowly, "I had to take anger management classes. I lashed out a lot."

"You hurt people?"

He sighs. "Just one person." He looks down at Cami. "My dad left when I was twelve. Just packed a bag and never came home. He never gave a reason. Mum was devastated. She didn't know how to support us. She'd never worked. She started dating rich guys to help out with money." He gently tugs out Cami's hair bobble, letting her hair loose. "I hated all of them."

I nod. That sounds pretty reasonable. "You just wanted your dad back."

"There was one boyfriend. He's my step-dad now. Steven. He was much older than my mum, and completely loaded. I came home from school one day, and he was shouting at her. Calling her names. I guess he found out that she was seeing other men." He starts combing Cami's hair with his fingers. She closes her eyes, enjoying the soft touches. "I just lost it. I was so mad. I ran at him and started punching him. I was only twelve, so I didn't do much damage, but I did knock out a tooth."

"Jesus."

He nods. "My mum was horrified. She put me in anger management classes, and when they didn't work, she shipped me off to American army camps. I went every summer, until I turned eighteen." He tucks Cami's hair behind her tiny ears. "They worked better than the therapy. I learned to control myself."

"Control yourself," I echo faintly. "What does that mean?"

"To keep my emotions in check. To act rationally, and logically, so I didn't hurt people." A vein throbs in his temple. "They weren't perfect, though. I still get angry. I still struggle. I guess it'll always be a part of me."

I think of all of Sebastian's odd little quirks. The cleanliness. The perfectly pressed suits. His distress when the house gets messy. I remember Jack's words. *It scares him. Being out of control.*

"Did you ever hurt anybody else?" I ask carefully. "Or was it just that one

time?”

“Just once.”

“When you were twelve. What, sixteen years ago?”

“Eighteen.”

“And you still think that if you let loose, you’ll turn into the Hulk?” I shake my head, anger bubbling inside me. “Since you were a kid, you were told that you were some kind of violent monster. So you keep all of your emotions locked inside you, until the pressure gets so bad you get physically ill.”

His mouth flattens. “I have to. For the sake of the people around me.”

“Sebastian. You hit a man once, when you were a *child*. That does not make you a monster.” He doesn’t respond. I sigh. “If Cyrus went to work, and found one of the girls getting harassed by a guy in the club, what do you think he’d do?”

“I don’t know.”

“He’d probably yell at the guy, and if he didn’t stop, I’d bet my whole salary that he would punch the man in the face. It might not be the best response, but it’s a very understandable one. And it wouldn’t make him a *monster*.” I lean forward, taking his hand. “Sebastian, you’re not violent. You were an angry kid who wanted to protect his mum. *Protect*, not hurt.”

He opens his mouth, but I interrupt him. “I grew up in care. I’ve looked after tons of children. I know *plenty* about angry kids. They aren’t *monsters*, they’re just hurting. Any therapist or parent worth anything should be able to see that. You’d lost your *dad*. You should’ve been helped, not punished.”

“You’re wrong,” he says, staring down at Cami. “And I don’t know what to do. I don’t feel safe keeping Cami. But I don’t feel safe giving her back to her mother, either. I don’t know what to *do*.” He takes a deep breath, running his fingers through Cami’s fine hair. “I think maybe it’s time I gave her up.”

Fear bolts through me.

THIRTY-NINE

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BETH

“I don’t think I can be a good father to her,” he continues woodenly. “Last night, if you hadn’t come, I don’t know what would have happened. What if I passed out and dropped her? What if she starved because I couldn’t stand up to make her a bottle?”

My blood is rushing through my body. I fight to keep my voice level. “Do you *want* to be a father to her?”

He nods slowly.

“Then *learn*. You’ve got two friends willing to help you every step of the way. Three friends.”

He wipes a hand over his mouth. “But what if she’d have a better life without me? What if she got adopted by a family who actually knows what they’re doing? Or a couple who’ve been trying to have a baby for years? They’d want her *so much*. They’d understand the difference between Montessori and Waldorf schools, and what kind of baby food is best for her, and whether she should be co-sleeping or in a crib.” He fists his hands in his hair. “I’ve been reading baby advice books since we first got Cami, trying to work out how to look after her. They all say that the way you raise a child will affect her personality. This is the stage where she’ll develop fears, and complexes, and anxieties. What if I hold her too much, and she grows up with separation anxiety? Or not enough, and she grows up feeling like she’s unloved? What if I’m too nice, or too harsh? I could ruin her life without ever meaning to.”

“Oh, Seb.” I put a hand tentatively on his back. “I wish you’d told me you were worried about these things. I can help you learn this stuff, easy.”

He sighs, pulling Cami closer to him. “What would happen?” He asks, his voice breaking. “If I did put her in care?”

I close my eyes. My heart is pounding. “Well,” I start slowly. “She’s small

and cute and healthy. There's a good chance she'll get adopted quickly."

"Weren't you adopted? Were your parents nice? Do they vet them properly?" I raise an eyebrow. "Cyrus let it slip. Sorry, is it a secret?"

"Not a secret. But I wasn't adopted, I was fostered." I look down at my hands. "My mum gave me up when I was four. I was in the care system until I turned eighteen. Bounced between residential care homes and foster families."

He watches me intently. "Was it bad?"

I hesitate. "Not *really*. Nothing bad happened to me. All my foster parents were nice." I curl my finger in Cami's hair. "And the care home was fun. There were so many kids, it was kind of like a school camp, or something."

"But?" He prompts, when I trail into silence.

I swallow thickly. "Well, it's not a school camp. You don't ever get to go home. Ever. You don't have one."

He frowns. "How come you weren't adopted? Did you not like any of the foster families?"

I laugh, tears popping into my eyes. "Because no one wanted me, Seb. No one. I was passed around like a shitty Christmas present. Sometimes I'd go through three foster families a *year*." I rub my eyes. Even after all this time, I can't talk about this without crying. "There was always one kid smarter, or prettier, or more talented than me. Most parents don't pick the freckly ginger kid as their ideal child. I felt like a toy that got left on a shelf in a toy store."

He doesn't say anything, drawing slow circles on Cami's back.

I bite my lip. "I'd hear the foster parents talking about me behind my back. It was always the same. '*She's so rude—she didn't offer to do the washing up.*' '*Her teachers say she's falling behind in class. I don't think she'll make the gifted programme.*' '*It's a pity about her hair. It makes her look so scruffy.*' '*She really needs to lose some weight.*' Shit like that. I'd hear them critiquing me, and I'd do whatever I could to mould myself into the kid they wanted. Because I wanted a family *so bad*." Tears roll down my cheeks, and I quickly wipe them away. "I lost weight. I straightened my hair. I studied like crazy. At a couple of foster homes, I would do hours of chores every night. I'd cook

dinner, clean the kitchen, clean the bathrooms, Hoover the whole house, do laundry, do dishes, tidy all the kids' rooms, babysit. On top of going to school and doing my homework. I'd do anything, *be* anything, to make them keep me."

"They exploited you," he says quietly.

"A bit, yeah. But it was my fault for letting them."

"You were a kid. None of it was your fault. They were in a position of power over you, and they turned you into their personal bloody live-in maid."

I look down at my hands. "When I left the system, it took me so, so long to build up my self-esteem so that I thought I was equal to other people. I've really only managed it in the last couple of years. Sometimes I still notice myself—" I grimace.

"What?"

"Trying to ingratiate myself to other people. Saying what they want to hear. Changing myself to look like what they want to see. Doing too many favours." I give him a pointed look.

"That's why you cleaned the flat when I yelled at you?"

I nod, embarrassed. "I went to a therapist a while back, and she said it's an extension of the fight-or-flight response. Fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. When I'm in stress, I—fawn. I try to make people like me. It's just a reflex, I don't think about it, but it's awful. My voice changes, the way I speak changes. I'm so *submissive*, even when I don't want to be. I'm always happy to do favours and help people out, but if I think someone is taking me for granted, it kind of takes me back. I don't want to be that desperate, exploited kid again, Seb. I can't."

He doesn't say anything, jogging Cami gently in his arms.

I sigh. "Sorry. This isn't about me. I guess what I'm trying to say is... being put into care is a really, really sad thing for a child to have to put up with." I look up at Seb. His grey eyes are burning with intensity. "If you really don't want Cami, then fine. Give her up. But don't assume her life will be better because of it. Even if she gets adopted by the nicest people on the planet, it will always hurt her, knowing that neither of her parents wanted her. It will

leave a scar.” I stroke Cami’s fat cheek. She reaches up, curling her tiny hand around my finger as she dozes. “Obviously, I’m not saying giving up a child is always bad. Sometimes it’s the best choice. It was the best choice for me; but I still cried myself to sleep every single night for about fourteen years. So really think about whether or not this *is* the best choice. Because if you’re just scared, get over it. Take the help me and the others are offering you, and *work* for her. I have one hundred percent faith that you can be an incredible father to her.”

He nods slowly. “Okay,” he says, his voice raspy. “Okay. Thank you. I—I will.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

I smile up at him, relief flooding through me. “Can I have a cuddle?”

He pauses, then awkwardly wraps an arm around me.

I burst out laughing. “I meant from Cami. I just spilled my life story, I wanna hold a cute baby.”

“Oh.” He goes to pull back, but I lean into him, trapping his arm. “Hey. I’m not opposed to a double cuddle.” Honestly, after everything he just told me, I want to hug him really, really bad.

He sits stiffly for a moment, then relaxes underneath me, shifting Cami’s weight onto my lap. She plucks at my shirt and closes her eyes. I yawn, holding her close.

“Are you tired?” Seb asks softly. I can feel his voice rumbling through his chest. It warms something inside me. “You can go home to take a nap, if you like. You’ve been here all night.”

“I’m fine. Cami just woke me up early.”

“And I kept you up late,” he finishes. “Did you get any sleep at all?”

“I’m fine.” I snuggle Cami closer, my eyes falling shut. Sebastian lifts a hand and strokes my hair away from my forehead. “What are you doing?” I mumble.

“Returning a favour. Sleep, Beth.”

I'm a sucker for people playing with my hair. He keeps on sifting through my curls, and I'm out like a light.



I float awake to the sound of voices.

“Quick,” someone hisses. “Oh my God, they’re so cute. Get a picture.”

“*Don’t*,” Seb’s voice warns.

“But it’s your first ever cuddle, mate! We need to memorialise it!”

I hear the shutter of a phone camera and stretch, rubbing my eyes. “Hmm?”

My pillow moves, and I look around to see I’m still on the sofa with Sebastian. He’s got an arm around me, and I’m cuddled up against his side. Cami is asleep on his lap, her tiny lips moving slightly as she dreams.

“Oh. Sorry. You’re very comfy.” I wipe off his shoulder. “Did I drool on you?”

“Don’t worry. This is a very absorbent shirt.”

I glare at him. His mouth twitches.

“I’m making this my background,” Cyrus announces by the door, jabbing at his phone. I turn to see him and Jack kicking off their shoes. Jack is beaming, practically bouncing on the spot with excitement. Which seems like an overreaction, no matter how cute the picture is.

“Why do you look like you’re about to piss yourself?” Seb mumbles.

“I just checked the mailbox,” Jack says, waving a fancy-looking black envelope. “We got an invitation to the AGAME Summit.”

Sebastian sits up immediately, the annoyance falling right off his face. “*What?*”

Jack nods. “It came in the post.” He drops the envelope on Seb’s lap, picking up Cami and jogging her in his arms. “Trust a tech company to use snail mail, huh? Missed you, chameleon.”

Sebastian shakes out the letter, frantically scanning its contents.

“What’s the AGAME Summit?” I ask groggily.

“It’s a video game and app convention in New York,” Cyrus explains, dropping onto the sofa next to me and leaning against my side. I flush as his bare arm presses against mine, suddenly remembering the last night we spent together.

I clear my throat. “And it’s a big deal.”

“Very big deal.” He reaches for my hand. “All of the biggest tech brands will be there. It’s invitation-only, and they only invite a handful of newbies every year.”

“Wow! Congratulations, guys!”

“It’s in two weeks,” Seb says, scanning the letter. He glances up at Jack. “Can you do it?”

Jack nods firmly. “I’ll have to.”

“Do what?” I ask.

Cyrus stretches next to me, subtly wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “Well, sugar, there’s not much point attending an app conference unless their shiny new app is up and running, is there? The amount of sales they’ll get from talking at the conference alone will be phenomenal. And future investors want to see exactly what they’re buying into.”

“What does that mean? You’re launching in two weeks?” I frown. “Launch date isn’t for over a month, is it?”

“We’re just going to have to speed up the timelines,” Seb says, turning the letter over and producing a pen out of nowhere. Jack snatches the letter back before he can start scribbling down notes.

“Don’t you dare deface it. I’m gonna frame it,” he insists. “Hang it in my bedroom.”

“Nerd,” Cyrus yawns, nuzzling into my neck like a cat. “Missed you,” he murmurs in my ear, his lips brushing my ear lobe. “Thought of you all weekend.”

“I missed you too,” I say honestly, and he smiles, white teeth glinting. Sebastian stands, and I frown up at him. “Hang on, though. What about what

we just talked about? Does this mean you won't be able to spend time with Cami?"

Sebastian shakes his head. "The workload won't be on me. It'll be on him." He jabs a thumb back at Jack.

Jack nods slowly, taking a deep breath. "I guess I'd better get started."

Seb turns to me, light shining in his eyes. "Me, too. I've got a lot to learn."

I smile up at him. "Don't worry. I'm a great teacher."

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FORTY

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BETH

After that, everything changes.

Apparently, all Sebastian really needed was to make a solid decision about what to do with Cami, because as soon as he decides that he's going to be her dad, he goes at it full-force. He doesn't just want me to look after her anymore; he wants me to teach him how to be a parent. And he's a natural. Every morning, I get in at eight to find him in bed with her, bleary-eyed and yawning as he gives her a bottle. I take over and go through my normal routines, bathing her, making her food, doing activities with her—but now, every so often, he pops up to watch me, asking questions and making notes in a little notebook he's started carrying around. He always comes with me on our afternoon walks to the local park, and most evenings he puts her to bed.

That's not to say that everything's easy. He's still nervous around Cami. His least favourite task was learning to bathe her. He had some odd idea that he might accidentally drop her, and she'd crack her head against the side of the tub. It pisses me off to no end, that his parents instilled this idea in him that he can't help hurting people.

Really, nothing could be further from the truth. The more time we spend together, the more he lets go of his tightly-wound self control. It turns out, when he's relaxed, he's a genuinely sweet, gentle guy. Every day, I like him more and more. After a full week of walks in the parks and bedtime stories, I can barely look at him without butterflies exploding in my stomach.

I might be seeing more of Seb, but I'm definitely seeing way less of Jack. Way less. He's working pretty much non-stop, from the morning to late in the night. He doesn't eat. He doesn't do laundry. Cyrus assures me that he has a mini-fridge, a kettle, and a lifetime's supply of ramen in his room, so he won't actually starve to death, but I can't help but worry about him.

On the seventh day of his self-confinement, I decide to take matters into my

own hands. I'm already cooking lunch for myself and Seb anyway, so I throw together a bowl of chicken pasta salad and knock on his door.

"Yes?" He asks, after a moment.

"Open the door, please."

"Beth." There's a sigh, and then he pulls the door open, sticking his head out. "I'm busy, sweetheart."

I offer him the bowl. "I made you lunch."

He blinks at the pasta like he can't remember what real food is. "You didn't have to do that."

"I know. That's what makes me so nice." He takes the bowl, and I use the opportunity to slip past him, following him inside his room.

If it was cluttered the last time I was in here, now it's practically a minefield. There are empty coffee mugs everywhere, papers overflowing off the desk and onto the floor, and his bin is piled full of empty energy drink cans.

He groans. "God, don't come in here. I look like a slob."

"No, you don't. You look like a very stressed, busy man who's pulling too many all-nighters." I reach up to trace the blonde stubble growing out on his jaw. It doesn't look like he's shaved all week. "I like this. Suits you."

"Thanks, love." He sighs as I press a kiss to his cheek. "Beth... I'm really sorry, I just don't have time for this. Trust me, there is nothing I want more in the world right now than to just turn off the computers and spend some time with you, but—"

I reach up and wrap my arms around him. He's still for a moment. Then he pulls me in close, hugging me tightly.

"You're doing great," I murmur in his ear. I figure he probably needs to hear it. His breath hitches in his chest. He nuzzles into me.

"You're the sweetest woman alive," he mumbles against my cheek.

I smile. "Prove it."

"Excuse me?"

I flatten my hands on his shoulders and push him down onto the chair,

straddling him. He looks up at me, his blue eyes wide. I'm not surprised. This isn't my normal style at *all*—but hey. I've learned a move or two from Cyrus. There's nothing like fucking a stripper to boost your sexual confidence.

I push my face into the crook of his neck, feeling him swallow against me. "Taste me," I breathe in his ear, rubbing my lips over his thrumming pulse.

He groans like he's in physical pain. He might be; as I readjust my weight over his hips, I can feel him stiffening under me. "I don't have *time*," he moans, tightening his grip on me. "Fuck—"

"You'll be more productive if you have a break," I insist. "Come on. Bet we can both get off in fifteen minutes." He hesitates, and I stroke his cheek. "Jack. You're killing yourself. Surely you can see that." I run my hand through his blonde hair. I can feel him shaking slightly under me. I don't know if it's anxiety, low blood sugar, or caffeine overdose, but either way, it's unacceptable. "Your health is more important than any job," I remind him.

"It's not," he mutters. "Not this job." He touches his forehead to mine. "You're sweet, but I'll be okay."

I sigh heavily. "Okay." I stand, squeezing his shoulder. "You can keep working. Call me if you want a break later, okay?" As I turn to go, my elbow knocks a pen off his desk. I bend down slowly to pick it up, giving him a good look at my red lace thong. "Here." I set it back on the table and head for the door.

"Wait," he grinds out.

I smile.

His lunch break ends up lasting well over an hour, until Cami wakes up again.

Over the next week, I also see three more of Cyrus's shows. I can't stay away. Some nights, I finish my shift, go home, and can't stop thinking of him oiling himself up in the changing room. Grinding against a strange girl. Slowly pulling off his clothes. Whenever my train of thought heads in that direction, I inevitably find myself in line outside the Tease Club half an hour later, shivering as I wait to pay my entrance fee. I never tell Cyrus when I'm

going, but he somehow always spots me in the dark room. Every time, he comes to my table, and I'm led up to the main stage with him holding my hand tightly.

On my third visit, he carries me through the crowd bridal style, his face buried in my neck like he's breathing in my scent. "Careful," I mumble in his ear as he sets me gently in the chair. "I'm not wearing underwear."

He stares at me, missing his cue. "What?"

"This is a short dress," I tell him. "And loads of people are watching. I don't really want all of these people to see my goods."

For a few seconds, he just gapes at me. I see his Adam's apple bob as he swallows convulsively. Around us, the lights flash as the other dancers move in sync, but he stays frozen, breathing hard.

I cup his cheek. "Sorry. Didn't mean to distract you. Keep going."

"You are in so much *trouble*," he growls, tugging off his tie. Instead of tossing it aside, he wraps it around my eyes, blindfolding me. I gape.

"Cy—"

He bends and nips my cheek, scraping his teeth over my skin. The crowd screams.

The performance is a thousand times hotter when I can't see what's happening. All of my senses are heightened as he drags my hands down his hard, sweaty abs, rolling his hips over mine. By the time the show is over, I'm sweating and panting and halfway to coming. Cy doesn't even wait for the encore; just grabs me and drags me outside to find a taxi. When we make it back to the boys' flat, my moans manage to drag Jack out of his bedroom pretty efficiently.



About a week after my chat with Sebastian, I walk into the flat at eight AM to find Jack in the lounge. He's kneeling next to Cami's bouncer, staring out of the window as he swings her gently. His shadowed eyes are zoned out. He doesn't even notice I've arrived until I sit down next to him, kissing his cheek.

“Hey, space cadet. I missed you.”

He blinks, looking around at me, and his face melts into a smile. “Oh. Hey. Sorry. Off in my head.”

“Yeah?” I slip my arms around Cami, picking her up. She coos happily as I pull her into a hug, grabbing a fistful of my hair and tugging. I gently disentangle her fingers before my hairline recedes. “What you thinking about?”

He rubs his eyes. “Just some code. There’s a bug messing up one of the save points. I spent all night trying to reproduce it, and it keeps slipping past me.”

“This is really stressing you out, huh?”

He shrugs. “It’s important. And I guess I’m kind of a perfectionist. Coding is all I’m really good at, so it feels pretty crap when I even screw that up.”

I frown, nuzzling Cami’s cheek. “Coding isn’t all you’re good at. What do you mean?”

“It’s just my thing.” Cami gets bored of me and reaches for him again. He takes her off me, bouncing her on his lap. “All my siblings are athletes. One of my brothers plays semi-pro football, the other is on the national swim team, and my little sister is a gymnast. She’s working towards competing in the next Olympics.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “That’s amazing!”

He nods, smiling. “They all are. I was never sporty, though. I mean, I work out, but only because I have to. I think the gym is the dullest place on Earth.” He sways Cami from side to side, making her giggle. “School was what I was always best at.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s *all* you’re good for, though,” I start, but I’m interrupted by a stream of muffled curse words coming from behind Seb’s closed office door. We both glance over.

“What’s going on in there?” I ask.

Jack shrugs. “Don’t know. He’s been on the phone for the past half an hour. Probably arguing with an investor, or something.” He bends and gives Cami a kiss on the nose. “Can you take over? I really want to fix this bug.”

“Well, it is my job, so I *guess* I have to.”

He smiles and gives me a quick peck on the lips, then grabs a half-drunk mug of coffee from the counter and heads back to his bedroom.

I bop Cami’s nose. “What do you think about trying some yummy oatmeal this morning, huh?”

She shouts with glee, and I stand, heading over to the kitchen.

The oatmeal does not go down well. In fact, I think Cami only gets one tiny lick in, before deciding she’d much rather just dump the bowl all over her front and take a bottle instead. Which is how I end up crouched by the bathtub, washing a squirming, sticky baby.

“Look up,” I tell her, holding her little whale bath toy over her head. “You’ve got porridge all down your neck.”

She babbles, ignoring me and examining her toes. I try to slip the flannel under her chin to wipe up the baby food, but she stubbornly pins her chin to her chest.

“Yeah?” I ask. “You want a mucky neck? You saving your breakfast for later? I can put it in a tupperware, you know.”

There’s a knock at the door.

“I’m just bathing Cami,” I call. I expect whoever it is to go away, but the door pushes open. I look up as Seb steps inside. He looks alarmingly close to how he did last week, his face pale and sweaty and his hair ruffled.

“Oh, honey,” I frown, “you look like you need a nap.”

“It’s just a headache,” he mutters.

“Your eyes aren’t focussing. You look like you’ve had some kind of traumatic head injury. Take your meds and go to bed.”

Cami notices him and squeals, splashing the water excitedly. A flicker of pain passes over his face, but he ignores it, coming to kneel on the bath mat next to me. He takes the washcloth, puts Cami’s toy whale on her round belly, and wordlessly takes over, cleaning his daughter in gentle, smooth strokes.

“You need to get her neck,” I say, sitting back on my haunches. “Half of her breakfast is sitting right under her double chin.”

“Look up,” he says quietly, nudging her chin with his finger. Cami refuses, so he rummages around in the box of bath toys, finding a tube of bubbles. He uncaps it and blows a stream of shiny bubbles over her head, and she lifts her face to watch, delighted. He quickly cleans up the beige goop. I smile to myself, then nudge him gently.

“Is something wrong? I heard you arguing. It’s not the app, is it?”

He shakes his head, carefully sluicing off Cami’s hair. “I told my mum about Cami. Figured I had to do it, sooner or later.”

I wince. That can’t have been a fun conversation. “What did she say?”

“She’s... *unimpressed* that I kept Cami a secret. She wants to meet her. This weekend.” His lips twist grimly. “They’re going to hate her. Her and my step-dad. They’ll make fun of her.”

My eyebrows raise. “Make fun of her? How?! She’s just a little baby!”

“I know what they’re like.” His jaw clenches. “They’re going to talk shit about her, just to rile me up. It’s what they do. They love pissing me off. And she’s the illegitimate kid of a drug addict; they’ll have plenty of material.” He rubs his throat. “I can’t handle them insulting my daughter.”

I reach out, putting my hand over his. “Want me to go with you?”

He snorts. “I don’t need you to hold my hand while I talk to my mum. I’m a big boy.”

“You may be, but Cami is a tiny baby who will probably need some entertainment on the long journey. And someone to look after her while you talk with your parents.”

He pales. “Shit. Yes. I don’t want to shout in front of her.”

He looks so worried. On a whim, I pop up and press a kiss to his cheek, my lips brushing the warm, stubbly skin. At the same moment, he leans forward to rearrange Cami in the tub.

Our cheeks brush together, and we both freeze. My heart starts to beat faster as I inhale his warm cologne. I can feel his breathing pick up, his chest rising

and falling a little too fast. Slowly, he turns towards me, his eyes dropping to my lips. My stomach freefalls.

Until now, I've ignored my growing crush on Sebastian. It didn't seem appropriate. Seb was my boss, and he honestly didn't seem particularly interested in me. But now he's staring at me intently, his pupils blooming. The air is zinging with electricity. Slowly, he shifts forward, leaning in.

There's a happy coo, and water splashes over us, hitting us both in the face. I choke, jolting back. Cami splashes the water again, squealing delightedly.

Seb clears his throat and reaches for the towel I've left folded on the edge of the bath.

I grab his arm, stilling him. "I've got this. Go to bed," I say. "It's all going to be okay." He hesitates, and I smile. "I've got everything under control, remember?"

He nods jerkily and stands, touching the top of my head lightly before turning and leaving the room. I wrap the towel around Cami's shoulders and lift her out of the bath, bundling her up.

"You think you're funny, don't you?" I ask, my voice low.

She beams up at me, clapping her hands.

FORTY-ONE

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BETH

Sebastian is unnaturally quiet on the drive up to his parents' house. They live up in Macclesfield, which is almost a four-hour trip. Cami sleeps for most of the journey, lulled by the gentle vibration of the engine, so we only stop once at a service station to change her nappy. I spend most of the drive sitting in the back seat next to her, watching the countryside flash by outside the window.

"I can't believe you grew up in *Cheshire*," I say, as we pass the fiftieth sheep-filled field. The landscape here is unbelievably different to London. "Where's your accent?"

"Never really had one," he mutters, staring straight ahead at the road.

I glance at him. "You okay? You sound stressed."

He nods, gripping the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles blanch. I decide to just shut up and let him drive.

Eventually, he pulls up outside a pretty stone house shaded by large, leafy trees. It's not flashy, but it's certainly expensive. A sudden wave of heat washes over me as I look up at the building, and I shuck off my jacket.

"Jesus. I thought it was supposed to be cold up here," I mutter, fanning myself. "I'm boiling."

Seb frowns, twisting in his seat to look at me. "It's eight degrees out, Beth." He reaches over and touches my cheek. "Your face is all pink. Are you okay?"

"Just hot." I swallow, stroking down the skirt of my dress. My heart is pounding uncomfortably hard, and I can feel myself sweating under my clothes. He gives me a sharp, assessing look, and I smile. "I promise. If I thought I was sick, I wouldn't go anywhere near Cami."

“It’s not Cami I’m worried about. If you don’t feel well—”

“I’m *fine*,” I insist. “Meeting peoples’ parents always makes me nervous. Shall we go?”

Without waiting for a response, I open my door and step out onto the road, turning to lift Cami out of her car seat. She yawns hugely, butting her head against my shoulder. I can’t help but kiss her cheek.

She looks adorable today. I put her in a little dalmatian-spotted babygrow, with pink hair clips pinning back her wild curls. I don’t care if Seb’s mum is the meanest bitch in Britain; there’s no way she’ll be able to resist her.

Seb grabs Cami’s baby bag, and we traipse up the path to the house. Seb is so tense he’s probably in danger of spraining something. He keeps glancing back at the car, like he’s thinking of packing back up and driving away.

I squeeze his elbow as we pull up by the front door. “It’ll be okay.”

He swallows, looking down at Cami. “They’re going to try and bait me,” mutters. “Will you take her away, if I get angry?”

I smile at him gently. “No.”

He blinks. “What?”

“No, I will not remove your daughter from the premises if you get angry. You’re not a bomb; you won’t just detonate and explode her to pieces.”

He clenches his jaw. “I don’t want to shout in front of her—”

“Then don’t.”

“You’re a nanny!” He says incredulously. “You wouldn’t remove a child from the room if her parents were having a screaming match?”

“Of course, I would.”

“But then—”

I lean up and kiss him on the cheek. “You might not trust yourself, Seb. But I do. You’re not the Incredible Hulk. If you don’t want to shout in front of your baby, you won’t.” I nudge him with my hip. “Hey. Maybe it won’t be that bad.”

He sighs, takes a deep breath, then rings the doorbell.

The door flies open almost immediately.

“Sebastian!” His mother cries, delighted. Sebastian doesn’t even have time to open his mouth before she throws her arms around him, tugging him into the house. He stiffly returns the hug, obviously uncomfortable, while I look on in shock.

I’m not sure what I expected Sebastian’s mum to look like, but it certainly wasn’t this. She’s small and round, with a sweet face and long, grey-streaked hair. Her cheeks are flushed with happiness as she pulls away from her son and turns to me. “And who is this?” She asks loudly.

I offer her my hand to shake. “I’m Beth. Thank you so much for inviting us over, Mrs Bright.”

She beams. “Please, call me Ellen.” Her eyes drop down to Cami. She gasps. “And *here* is the little angel! Aren’t you beautiful!”

Cami laughs, bopping around in my arms like a helium balloon. Ellen reaches to take her from me, and Sebastian frowns, stepping forward.

“Mum—”

“Oh, hush,” she orders, “let me hold my granddaughter.” She pulls Cami against her chest, smiling down at her. “Oh, she is very sweet,” she coos, tapping Cami’s pink cheeks. “Aren’t you a sweet little girl!” Cami giggles, wriggling happily into her jumper.

Seb puts his hands behind his back like a soldier, and I reach out and squeeze his palm.

“I can’t believe you didn’t bring her to us sooner!” Ellen cries. “We should’ve known as soon as you got her pregnant!”

I open my mouth to correct her, but Seb cuts me off. “Sorry. It’s all been a bit of a rollercoaster.”

I frown up at him.

Ellen rolls her eyes, turning to me. “He was always like this when he was a child, too. Never told me anything. I hoped he’d grow out of it, but he’s just become more secretive as he’s gotten older.”

I smile uncomfortably, not sure what to say.

Ellen blinks. “But why are we standing around here? You must be hungry! Dinner is all ready. I made a chicken roast.” Her forehead wrinkles. “You’re not vegetarian or anything, are you, dear? I’m sorry, I should’ve checked.”

I shake my head. “I eat everything.”

Ellen gives me a soft look, turning back to Sebastian. “Oh, she’s lovely. Where did you find such a lovely girlfriend?”

“I met Beth in our building,” Seb says, before I can answer. “She lives in the flat below mine.”

“Neighbors!” She claps her hands together excitedly. “How romantic! Well, come in, come in. No need to hang around on the doorstep.”

She turns around and bustles into the house. Seb goes to follow her.

I poke him in the hip. “What are you doing?” I hiss.

“Later,” is all he says, following his mother inside. I stare at his retreating back. What the Hell is he playing at? No one is going to believe Cami is my child; she looks nothing like me. And even if she did, I agreed to come here as Seb’s nanny, not his fake girlfriend.

Sighing, I toe off my shoes, shut the front door, and follow behind him. Ellen leads us through a long corridor and into a large, high-ceilinged dining room. There’s a table draped in a snowy-white tablecloth in the centre of the room, filled with covered dishes. A silver-haired man, probably in his sixties, is already sitting at one of the places. He sets down his wine glass and nods as we all step into the room.

“Beth, this is my husband, Steve,” Ellen introduces, bouncing Cami in her arms. “Steve, this is our son’s secret lovechild, Camilla.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I tell him.

He just takes another swig of his wine. “Can we eat?” He asks his wife, his voice rough.

“Of course, dear.” There’s a high chair set up at the table, and Cami coos as Ellen sets her down into it. “That’s right!” Ellen sings. “I made some food for you too, honey! Is she hungry?” She asks me.

“Oh, I was just going to give her a bottle—”

Ellen tuts. “Nonsense. She’s eating solids, right?” I nod, and she smiles. “Then I’d love for little Camilla to have some of her grandma’s food.” She lifts up one of the dish covers.

“What is it?” Sebastian asks brusquely, looking over her shoulder as she produces a plastic bowl of orange mash.

“Oh, just some mashed potato and carrots.”

“Did you put seasoning in it?” He demands.

Ellen looks bemused. “Look at you, acting like you know what’s best for a baby. Of course I didn’t, it’s nice and plain.” She waves me to one of the seats. “Sit down, please.”

I do, and she bustles around the table, serving us all chicken and potatoes. I’m confused. This isn’t how I imagined Seb’s mother at all. Ellen seems thrilled to see her son and granddaughter. I glance across at Sebastian. He’s sitting ramrod straight, not moving to take the cutlery, watching suspiciously as his mother ties a bib around Cami’s neck.

Hm.

“Please,” Ellen says, finally sitting down. “Eat.”

I reach for Cami’s spoon, but Seb shakes his head. “I’ll feed her,” he mutters.

I nod and cut into my chicken, glancing around the dining room for a topic of polite conversation. The walls are covered in pictures of Ellen and Steve, taken all over the world. I see one of them standing in front of the pyramids; the leaning tower of Pisa; the great wall of China.

“Wow,” I say, pushing potato onto my fork, “you guys travel a lot, huh?”

“Oh, yes.” Ellen beams. “Steve and I have always loved to visit new places, haven’t we, honey?” She reaches across and squeezes her husband’s hand. He doesn’t respond, dousing his plate in gravy. She points to a massive, blown-up photograph of them both standing on a boat deck, holding champagne flutes. “That was our very first trip. We’d only known each other for two weeks, but Steve decided to whisk me away on a cruise. It was so romantic.”

“That’s lovely,” I say, scanning the walls. There’s not one picture of Sebastian. Not a baby picture, or a graduation photo. Nothing. “Did you ever go with them?” I ask him.

He doesn't say anything, offering Cami a spoonful of mash.

"Oh, Sebastian never came with us. He was always tied up in military camp." She tosses me a sideways look, cutting into her chicken. "I suppose he never told you about that."

"Oh, he did," I say cheerfully.

"And it didn't bother you?" She asks, her voice incredulous.

"Why would it? I have nothing against the military."

"Well, it wasn't a regular military camp, you understand. It was a behavioural correctional programme." She leans forward, lowering her voice conspiratorially. "Sebastian got into a lot of trouble when he was younger."

Seb puts Cami's bowl down with a *thunk*. "Mum. What are you trying to do?"

I gently take the plastic spoon off him.

"What?" Ellen blinks innocently. "If she's your girlfriend, dear, she needs to know about your past. I'm surprised you haven't told her already. It's a little unfair, don't you think?"

"Well, he must have been a star student," I interrupt, smiling down at Cami as she waves her hand, trying to grab another bite of mash. "He's one of the kindest, gentlest, most well-disciplined men I've ever met."

Sebastian gives me a sharp look. Ellen frowns. I feed Cami another spoonful, and she makes little happy *nom nom* noises as she scoffs it down. "She really likes your food, Mrs Bright. She's gobbling it up."

Ellen smiles blandly. "She is a sweet thing," she says distractedly. "Although, I have to say, she doesn't really look like you, dear." She squints at me. "If your roles were reversed, I'd be accusing my son of sleeping with the postman!"

I've just taken a bite of potato, and that image makes me choke on my mouthful.

"I mean, really. Do you have some... *exotic* heritage in your family tree?" Ellen continues delicately. "I mean, you hardly look it, but Camilla here doesn't look... fully *English*, if you catch my drift. And she certainly doesn't

get it from our side. We're Brits down to the roots."

I look at Sebastian expectantly. I'm not about to invent a whole racial background just so he can lie to his mother. Sebastian sighs, wipes his mouth with his napkin, and reaches for his glass.

"Perhaps I should have mentioned," he says calmly, taking a sip of water. "Beth isn't actually the mother."

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FORTY-TWO

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BETH

All the noise around the table stops.

Ellen's lips thin. "*Sebastian*. Don't tell me you slept with some poor girl, got her pregnant, and then took her child and went off with the next floozy that looked at you?"

My eyebrows shoot up. Wow. I've never been called a *floozy* before.

I watch Sebastian's grip tighten on his fork. "Don't talk about Beth like that ___"

"I'm just saying, dear, you can't be too careful. You're making a good salary. That makes you very attractive to young women."

Blood flushes Seb's face. "*Mum—*"

I step in. "It's okay, Seb. I mean, I guess, in a way, Ellen's right. I am using you for your money." I smile at his mother. "I'm not his girlfriend; I'm his nanny. Sebastian's very busy at work right now, and he needed some help looking after Cami on the weekdays."

Ellen's mouth drops open. "A *nanny*?" She asks, horrified.

Steve puts down his cutlery and finally speaks up. "What happened to the mother?" He asks, his voice low.

Sebastian studies his water glass. "We slept together casually just over a year ago, then lost contact. A few weeks ago, she sent Cami to me, and said that she needed me to look after her. It turns out that she was a drug addict, and was entering rehab."

There's a very long silence. Cami gabbles happily, poking her hand in her potatoes, then beams across at me.

"And is there a reason you didn't tell us all of this off the bat?" Ellen asks at

last, her voice acidic.

“Because I knew that you’d look at her differently, once you knew,” Sebastian says levelly. “I wanted you to see her as your *grandchild* before you wrote her off as some addict’s illegitimate child.”

“Well, that’s the truth, isn’t it?” Ellen looks at Cami, distaste all over her face. “Good lord. I suppose that means the mother was shooting up whilst she was pregnant! Is the baby addicted to anything? Are there any...” she shudders in delicate horror, “*developmental problems?*”

Sebastian’s face goes white with anger. “If there were, she wouldn’t be worth any less! How the Hell is her mother’s addiction her fault?!”

“Cami is perfectly healthy,” I step in, smiling as sweetly as I can. “We had her checked out by her paediatrician.”

Cami waves her hands in the air triumphantly, then wipes potato onto Seb’s shirt. He catches her tiny palm and kisses it hard, his jaw tight with anger.

“And why is *she* here?” Ellen continues, not even bothering to look at me. “Why on Earth would you need a nanny? Really, you’re going to be one of those parents who *hire help* to look after their children?” She scoffs. “Well, I suppose I understand. It’s probably best that you get someone else to look after her. I doubt *you* could do it.”

I frown. I don’t like the tone of that. “Sebastian is more than capable of looking after his baby.”

“If he were, dear, then you wouldn’t be here,” she says dismissively. “I personally think it’s an awful thing to do to a child, foisting them off onto some stranger instead of raising them yourself. Even when your father left, I never put you in a creche or hired a babysitter.”

“No,” Sebastian says coldly, “you just shipped me off to American military camps. Maybe you’d prefer if Beth made my child run drills and do hard labour, instead of cuddling her when she cries and reading her story books? Would that be more acceptable to you?”

Ellen’s face flushes angry red. She leans across the table, almost knocking over her wine glass. “You were sent to those camps because you were behaving like a spoiled, violent brat,” she hisses. “That’s hardly *my* fault.

You think I *wanted* to send my son away?”

“Oh, yes, you seemed heartbroken. You needed to cheer yourself up with a cruise in the Bahamas every time I left.”

“I didn’t have a choice! You were scaring me!”

“I was *scaring* you?” Sebastian repeats, a vein throbbing in his forehead. “I was a five-foot-two twelve-year-old who liked reading about trains and refused to kill spiders. How the *hell* did I scare you?!”

“You were so aggressive! You knocked one of Steve’s teeth out for no reason at all!”

“He was shouting at you! You looked terrified!”

“Oh, please, don’t make this about *me*. You weren’t being some heroic saviour, you were just an angry, violent child. Remember that Emile boy that you beat up?”

Seb frowns. “Emile—you mean *Emile White*? He was my best friend, I never *beat him up!*”

“That’s the one.” She turns to me, shaking her head sadly. “He almost broke the poor kid’s leg.”

“I *tackled him* while we were playing football. He fell, scraped his knee, and got right back up again.”

Ellen’s lips purse. “His mother complained to me that you were bullying him.”

“Well, he must have been some kind of masochist, considering how often he invited his *bully* over for dinner—”

“I’m just saying. You’ve always had a violent streak. I mean, look at you.” Her lip curls in disgust. “Here we are, trying to have a nice family dinner. I’ve spent all day slaving away in the kitchen. But you can’t even sit and eat for *ten* minutes without raising your voice at me. In front of your own *child*, mind you.” She turns to me. “Maybe you should take her out of the room. It’s bad for developing children to see their parents lose their temper like this. It can cause all kinds of trauma.”

I smile through gritted teeth. “Cami doesn’t look particularly traumatised.”

We both glance across at the baby. She's happily playing patty-cake in her potatoes, kicking her legs in her high chair. When she sees us all staring at her, she squeals with laughter and flops face-down onto the food tray. Seb gently pulls her upright, cleaning off her cheeks, and she looks at him with complete adoration.

Ellen sniffs. "Well. It's only a matter of time. If I were you, I'd keep a close eye on my son. He can control himself for the most part, but it only takes one little incident. Honestly, with his anger management issues, I can't help but worry about whether or not he's a suitable parent at all. I'd hate to see something... happen to the child."

My mouth falls open. There's a loud, sudden *crack*. I jump, turning to see Sebastian holding his shattered wine glass by the stem. His grip was so hard, he accidentally crushed it to pieces. His face is white with horror as he stares down at the glass shards on the tablecloth.

For a second, no one says anything.

"Excuse me," he mutters, pushing back his seat and almost running out of the room.

"And, *there* it is," Ellen sighs, watching him go. "It's been, what, fifteen minutes? If he can't last that long without breaking my glassware, I don't see how he can handle a child." She sits back, crossing her arms over her chest. "If I were you, dear, I'd think seriously about calling the authorities, and informing them of this behaviour. I know it'll put you out of a job, but it's what's right for the child."

I slowly put my cutlery down, taking a deep breath. "What's wrong with you?" I ask quietly.

She blinks. "What?"

"What's wrong with you?" I repeat. "Why would you imply that Sebastian will hurt his baby?"

She sniffs. "Because I know him, dear. I know what he's like."

I snap. "You *don't* know him! For his entire teen years, you shipped him away!"

"He was an aggressive child. We couldn't handle him."

“You should’ve! You don’t fix pain by ignoring it or beating it out of someone! When a kid is hurt, you don’t *punish* him for it.” I shake my head. “You know, most studies show that behavioural boot camps are actually damaging to young children? Military camps, like the one you sent your son to, focus on physical punishment and *forcing* complete obedience, instead of giving the child the therapy they need to make correct decisions.” She opens her mouth, but I interrupt her. “And I can tell you for a fact, there is *no* behavioural correctional residential that would take a kid every holiday for six years straight. If it takes that long, it obviously isn’t working. Which either means that you were paying the programme off, or you sent him to an unregulated camp—in which case, you were putting your son in real danger. Kids have *died* at unauthorised behavioural residentials. They’ve been physically, mentally and emotionally abused. But you didn’t care, did you?” I wave around at the walls. “You know what I think? I think you were stuck in a relationship for over a decade, and when you finally got a divorce, you wanted your old life back. You wanted to be single and unattached again. You wanted dates, and parties, and expensive holidays. So you sent your own child away, over and over and over again, just so you could mess around like a woman in her twenties, instead of a *mother* with a son who *needed support*. He’d just lost his dad! Of course he was going to be angry! If he wasn’t, he wouldn’t be human!”

There’s a footstep in the doorway. Sebastian stands watching me, a dustpan in his hands, his eyes dark. I know I should shut up, but I can’t. I feel like I’m on fire. Back when I was in care, I saw hundreds of children get abandoned by their parents. Parents who’d promise to visit on weekends, but never show. Parents who’d offer to take their kids out on their birthdays, then cancel last minute. Parents who swore they still loved their children, but treated them like inconveniences.

And it’s not *fair*.

Ellen gapes at me. “Don’t speak to me like that! You have *no* idea what he was like—”

I cut her off. “I know that he was a kid, and you punished him for his emotions. You punished him so badly, he’s still scared to feel things. For God’s sake, the man practically had a panic attack when I asked him to *burp his baby*. You’ve made him believe he’s some kind of a monster, when

really, *you* were the one treating him like utter shit. Sebastian is a *perfect* father to Cami. He's been adaptable and loving and gentle with her. He's not a bad parent. The only bad parent here is *you*."

I break off, breathing hard.

No one says anything. Steve and Ellen's faces are slack. Sebastian is leaning against the doorframe like he needs it to stay upright. In the middle of it all, Cami's falling asleep with mashed potato all over her cheeks.

As the seconds pass, embarrassment starts to rush through me. What the Hell is wrong with me? This whole trip was about building a relationship between Cami and her grandparents, and I just ruined it. I *ruined* it.

My chest suddenly feels too tight. My cheeks are burning. My throat swells. I have to get out of here.

I take a step back, almost tripping when my foot tangles with the leg of my chair. "I. Um. Could you please tell me where your bathroom is?" I croak.

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FORTY-THREE

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SEBASTIAN

Steve is the first one to break the silence. “Upstairs,” he mutters, pouring himself some more wine. “First door on the left.”

“Thank you,” Beth squeaks, turning and running out of the room. I listen to her footsteps disappearing. Her words echo in my head, over and over and over again.

“*Well...*” My mother says, pressing her napkin to her lips. “I think you need some lessons in finding good help.”

I don’t say anything. My heart is pounding in my chest. I turn slowly to Steve, watching him eat.

I used to hate this man with every molecule of my being. For screwing up my family. For turning my mother against me. I hated him so much, I’ve barely ever even spoken to him. Whenever I was home from camp, we would just ignore each other.

I should have talked to him, I realise.

One thing about my step-dad; he doesn’t lie. He’s the bluntest man I’ve ever met. All he really gives a shit about is work and stocks. He can’t be assed with trying to get along with people. If you ask him a question, he either ignores it, or answers it straight-up.

“Is it true?” I ask. “Were you just trying to get me out of the way?”

He puts down his wine glass. “Before I married Ellen, I told her I wanted a wife, not a problem child. I didn’t want you around the house. I wasn’t coming home from work every day to some angsty teenager moping around, hating my guts.”

I nod slowly. “Thanks.”

He shrugs, taking another bite of chicken. Mum’s mouth falls open. “Steven!

Don't say that!"

He rolls his eyes. "He's a man, now, Ellen. He can see the truth for himself. There's no point lying to him. Stop defending yourself for something you did twenty years ago and move on."

"But—"

"He's right," I tell her. "If you wanted to stand up for me, you should've done it when I was a kid." I glance over at Steve. "So, what? The therapy, the military camp—it was just to get me out of your way? Couldn't you just send me to boarding school, or something?"

He takes another bite of potato. "Her idea," he mutters. "I told her that if you ever hit me again, I'd leave her. She thought the boot camp would work."

"Steven!" My mum hisses. "What the Hell are you saying?" She whirls on me. "I always did my best for you, Sebastian."

"You picked your boyfriend over me," I point out. "If that was your best, it was pretty crap." I look down at Cami. She's nodding off in her high chair. I stroke back some hair that's stuck to her damp cheek, and she clutches my finger, not opening her eyes.

"You want a nap?" I ask her, standing and carefully lifting her out of the high chair. She flops over my shoulder, breathing tiny breaths against my neck as I carry her into the lounge. Beth packed a foldable cot, so I set her down in her car seat while I pull it out of my bag. As I erect it, a memory sparks in the back of my head. I remember a conversation I had with a drill sergeant back in my first year at the boot camp. He'd called me to his office after dinner and sat me down opposite him. I sit back on my haunches, frowning as the memory blooms.

"Why the fuck are you here, Bright?" Sergeant Carson barks, glaring at me from across the desk.

I just stare at him. "You asked me here, sir."

He huffs impatiently. "Not in my office. Why. The. Fuck. Are. You. Here?" He repeats. I don't know what to say, so I keep my mouth shut. He sighs. "This is a behavioural correction facility. Ever since the day you got here,

you've been holding open doors, saying please and thank you, and smiling at the canteen lady. We've had kids stay here for years, and most of them don't come out as polite and well-behaved as you were on your first damn day. So I want to know, why the hell did your mum and dad send you here?"

I scuff my boot against the floor. "I'm violent," I mutter.

"You're twelve. What did you do, rugby tackle someone too hard?"

"I punched my mum's boyfriend. Knocked out one of his teeth."

His eyebrows raise. "A weedy thing like you? What, was he a fuckin' geriatric?"

"No, sir."

"He deserve it?"

"No, sir."

He sighs heavily. "I want to sign you off. There's nothing we can do for you here. Your parents may as well save their money."

My eyes widen. "No. Please, don't." Mum's told me a thousand times that I'm lucky to be here. She says that Steve wanted to call the police when I hit him, but she convinced him that I could be sent away to a boot camp instead. God knows what will happen to me if I get sent home.

Sergeant Carson's eyes are hard as granite. "You seriously prefer military camp to your own home? With two-minute cold showers and four hours of chores a day? No video games, no TV, no girls? You prefer it like this?"

I nod. There's no question. I don't want to go back home. They don't want me there. Not my mum, or my dad. Not even Steve. There's nothing for me back home.

For a second, sadness flashes over his face. He nods, standing. "Fine. Then you don't go back. Back in line."

There's a footstep behind me, and I blink out of my trance.

"I washed your old crib blankets," my mum says quietly. "You always liked them more than a mattress pad." She offers me a folded pile of linen. I

consider for a moment, then take them.

“Thanks.”

She sits on the sofa and watches as I carefully make up the cot, then settle Cami down in the new sheets, stroking a bit of drool off her tiny cheek.

“Sebastian,” she starts, hesitantly, “about what Steven said.”

“I don’t care,” I say. “I really don’t care, Mum.”

It’s the truth. I’m not even mad anymore. “I don’t care about how you treated me. I don’t care if you were right, or wrong, or if you had your reasons, or if you’re sorry. It doesn’t matter. All I care about is Cami, now.”

She scoffs. “Oh, please. You just found out that the girl exists.”

“And she’s everything,” I interrupt her. “Everything.” I stare at Cami’s sleeping face. Emotion rushes over me, squeezing my throat. “None of this was her fault,” I say quietly. “Say what you want about me. Say what you want about her mother. But Cami is a child. *My* child. Nothing that has happened to her is her fault. And I love her. I want her to have—everything.”

She’s silent for a long time. “Why did you bring her here today, Sebastian?” She asks eventually. “You’ve not wanted anything to do with me since your father left. So why are you here now?”

I frown. “That’s not true.”

“It is.” I look up at her. Her grey eyes are faraway. “He was always your favourite. You hated me, after he left. You blamed me for the divorce. And when I tried to find someone new, to rebuild the family again—you hated me even more. I could never do anything right.”

“I didn’t hate you.”

“You used to beg me to track your father down so he could have custody over you.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “Do you have any idea how that felt? My husband didn’t want me. My kid didn’t want me. Steven was the only one who gave a shit if I was dead or alive. What was I meant to do?”

I swallow the urge to sigh. “I brought Cami here because she deserves a family. She’s not in contact with any relatives on her mother’s side. She doesn’t have any aunts, or uncles, or cousins. I want her to have a

grandmother.” My tone hardens. “But if I catch you lying to her, or manipulating her, or gaslighting her into thinking that she’s something that she isn’t—you’ll never see her again. Never. You won’t get a second chance on this. Do not treat her like you treated me.” I stand. “I’m going to check on Beth. Do you want to watch her?”

“I...” She looks down at Cami. She’s sleeping like a little angel, her plump cheeks pink. “Yes. Okay.”

“Okay.” I give Cami’s hair one last stroke, then go to find my nanny.

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FORTY-FOUR

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SEBASTIAN

When I get upstairs, I head straight to the bathroom. It's locked. I knock on the door. "Beth? Are you okay?"

She snuffles inside. My stomach drops. Christ, is she *crying* in there?

"Beth." I knock again. "Open the door."

There's a sigh, the sound of a tap running, and then the lock clicks. Beth pulls the door open and blinks up at me. Her cheeks and nose are pink, and her eyes are shiny. I don't even think before I pull her into my arms. She's so soft it's shocking; her skin, her breasts, her *hair* all press against me, and I may as well be drowning in an apple-cinnamon scented comforter.

"Why are you crying?" I whisper into her hair.

She laughs, wiping her eyes. "I don't know. Maybe I'm PMSing, or something. I cried when I ran out of milk this morning." She sighs, pulling away. "I can't believe I got that angry. I am so, so sorry, Seb."

I stare at her, disbelieving. She's *sorry*. Sorry, for being the first person to stand up for me in my entire life.

"Come here." I take her hand and lead her down the hallway, pushing open the door to my old bedroom. It's been left practically untouched since I moved out, like a time capsule of my childhood years. My old film posters are still on the wall, and my bookshelves are full of sci-fi paperbacks. There's a row of collectible model cars lined up on my windowsill.

Beth looks around and laughs tearily. "Holy shit," she whispers. "You're a nerd, too."

I push her gently onto the mattress and sit down next to her, thumbing away the tear tracks on her cheeks. "Why are you upset?"

"I'm more embarrassed, I guess. That was really inappropriate." She looks

down at her hands. “This whole visit was supposed to be about Cami, and I ruined it for her. I’ve hurt her relationship with her grandparents.” I don’t say anything. My heart is beating painfully hard in my chest. “I just got so *mad*,” she murmurs. “Sebastian, they treated you like *shit*. And even now you’re grown up, they’re still trying to get into your head. It’s not *fair*. I—”

I can’t hold back anymore. All of the energy simmering in my body finally releases, and I lean forward, cupping her cheeks in both hands and crushing our mouths together.

It’s not a long kiss—just one hot, hard press of lips—but when I pull away, Beth gasps for air like she’s been underwater.

“What?” she asks breathlessly. Her eyes are fuzzy and out of focus as she looks at me.

“Thank you,” I tell her quietly, sliding my cheek against hers. “Thank you.”

“What... I... you’re not mad?” Her breath hitches as I nuzzle the side of her jaw. She sways into me, leaning against my chest.

“Not at all.” I trail my lips across the side of her pink mouth. Now that I’ve started kissing her, apparently I can’t stop. “Beth. My whole childhood, I thought there was something *wrong* with me.”

“There wasn’t,” she whispers. “You weren’t the problem, Seb.”

I kiss her again, and this time, she kisses me back with abandon, fisting a hand in the front of my shirt and meeting my lips stroke for stroke. Our mouths go from tentative to desperate, and the kiss gets hot and heavy fast. She falls across my front, and I kiss her and kiss her and kiss her, our tongues sliding together, pouring out weeks’ work of want and lust and frustration.

Christ. I knew Beth was interested in me—the girl couldn’t hide her emotions to save her life—but I never dared to dream that she wanted me just as much as I want her.

“You’re okay leaving Cami downstairs?” She breathes between kisses.

I nod against her mouth. “She’s asleep. I’m hoping some alone time together will help bring Mum around.” I press a little sucking kiss at the crook of her neck, and her eyelashes flutter.

“Cami does have that effect,” she agrees, tipping her head back to give me

better access. Taking the hint, I trail my mouth down the soft curve of her neck, sucking at the pulse beating under the thin skin. She shivers deliciously, and my heart catches in my chest. I can't believe that I've been missing out on *this*.

My hand is still locked on her thigh. I slide it up an inch, playing with the hem of her dress. She looks down at my fingers, her breath freezing.

"Is this okay?" I murmur, slipping my hand back down again.

She laughs breathlessly. "*Yeah*. It would be more okay if you had a condom."

Wordlessly, I pull my wallet out of my jeans and flip it open, shaking out a little foil packet.

Beth goes still. "Now, why on *Earth* would you bring that to your parents' house?"

"Would you believe me if I told you that Cyrus brings them back from the club and stuffs them into everybody's pockets in case we ever get lucky?"

"Probably."

"He doesn't."

She sucks in a breath, then shuffles around to face me, meeting my eyes. "How long?" She whispers.

"Since I first saw you," I admit. There's no point lying, anymore.

Her pupils bloom. She tips her mouth up for another kiss, and this time it's hotter, deeper. Needier. I slide my hand up to her chest. She's not wearing a bra, and I can feel the softness and warmth of her breasts under the light cotton of her dress. I squeeze slightly, and her head falls back. Red curls cascade over her face.

"Seb," she murmurs.

I pull her closer to me as she trails her palms up the plane of my chest. She undoes my top button and nibbles at my throat. A shudder rolls through my body. I pull her mouth back to mine. We make out like teenagers, running our hands over each other, losing ourselves in the kiss. I don't remember the last time I had a kiss like this. A kiss that makes my lungs ache, because I can't bear the thought of pulling away. Soon, she's shivering and moaning against

me, rocking her hips slightly against my bedspread. My erection is so hard it physically hurts; I palm myself through my trousers, wincing at the thudding throb of blood. I feel like I'm about to split my damn skin.

And who can blame me? This, right here, is what I've been dreaming of for weeks. Ever since Jack and Cyrus invited Beth over for dinner, and I first heard her soft moans filtering through the walls. The past few weeks have been torture. Every night, I lie in bed alone, imagining what's happening on the other side of my bedroom wall.

Not anymore. Now, finally, it's my turn.

I wrap my arms around her waist, and she jolts in surprise as I pull her into my lap. "I've got you," I murmur, and she relaxes against me. My fingers play under the hem of her dress, tickling up her sensitive thighs, tracing over her underwear. It's wet, and made of some soft, slippery material—satin, or silk. I hook my fingers underneath the fabric, cupping her hot core.

"Jesus," she mumbles, pressing her face into my shoulder. I can feel her breath fluttering against the side of my throat. "Jesus, Seb. Please—"

"Please, what?" I ask quietly. "What do you need?"

"Just—" She flexes her hips as I stroke my fingertips up and down her moistening lips, getting them slick and warm. "Touch me. I need you."

I press another kiss to her neck, then gently push my fingers inside her. She makes a crying sound and clenches around me, gripping my fingers. I groan, pushing in closer, digging in deeper. She's so hot and wet inside, like a pool of molten honey. Twisting my wrist, I feel around, stroking her sensitive flesh until my fingertips brush the soft tissue on her inner wall.

"*Oh!*" she gasps, her whole body jerking against mine.

I smile into her hair and start to curl my fingers, massaging the spot. Her mouth falls open, her hips bucking back into me. "Oh," she chokes, "oh, shit, Seb—"

"Shh," I murmur, sliding my fingers free and raising them to my mouth. Her lips part as she watches me suck off her flavour. She tastes hot and musky and sharp. It's enough to make my mouth water.

"God," she whispers, her eyes fixed on me. "Seb, please, I need—"

She's interrupted by my phone ringing. We both freeze. Slowly, I reach into my pocket and draw it out, checking the screen. It's Marcellus, the dumbass investor trying to micromanage my company. I clench my teeth. Fuck. My boss will be pissed off if I just let it ring.

"Pick it up," Beth gasps. "It's fine."

I look at her for a moment. She pulls back, pushing her hair behind her ears, trying to fix her pretty, heart-covered dress back into place. The fabric slides back down her freckled thighs, covering her up primly.

I don't like that. Not at all.

I lean in so my breath tickles in her ear. "Better stay quiet," I mutter, biting her earlobe.

Her eyes widen. "Sebastian, what—"

I slide a hand back under her dress, yanking it up around her hips, and press the *Accept Call* button. "Sebastian Bright," I say politely.

"Bright. It's Marcellus. I wanted to talk to your boss about your pricing in India, but he told me to call you instead." He sounds annoyed.

"He's very busy," I say, keeping my voice neutral. Beth's gold eyes are huge as I slide my fingers back under her panties, stroking through her hot folds. She's even wetter than before, soaking through her underwear. I fight the urge to groan.

"Well, I guess you'll have to lodge my complaint for me, won't you?" Marcellus snips. *"I think what you're doing out there is disgraceful."*

"Oh?" I graze my lips down the curve of Beth's neck, teasing my fingertips around her entrance. She shivers deliciously, squeezing her thighs together. They trap my hand in hot, pillowy softness.

"Look, I get that it's a poor country, or whatever, but I don't see why they should get such a massive discount. You're selling programmes at ninety-five percent lower than in the US or Canada!"

"It's common practice to lower the prices on educational programmes in lower-income countries," I explain patiently. "The royalties in the rest of the world make up for the loss."

He sputters. *“Yes, but you’re not charging fifty percent. You’re barely charging five. You’re not making any money at all.”* He sniffs. *“Frankly, I think it’s racist. You know not everyone in India is poor, right?”*

“It’s widely considered the sixth wealthiest country in the world,” I agree, sucking Beth’s throat. I can feel her pulse hammering under my lips, and bite down a little. She jolts, then looks up at me reproachfully.

Please, she mouths, trying to screw her hot sex down over my palm. I just kiss her cheek, swirling my fingers in her wetness.

“Well, then. I don’t see why they can’t pay fifty fucking dollars for each of the educational programmes, like the rest of us.”

“Because most users can’t afford them.”

“But you just said—”

“You don’t understand the concept of wealth disparity? Most of the people buying our programmes aren’t billionaires, they’re students in public education. Children or teens.”

“Well, I’m sure the parents can pay for them.” He clears his throat pompously. *“I personally think that we should—”*

I tune him out as I finally slide my fingers back inside Beth. She’s sweltering hot and unbelievably soft around me. Her eyes fall shut as I start to finger her, plunging in roughly, getting in as deep as I can. God, she feels good.

I realise Marcellus is done speaking. “There’s a very high rate of commercial piracy in many of these countries, particularly India and Bangladesh,” I recite. “Students are often forced or compelled to buy pirated versions of our programmes, which can be out of date or faulty.” Still sawing my fingers inside her, I stretch out my thumb, gently touching it to Beth’s clit. Her eyes widen. She grips at my shoulders, frantic. “It’s better for everyone involved if we make our prices competitive with pirated copies. That way, we still make some small amount of profit, and the students get the information they need.” As I talk, I play with Beth’s delicate nub. It’s engorged and throbbing, slick with her juices, and so full and ripe I feel like I could pop it like a berry. I roll it with my thumb, and she goes crazy, her whole body arching off the bed. A harsh, shuddering gasp falls out of her mouth.

There's a pause on the line. "*You alright there, Bright?*"

"Shit, spilled my coffee," I lie smoothly. "Can I put you on hold a second?" I press the button, then turn to Beth.

"Hold it." My fingers don't stop moving inside her, scooping the tender tissue of her slick inner wall.

"I can't," she gasps immediately, rutting against my palm. Her face is bright pink, and I can see the strain in every muscle of her body as she shivers against me. "I can't, I can't stop it—"

"You can last until the end of this phone call," I mutter, nosing at her temple. She just moans softly in response as I steal one last kiss, then restart the call.

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FORTY-FIVE

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BETH

“Sorry,” he says, his silvery eyes flashing with amusement. “I thought my nanny was coming.”

If I weren't so turned on, I would probably kick him. Instead, I just bury my face in the crook of his neck and try to breathe as he slicks his fingers in and out of my throbbing pussy. I feel like I'm about to cry. It's too much. I've always been loud during sex, and I've never had to be completely silent while a sexy businessman sits me on his lap and pounds at my sweet spot like a power drill. I squirm on his knees, my whole body shaking.

“Consider it a gesture of goodwill,” Seb says, trapping the phone between his ear and his shoulder. “You don't want to support low-income students struggling to get an education?”

I bite back a groan as he slides his free palm up my stomach, his fingers trailing over my skin.

The knobhead he's speaking to says something else. I can't make out the words, but it sounds like he's getting more and more pissed off. Seb just hums in acknowledgement, cupping my breast. My mouth falls open as he starts to play with it, rolling and squeezing the aching flesh as he finger-fucks me.

“We don't need to declare every charitable act,” Sebastian points out, his voice perfectly even. “That sort of defeats the point of charity, doesn't it?” His hand keeps moving between my legs, and my climax builds up inside me, tightening my belly. God. It feels so *strong*. I don't see how the Hell I'm going to be able to hold it back. I bite my lip, writhing in his lap. Sweat is pouring down the back of my neck, sticking in my hair. Seb kisses my throat silently, and I gape as the heat inside me reaches a fever-pitch. I feel like I'm hanging on the edge of a cliff, looking over the precipice at a canyon thousands of miles below.

I can't do it. I can't hold it back.

I grip his thigh hard, digging my nails in, trying to warn him. He looks on impassively, his lips curling up into a tiny smile.

Screw it. I give up. It's too late. His fingers pump inside me one last time, and I tip over the edge, starting to come.

My climax is so strong it's almost violent. I press my face into his shoulder and start to shake, harder and harder, as the waves of spasming pleasure wrack my body, all of my muscles contracting rhythmically. I squeeze my eyes shut, tears beading behind my eyelids. I'm holding my breath to make sure I don't gasp or pant, and the lack of oxygen is making my head spin.

I feel Seb hiss out a hard breath through clenched teeth. "Something's come up. I'll call you later," he mutters, hanging up and tossing his phone on the bed. He wraps an arm around me, tugging me closer, and presses his fingers even deeper inside of me, fucking me through my release. I finally let myself moan into his neck, soft, desperate noises of pleasure falling out of me as I squirm and shift and shiver over him. I can feel my arousal dripping all over his hand, probably soaking into his sheets.

"Told you to hold it back," he breathes in my ear, his breath hot on my neck.

I glare up at him. "N-next time you have a video call I'm cl-climbing under the -ah! The t-table and sucking you off. See how you handle it."

He dips his head and catches my tit in his mouth, sucking the hard pink pebble hard as he milks the last echoes of my release right out of me, making my spine arch and curve against him as I shudder. He doesn't even wait for me to finish coming before he flips me over and drops his trousers, tugging impatiently at his leather belt.

I reach up to help. There's a *ping* as a button flies off haphazardly, but he doesn't seem to give a shit. Shoving down his underwear, he grabs the shiny wrapper and goes to roll on the rubber. I hold out my hand, stopping him. I want a second to just look at him, naked. He freezes, breathing hard as I run my eyes over his length.

He's big. Not as thick as Jack, but definitely longer. I bite my lip. God. He's going to be able to get so *deep* inside me. I wrap my hand around his length, thrilling at the feel of him; hard and soft at the same time, twitching under my

palm. I start to pump him, gripping him tightly.

“Oh, fuck,” he groans, his head falling back. “Beth, please. I won’t last.”

I smile up at him. “Now you know how it feels,” I point out, running my hand slowly up his shaft. His breath stops in his chest, and he shuts his eyes as I start playing with his balls, rolling them gently in my hands, and then tickling underneath them with my fingertips. His hips jerk. His hands fly down to catch mine.

There’s a thudding sound downstairs, and I hear the muffled voice of his mum. It kind of sounds like she’s singing. Maybe a lullaby?

A pained look crosses Seb’s face. “Shit. How long do you think Cami will sleep?”

I think. “Normally she sleeps over an hour after lunch. But I let her sleep a lot in the car. And she’s in an unfamiliar place. I wouldn’t be surprised if she wakes up soon.”

He swears and pulls my hands away from his bursting hard-on, rolling on the rubber himself. “We’ll have to be quick,” he mutters, flipping me onto my back and landing on top of me. I let out a small *oof* as my head falls on his pillow. “Sorry. I know that’s not very romantic.” He trails his lips down the centre of my throat. “I’ll make it up to you.”

I laugh. “You’re a new parent. I’d expect nothing less.”

“Don’t wanna leave Mum with her when she’s awake,” he explains, kissing across my collarbone, down my cleavage, and drawing a line to my navel. I love the feel of his soft, firm lips against my stomach.

“Mm.” I wrap my legs around his hips, pulling him closer. “A quickie in the family home. I feel like a teenager again.”

“Is it weird?”

I shake my head, trying to tug him closer with my thighs. “I think it’s kinda hot. Like I’ve... unlocked another level of you.”

“A video game metaphor. You’ve been hanging around me and Jack too much. We’re rubbing off on you.”

“*Please*,” I breathe, and he laughs, settling his weight over mine. My lips part

as he pushes his stone-hard member between my thighs and rocks his hips. His shaft slides maddeningly through my slippery folds, rubbing over my aching entrance.

I whimper, squirming. “Seb—”

“Okay?” he murmurs, and I nod frantically.

“Please. Hurry up.”

He cups my cheek, guiding my gaze to his. I stare into his pale grey eyes as he lines up and slowly sinks inside me, sheathing himself in my hot, fluttery centre. Our bodies lock together naturally. He feels incredible; thick and firm, filling me up completely. He groans as he bottoms out inside me.

“Good?” He asks quietly.

“Move,” I order. He laughs and shoves into me, and I gasp, loud and high-pitched. He quickly claps his hand over my mouth, muffling my moans.

“Stay. Quiet,” he growls in my ear. I giggle giddily, digging my feet into his back. He gives me another deep, penetrating kiss, then grabs my wrists in one hand, pinning them over my head as he continues to drive into me, again, and again, and again. My body spasms with every thrust like I’m being electrocuted. He fucks me fast and hard, and after just a couple of minutes, I can feel my self-control dwindling as heat rushes through me again, building in a boiling, churning seawave. My wrists twitch in his grip.

Luckily, he doesn’t seem to be far behind. A bead of sweat collects at his temple and streaks down his face. His movements are getting shaky and uncontrolled.

“Fuck,” he mutters, kissing my neck. “Jesus, Beth. You feel—I—” His breath whispers against my cheek. The tension pulling in my stomach is almost too much to bear. I’m squirming and rubbing myself up against him, desperate to reach my peak.

“Just *come*,” I moan. “Please.”

He dips his head and presses his lips to mine. His balls tighten as he finally lets go, spilling inside of me. Every muscle in his body seems to tense and seize, turning to solid rock. I hold him against me, digging my fingers into his hot skin as lust smacks into me, exploding like a bomb in my face. I surge

forward and muffle my shout of pleasure in his chest.

It's so strong. So strong. My ears are buzzing, my body is bending, my vision is blacking out. And still, I can't stop fucking him. I keep slamming our hips together furiously, grinding myself harder into him, trying to get him deeper inside me, even as I mewl and choke for breath. My climax peaks, starts to fade—and then rises up again, and I'm not sure if it's the same release, or one orgasm rolling right into the next. I spasm with pleasure under Seb, grasping at his shoulders, gasping and writhing as we rub our sweaty bodies together. The bed's headboard slams rhythmically against the wall, but I don't care. I don't care that we're in Seb's childhood home. I don't care that his parents might hear.

I never, ever want this moment to end.

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FORTY-SIX

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SEBASTIAN

When we both finally go limp, we lie still for a moment, panting, our bodies intertwined. My hips are still rocking into her slightly, and she gasps with every tiny press inside her.

I don't know what to say. I don't remember the last time I had sex that good. I'm not sure I ever have. I feel almost high, endorphins pumping through me so hard my head is spinning.

"Beth," I rasp, and she shivers all over, burrowing her face into the pillow.

"Holy shit, Seb," she mumbles. "You're a freaking nuclear weapon."

It was just as good for her, then. Thank God. I nuzzle into her soft curls, breathing in her sweet apple scent. "My dick causes widespread death and destruction?"

"It belongs in a fucking containment facility. Made of concrete. Buried fifty feet underground. Somewhere near the Earth's core, where no poor, innocent girl will accidentally stumble across it and get fucked to pieces." She twitches as an aftershock runs through her. "I think I'm *dead*. My vagina exploded."

I can't help but laugh, pulling her closer, and she relaxes against me. Slowly, cautiously, her little arms sneak around my waist. It takes me a second to realise what she's doing.

She's trying to hug me.

It's so cute I can't help but smile. I gather her up against me, rolling her onto her side so my body is wrapped around hers. She sighs and softens as I start running my fingers through her hair. "This isn't how I thought you'd be in bed," she murmurs.

"Hm?"

"You're usually so uptight. But you're so soft, underneath it all."

“What were you expecting?” I wrap a curl around my finger, tugging it and watching it spring back into place.

“Silent missionary sex where you counted your thrusts and thought about the upcoming tax season to get yourself off.”

I bite her hair, and she laughs. It’s a bright, happy sound, and pride swells inside me. I’ve heard her laugh like that with the others. Jack, and Cyrus, and definitely Cami. But this is the first time I’ve made her this happy. It feels good. Intoxicatingly good. I kiss her shoulder and start sifting through her curls.

I remember Samantha, my old assistant, saying that she hated having curly hair, because she couldn’t brush it without it going puffy. I guess she’s right, because the more I comb through Beth’s hair, the fluffier it gets, exploding into a bright red mane around her small face. It’s the cutest thing I have ever seen. I start spreading the curls over the pillow, tangling my fingers into them.

Beth doesn’t notice. “How come this took so long to happen?” She murmurs, kissing my chest. “You must have heard me screwing Cy and Jack around the flat.” She looks up at me through her lashes. “I was loud on purpose.”

I snort. “I figured. Unlike Cyrus and Jack, my dick is usually at the bottom of my priority list.”

“Poor dick.” She ducks her head under the covers. “Don’t worry, I care about you,” she whispers, wriggling down to give it a kiss.

I grunt and grab her wrist, dragging her, giggling, back up to the pillow. “I just found out I have a kid, I have an app launching in a few weeks, and you’re my employee. It didn’t feel like the right time to... get involved.”

She nods, trailing her fingertips down my bare chest. “Mmm. Very responsible. And now?”

“And now...” I don’t know. Seeing her defend Cami like that—seeing her defend *me*—put our relationship into perspective. Cami loves her. Jack and Cyrus are halfway in love with her. And she obviously cares about all of us. There’s no point holding back from her anymore. “I think you belong with us,” I say quietly. “With all of us.”

She goes stiff.

I glance down at her. “What?”

“Nothing,” she says quickly.

“What is it?”

“*Nothing.*”

“Beth—” I’m about to push it, but there’s a sudden cry from downstairs, and I tense, sitting up.

Beth slips out of bed. “I believe that’s our cue.”

I follow suit, tugging my trousers and shirt back on. Beth straightens up her dress, then goes to check herself in the mirror. Her mouth falls open. “What did you *do*?” She cries, horrified.

I glance up from my belt. “What?”

“Could you not have fucked me a bit more discreetly?” She starts frantically finger-combing through her bright red curls.

I frown. I liked her hair fluffy. “You look fine.”

She glares at me. “I look like I’ve just had my *employer* pull on my hair while he fucked me in his childhood bedroom! What the Hell are your parents going to think?”

“That you had a nap.” I button my collar. “I told them you were tired from the drive.”

She scoffs. “Oh yeah, I’m sure they’re going to believe that. *My nanny got really tired from yelling at you, so she took a nap and then got mildly electrocuted, thanks for a lovely dinner?*” She shakes her head and looks frantically around the room, her eyes fixing on a stack of rolled-up posters. She grabs one and pulls off the rubber band holding it together. I watch, amused, as she twists her hair back into a knot.

“Do you want to take your underwear, too?” I offer. “I think that might be a better hint than your hair.”

She looks around, wide-eyed, and spots her little pink briefs curled on the foot of my bed. She flushes and picks them up, shoving them at me. “Put

them in your pocket,” she demands.

I almost choke on my tongue. “What?”

She scowls. “I can’t *put them on*, I don’t want a damn yeast infection. And I’m a woman, I don’t have pockets.” When I don’t move, she just huffs, balling them up and stuffing them in my trouser pocket. “If you’re not going to take my panties off before you finger me, you should at least have the decency to launder them,” she mutters. “These were forty quid, I’m not just throwing them away—”

I cup her neck and pull her into another kiss. She sighs, melting against my front. I wait until she’s nice and relaxed, then slide my hand into her bun and snap the rubber band. Her hair falls out in a fluffy red cloud.

“*Seb!*”

I kiss her again, then head to the door to go pick up my daughter. I feel lighter than I have in weeks.

FORTY-SEVEN

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BETH

By the time we get back home, it's evening, and everyone is exhausted. Seb and I both put Cami to bed, then we make some tea and migrate to the sofa. I curl up under his arm, my head on his chest.

Mary Berry discusses batter consistencies on the telly, and I watch the light from the screen flicker across Sebastian's chiselled face. His words echo in my head. *I think you belong with us. With all of us.* Fear expands inside me, and I push it down fiercely.

I don't remember the last time I really belonged with anyone. I don't know if I ever have. I can't bring myself to believe he really meant it. He was probably just happy and post-coital.

He glances down at me. "What is it?"

"Nothing." I look at the TV and sigh. "That soggy-bottomed flan just made me super sad."

He squeezes me closer. "Beth," he growls, and I squirm as the low rumble vibrates through me.

I reach out and take his hand, playing with his fingers. "I still can't believe they treated you like that," I say quietly. "I can't believe they made you feel so awful about yourself."

It's funny; I spent all my childhood so jealous of other kids, who had parents, and houses, and siblings. That's all I wanted. Back then, it never even crossed my mind that someone could have a family that hurt them.

He lifts my hand, pressing a kiss to my knuckles. "Don't feel bad. That was the best trip to my parents I've ever had."

"But—"

"Stop *worrying*," he murmurs. I open my mouth to argue, but he shuts me up

with a kiss. It's a very efficient tactic. I melt into goo as he crushes our lips together possessively, curling his tongue against mine.

The front door suddenly slams open, and we both jump. Cyrus strides into the flat, his hair sticking up and his face like thunder. There are still streaks of baby oil shining on his arms, like he hasn't cleaned himself off yet. I frown, checking the clock. His shift barely started. "Cyrus?"

He doesn't say anything, kicking off his shoes and tossing his keys noisily on the counter. "Do we have any booze harder than a bloody Carlsberg?" He demands.

Sebastian and I share a look. "I put a bottle of white in the fridge," I say slowly.

He nods and storms over to the fridge, yanking open the door and pulling out the wine. Seb and I both watch as he sloshes a third of the bottle into a glass, gulps it down, and refills the glass. He swallows another mouthful, then freezes, looking at me. "Uh. I can drink this, right?"

I slip off the sofa and go to join him, putting my hand on his arm. He's tense, all of his muscles vibrating with energy.

"Cy," I say softly. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

He pulls away from me and takes another deep glug of wine. "This, this fucking *girl*—" he throws his arms out, exasperated. "Look. I'm used to girls getting handsy onstage. They're not supposed to, I don't *love it*, but I *am* shoving my bits in their face. It's why I wear the sock, in case some horny fan decides it's okay to pull my underwear off." I frown. I don't like where this is going. "That's one thing," he continues, "but this *girl* came backstage, followed me into the bathrooms, and literally walked into my shower cubicle while I was butt-ass naked."

My mouth falls open. "Oh my *God*. Are you okay?!"

"I'm not upset. Just *pissed*." He kicks the table leg, his jaw clenched.

"Did she touch you?"

"No. I yelled, and security got in there quick."

I reach for him. "Oh, Cy, that's *awful*."

He turns on me suddenly. His dark eyes are burning with intensity. “You know why it pissed me off so much?” He demands.

“... Because you were violated?”

“No. Because it made me think of you.”

I pout. “I thought you liked it when I visited you in the shower.”

“Not like that.” He heaves a sigh, running a hand over his face. He looks exhausted. “Does it bother you? What I do?”

“Oh my *God*, are we having this conversation again? No, I do not care that you take your kit off onstage.”

“I’m not talking about the *dancing*,” he insists. “I’m talking about the *women*. Me touching women. Me picking women up and tossing them around. Grinding one inch from their faces. Letting them rub baby oil over my chest.” He wipes a hand over his mouth. “I like you, Beth. And it feels really unfair to sleep with you every single night, but still let other women grab my junk.”

“Yeah, but it’s just a performance, right? Choreographed. You’re not really Cyrus up there, you’re *Randy Romeo*. The girls are just part of your routine. If you were an actor, I wouldn’t get mad at you for kissing your co-star.” He doesn’t say anything. I reach up and touch his face, grazing my fingers down the line of his smooth jaw. “I appreciate you checking how I feel. I get why it would bother some people, but you don’t have to worry about me. I love that you have a job that you love. I love that you entertain people. And I love that you come home to me,” I take his hand, putting it on my hip. “And I get the real deal. I’d never want you to stop doing what you love for me.”

His eyes rove over my face. “I would,” he blurts out. “I stopped for Chloe.”

“And?”

His shoulders slump slightly. “It wasn’t enough. She was still jealous. She still didn’t trust me. I’d given up my whole career for her, switched back to bartending instead, and she still thought I was probably picking girls up at the bar. Because that’s just what men like me do.”

“She should have trusted you,” I say honestly. “I can’t even imagine you cheating on someone.”

His dark eyes flare. He pulls me even closer. “You’re really not jealous?” He

asks quietly.

I snort. “Cy, I’ve seen the women at those shows. They’re all drunk, most of them have, like, *penises* drawn on their faces because they’re at a hen do, and they spend the whole night yelling at you to get your junk out. I don’t think there’s much competition.”

He cups my cheek. “None. There’s none.”

I sigh as he kisses me softly, his mouth hot and gentle. His big hands slide off my hips and down to my bum, giving me a little squeeze. I had sex less than four hours ago, but I still feel a flutter of desire between my legs. All I want to do is grab Cy by the collar and drag him to the nearest bedroom, but as he tentatively nudges my mouth open with his, I can still feel that something’s off. He’s still feeling insecure about something. And I don’t really think that sex is going to fix it.

“Since you’ve got the night off,” I whisper against his lips, “do you wanna go out?”

He blinks. “What?”

I thread my fingers through his silky hair. “You. Me. Cheesy chips from that dodgy van on the corner and a moonlit stroll by the river.” I glance back at Sebastian, who’s still sitting on the sofa, watching us like we’re an episode of his favourite soap opera. “That okay?”

He nods, his lips tugging up like he’s trying not to smile. “I think that’s a great idea.”

Cyrus pulls me closer. “You asking me on a date, Bethie?” He purrs.

“I sure am.”

His nose nudges mine. “Why?”

“Because you’ve had a hard night, and I fancy the pants off you.” I step back, clenching my thighs together under my dress. “Come on. Get your coat. Let’s hit the town.”

FORTY-EIGHT

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CYRUS

Beth and I end up walking through central London, following the curving line of the Thames. We've picked up cans of beer, a chicken and mushroom pie, and a massive portion of hot cheesy chips. The pie is long gone by the time we pass Shakespeare's Globe, and we're steadily working through the chips. The garden pub outside the theatre is filled with raucous laughter, as hipsters and Shakespeare-nuts swig mojitos and watch the city lights reflecting off the river.

"So." I elbow Beth as we walk. "You and Seb, huh?" She blushes prettily, and I laugh. "It was bound to happen eventually. He's been into you ever since you first walked into our flat."

"And you don't mind?" She checks, anxiety tensing her face.

"*Mind?* Baby, everything is about to get so much better." I tug at her hair. "*Especially* for you."

Her flush deepens. She nabs the cheesiest chip out of my fingers and smiles sweetly when I glare at her.

A cry goes up in the distance, and we both turn and watch as fireworks start flashing through the sky further down the river. Big bursts of red and gold and green, showering sparks down over the water. I know from experience that they're coming from Trafalgar Square. I take another deep drag of beer, watching the bright lights pop and scatter.

"What do you think the fireworks are for?" Beth asks through a mouthful of melted cheddar.

"Eid. Ramadan just ended."

She looks up at me, licking grease off her fingers. "How do you know that?"

"My grandparents are Muslim."

“Did you used to celebrate Eid?”

I nod. “My whole family did. Everyone will probably be in Trafalgar right now, watching the show.”

It’s weird to know that they’re so close. I could potentially go and join them. It’s just a twenty-minute ride on the Tube. In twenty minutes, I could be huddled up with them, staring up at the fireworks like when I was a little kid.

She glances up at me. “But not you?”

“Nope. Wasn’t invited.”

“Because of your job?”

“Among other things.” I scuff my feet against the pavement. “I believe being a ‘lazy sponger’ was also cited as a reason.” My voice is bitter.

“Lazy?” She tilts her head. “Is that why you got so upset with me a couple weeks ago? When I thought you didn’t work?”

I give her a grim smile, nabbing a chip. “Sorry. Sore spot.”

She laughs. “I’ll say. For the record, it’s pretty shitty to get annoyed at me for thinking that you’re unemployed when *you’re literally hiding your job* from me.”

I groan. “I know. I was a knob. Just hit too close to home, I guess.”

She links her arm through mine. “Why do they think you’re lazy?”

“Don’t you?”

“Um, no.” Her cheeks colour. “I think your job has you working up a pretty solid sweat.”

God, she’s so cute. “But it’s easy,” I protest. “Stripping is easier than office jobs. It’s easier than working a nine-to-five, then going home and spending all night working overtime. Like Seb and Jack.”

She wrinkles her nose. “Not for me. I’d find working an office job a million times easier. Especially at the level you do it.” She pops another chip in her mouth. “How did you get started with dancing, anyway? Jack said you met at uni. You didn’t want a job in Com Sci?”

“That was originally the plan.” We start walking again, trailing slowly down

the street. “My mum’s a GP, my dad is an orthopaedic surgeon. They assumed I’d take my degree and work for NASA, or the CIA, or some shit.”

She pulls a face.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She stabs a chip and pokes it at my mouth. “I just can’t imagine you sitting behind a desk, is all.”

My lip twists. “Well, neither could I. I tried, though.” Fuck, did I try. I look out at the water, watching the coloured lights flash over the surface.

She puts her head on my arm. “Cy?”

“I never graduated,” I admit. “Dropped out in my fourth year, a few months before my final exams.”

She frowns. “You didn’t like it?”

“It wasn’t just that I didn’t like it. I couldn’t *do* it. I—” My mouth is suddenly dry. I take another sip of beer, my palms sweating around the can. “I have dyslexia.”

I don’t know why it’s so hard to say. I know Beth won’t care. She’s probably looked after tons of kids with learning disabilities.

Which I guess is the issue. I’m not a bloody *kid*.

She nods, her face sympathetic. “The university didn’t give you any support?”

“I didn’t tell them. I was embarrassed. I know, it was stupid.” I rub the back of my neck, my cheeks heating. I hate talking about this. “It’s just—I was so used to it being this shameful thing. My parents *hated* that their child had ‘special needs’. We were part of this big ex-pat Bengali community, and all of their friends’ kids were getting top grades, becoming lawyers and doctors and pharmacists. And their kid couldn’t even spell the word *through*.” I can feel her eyes on me, warm and kind, but I can’t bring myself to look at her. “I was diagnosed when I was ten, but they wouldn’t believe it. They dragged me around all of these different specialists and doctors, trying to work out why I was so bad in school. They gave me eye tests. Hearing tests. Blood tests. I had MRI scans. They’d rather I had a goddamn *brain tumour* than a learning disability. And obviously, everything came up clear.” I lower my voice.

“Sorry, Mr and Mrs Rhaman. I’m sad to say that your son is perfectly healthy, he’s just stupid.”

“Oh, Cy.” She scratches her nails lightly over my forearm. It feels surprisingly comforting.

I take a deep breath. “I hated school, but there was no question of me not going to uni. Everyone in my family did. I picked Com Sci, because I figured it would be mostly numbers. No one would need to know how shitty I was at writing.” I snort. “I could only ever scrape a pass. It was just—fucking impossible. There were like, ten textbooks for each class, and they were all five inches thick, and the text was really tiny and dry. They didn’t have audiobooks or ebooks, so I couldn’t listen to them. I’d look around, and Jack and Seb were just *reading* the chapters like normal people, and I’d spend an hour trying to work out one page. It was like being told, *hey, you’re an idiot* every day for four straight years.” I look out at the river, but I don’t see anything. “The first couple years weren’t too bad, but by the third year, I just got depressed. Like, so *fucking* depressed. I’d never felt like that before. It was the worst time of my life. By the time we were studying for our final exams, I knew I wasn’t going to pass. I knew there was no point even trying. And I couldn’t find the energy to get out of bed and study, anyway. So I dropped out.”

She takes my hand. “Cy. I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t even know why I’m telling you this.” I say. “I might be kinda drunk.”

Her lip curls up. “Please. You’re not *drunk*,” she says smugly. “You’re telling me because you *fancy* me.”

“That is true,” I admit, and she beams, hooking her arm through mine and tugging me down the street. “So, you left uni. What then?”

“I moved out with Jack and Seb. While they finished up their masters’, I spent a year bartending, looking for jobs. My dad got more and more pissed off at me. Kept insisting that I go back to university. When I told him I didn’t want to work in Com Sci anymore, he said I should just grit my teeth and deal with it. Said that everyone works jobs that they hate.” I frown. “And, yeah, lots of people do, but I don’t really think it’s something I should be *aspiring* to, right? It’s still shitty. I *hated* Com Sci. Even now, just thinking

about it stresses me out.”

She nods, her eyes wide. “Especially if it was messing with your mental health. That’s way more important than a higher paycheck.”

“Right.” I kick a stone across the curb. “One night I picked up a bar shift for a friend at the Magic Nights Show. I saw *one* show, and it was like,” I click my fingers. “*That’s* the job made for me. Entertainment. Sex. Dancing. Nightclubs. Women. *That’s* my element. I auditioned and got hired on the spot. Once I started, I became one of the most popular dancers. It was so odd, to be the best at something.” She smiles, fiddling with one of the bracelets on my wrist. I sigh. “I’d worked there a year, and then the show decided to advertise their new cast. My mum called me and asked me why there was a picture of her son in his boxers on a billboard in her local tube station.”

She stops walking. “*Shit.*”

I nod. “There was a very long shouting match. I tried to tell them that this is what made me happy. And they told me to never contact them again. Haven’t spoken to them since.”

She looks heartbroken. “Cy, that’s awful. I’m so sorry.” She hugs my arm like a teddy bear.

“It’s not a big deal. I’m an adult. I moved out a long time ago. It’s not like I need them anymore.” I nod up at the sky. “It’s just days like these that get to me. When I know my whole family is getting together and celebrating, but I’ve been... Erased from the picture.”

“Getting rejected by your family hurts, Cy. It’s one of the deepest rejections there is. You’re allowed to be upset about it.” She gives me a little smile. “Trust me. I’m an expert.”

My chest aches. I thread my fingers through her red hair, watching it catch the colours of the lights over the water.

She turns her cheek into my hand. “Is all of your family unsupportive? ”

“No. My sisters think it’s hilarious. Lucy keeps trying to get me to take her backstage to meet the guys. She’s in love with Harrison.”

“Good.” She comes to stand in front of me. “That’s the way it should be. Your family should be happy that you’re happy. I am.”

I look down at her, emotion running through me.

She tilts up her face and kisses me. It's an unbelievably gentle kiss; slow and soft and tender. It's nothing more than a chaste peck, but when she pulls back, my head is swimming and my balls are thumping with blood.

I think for a moment, then take the empty chip paper and ball it up, tossing it into a nearby bin. "Come with me." I reach for her hand. "I want to show you something."

Bemused, she lets me lead her through the streets, away from the bright lights and the Thames. We come to an Underground station, and I lead her around it until we reach the billboard advertisements.

Her mouth falls open. "Oh. My. God." She takes a step back to take in the full picture.

I suppose it's a lot to process. Plastered on the billboard, fifteen feet high, is a photograph of me in my boxers, hands on my hips, smirking at the camera. Four of the other guys are behind me: Harry, Aaron, Samuel and Lei, all posing in cop costumes. Purple spotlights stream down over us. *Magic Nights: Book Tickets Now!* is printed over our abs in gold lettering.

"Oh my God," Beth repeats. "You're famous!"

"I can't believe you've never seen it. There are loads up near the West End."

"Oh my God, *please* take a picture of me with it," she squeaks, shoving her phone in my hands. "Please, please, *please*."

I laugh as she scurries over to the poster and poses by it. Even in the cooling night air, my whole body feels warm.

I won't apologise for my job. I truly believe there's nothing wrong with it, and I love doing it. But I'm so used to people judging me for what I do. Making assumptions about who I am.

And she doesn't.

Your family should be happy that you're happy. I am.

Fireworks flash and bang in the distance, echoing over London, but as I lift the phone and snap a shot of Beth pretending to kiss my abs, all I can hear is my heartbeat pounding in my ears.

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FORTY-NINE

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JACK

I press the *submit app* button, then sit back and just stare at my computer. The pixels on the screen glow and blur, smudging together. My chest is tight, and my heart is beating too fast. Caffeine wires through my veins.

I'm finished. The game is done.

I mean, realistically, it's probably not *done*. I'm sure as soon as it launches, I'm going to remember a million little bugs in the code that I missed. And then the reviews are going to start rolling in. We'll be inundated by one-stars complaining about glitches. The critics will latch on to them. People will realise the first game's success was a fluke. Fans will be disappointed. We'll be thrown off the conference. And it will all be my fault.

My hands start to sweat. Hissing in a breath between my teeth, I drag my keyboard closer. It's too late to change the code now, but maybe, if I can just find the errors, I'll be able to fix them after release without too many people seeing them.

"Deadline's up. It's done," a voice comes from behind me. I jump, turning to see Beth standing in my doorway. She looks gorgeous, dressed in one of Cyrus's old shirts, her hair tangled around her head.

"Beth?" I blink at her like she's a mirage. "What are you doing here? Isn't it the weekend?"

"You are so cute," she says, smiling widely.

"Wha—"

I trail off as she practically skips into the room and cups my face. I jerk under her touch, shocked at the sudden contact. "You look like an owl," she whispers. "A very confused owl."

"Oh."

She presses a kiss to my hair, then slides into my lap, winding her arms around my neck. I groan as I feel her softness melt against me. It's been two weeks since we got the invitation to the AGAME summit, and I've only touched her a handful of times since.

"I missed you," she says, running a hand through my hair.

"I miss you, too," I mumble.

For some reason, that makes her laugh. "You are a shell of a human being." She pulls away, leaning over my shoulder to gently push away my keyboard. "Right. That's it. We're celebrating. With real food. And wine. And sex, if you're up to it." She kisses me gently on the lips.

I suddenly remember how gross I am. "Don't," I groan, trying to pull away. "I need a shower." And probably to brush my teeth. With all of the espressos I've been chugging, my breath probably tastes like the butt end of a french press.

She perks up. "Can I help you?"

I blink blearily. "Brush my teeth?"

"What? No, shower."

"Yes."

She grins and tugs me upright, pulling me out of my spinny office chair. The next thing I know, I'm in the bright, shiny bathroom, and Beth is standing in front of me, unbuttoning my shirt.

I look around. "Um."

"I think you just fell asleep standing up," she says, sounding impressed.

"Like a horse?"

She laughs. "Sure. Like a horse. A stud. A sexy, sleepy stallion." Her voice is kind of echoing in my head. Which probably isn't great. Maybe I should go to bed.

"I think they're called microsleeps," she says, pushing my shirt off my shoulders and sliding her hands over my bare chest. "Hey, don't they say if you've stayed awake for three days, you can claim insanity in court? Wanna go rob a bank after this?"

Something tells me that's not right. "I'm not that tired," I tell her, and then stare at her suddenly naked breasts. "When did you take your top off?" My eyes follow the soft, white curves of her freckled body. My mouth waters.

She giggles. "Wow. You are a *wreck*, honey." She kicks off her shorts, then turns and switches on the shower. I watch her lean thighs and tight, muscled butt as she stretches to test the water temperature. "You need me to take off your pants too?" She says over her shoulder.

I blink back to reality and shove off my joggers and underwear. I've got that weird, disconnected feeling I always get when I've been staring at a screen for too long; like the real world is a video game, and my body is just a character I'm controlling. Steam starts flowing into the room, and Beth takes my hand, leading me into the cubicle. "It's fine," she murmurs, pushing me against the steamed-up tile. It's cold against my back as she turns the gentle spray to a hot, flooding downpour. "Just relax."

I want to protest, but my brain feels heavy, and all of my muscles are softening to plasticine under the hot water. She pours some soap into her hand and lathers it up into a soft foam.

I close my eyes and tip my head back against the wall. "You're a dream," I mumble. "Dream-girl."

"Mm. That's me. Dreamy AF." She bends forward and kisses my chest. "I'm so proud of you," she whispers. "You've worked so hard. And you've done so good." She starts massaging bubbles into my chest.

"You don't know that," I point out, frowning as anxiety seeps through me like acid. "I know I missed something." I always miss something. No matter how hard I try, if I pour every ounce of myself into a project, I can never, ever get it perfect. It always ends up flawed.

I rub my eyes. Fuck, I didn't re-check the coding for the background of the Emerald Lagoon scene, the waterfall graphics are probably going to keep glitching, and now everyone is going to *see*—

Small, warm hands cup my cheeks, and golden-brown eyes burn into mine. "Stop it," Beth says, kissing me firmly. "Baby, you do realise that your bad days look like most peoples' good days, right? You got this."

"How do you *know* that?"

“I’m familiar with your work,” she reminds me. “I finished Legend of Azaran last week.”

I double-take. “You did?” I know that she checked it out, but I didn’t expect her to play it the whole way through. I thought she was just being supportive when she downloaded it.

She nods. “Been playing it while Cami naps. It was incredible. But I hate you for putting that maze in.”

I laugh. “The trick is to draw the maze out as you go,” I explain. “If you get some graph paper, you can keep track of the rooms with keys or traps. If you’re not keeping note, you don’t have a chance.”

“Yes, well, I worked that out after about two hours.”

“Or,” I say, picking up a wet red curl, “if you’d talked to the cartographer in level eight, he would’ve given you a map.”

Her mouth falls open. “Are you kidding me?”

“All of the puzzles have multiple solutions, Beth.”

“But—I thought he was a red herring! His dialogue was just pointless backstory!”

“Sure. But I wouldn’t programme an entirely useless character. If you’d listened to him ramble on for a few minutes, he would’ve been so grateful, he’d have given you the map for free.”

She pinches my hip. “I spent hours on that stupid maze, you smug bastard!”

I laugh and dip my head to kiss her. My feet somehow slip on the tile, and she squeaks as my body presses against hers, pinning her to the wall. Her wet cleavage squashes against my chest, and I wince as I feel myself hardening against her soft stomach.

“Ugh. Maybe you’re right. I do need to sleep.”

She hums, flattening her hands on my chest and pushing me back into the wall. “Don’t worry about it,” she whispers, kissing my stomach. “Just relax.”

I don’t have much choice—I’m completely drained. I slump back against the tile as she kisses her way down my body, her wet skin sliding over mine, until she finally drops to her knees between my legs.

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FIFTY

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JACK

My eyes widen. “Beth, you don’t have to—”

“Shh.” She licks a bead of water off my thigh, then traces her tongue down the line of my hip. “You’ve lost weight,” she says, looking affronted.

“Um. Sorry?”

She nips my hip, and I jolt, my hands flying to tangle in her wet hair. “You need to learn to take care of yourself,” she murmurs. Her hand wraps around my shaft, and she starts to pump me slowly. The hot water dripping off her fingers acts like a lubricant, making her movements feel slick and smooth. I close my eyes and imagine it’s her hot, wet mouth closing over me.

“That’s okay, though,” she says, dipping her head and pressing a kiss to my tip. My thighs flinch and she laughs. “I like taking care of you.”

With that, she opens her mouth and swallows me down. My eyes fly back open as she starts sucking me, her head bobbing gently. I stare down at her, entranced.

She looks like a fucking dream sprawled below me, her white limbs slick and dripping, her hair flattened to her head and darkened with water. Her makeup is starting to smudge sexily around her eyes, making them look smoky and dark, and her plump lips are wet, stretched around my dick. Her eyes don’t leave mine as she curls her tongue under my balls, eyelashes fluttering. Jesus, she’s good at this. I shudder, and a moan vibrates through her whole body. She presses closer, digging her fingernails into my thighs. I can’t stop my hips from jerking forward, shoving my length deeper into her mouth.

She moans even louder, and I wince, pulling back. “Shit. Sorry.”

“Harder,” she rasps out. “I can take it.”

I stare at her, my eyes blurry from the water and tiredness. “Beth...”

She sighs, pulling out to suck some droplets of water off the side of my shaft. I shift, feeling sweat beading on the back of my neck. “I know you guys think I’m a total goodie-two shoes because I work in childcare. But I’m not actually Mary Poppins.” She takes my hands and puts them on either side of her face. “Let go,” she demands, her voice stern. “I like it.” Then she takes me into her mouth again.

So I let go. Gripping hard onto her jaw, I let my body take over, fucking her face. As I thrust down her throat, I half-expect her to gag, but she doesn’t—just hums, curling her tongue along the underside of my shaft. I keep on burying myself into her, deeper with each stroke, and she sighs, the hot steam flushing her cheeks pink as she reaches up and rolls my balls with her small hands.

It’s too much. The muscles in my thighs tense around her face. “Beth—”

She takes me even deeper, tilting her neck and swallowing me down, until all I can feel is hot, wet warmth all around me. At the same time, she twists her hand at my base, tightening her grip until white stars burst behind my eyes. She wants me to come in her mouth.

But I want something different. Ever since the first night we slept together, I’ve had *dreams* about her, lying in my bed, hot and dripping with my come. I think she’s given me a new obsession.

At the very last second, I pull out, tilting my head back against the tile and shouting as I climax. Hot ropes of white explode over her slick body, splashing over her chest and mixing with the water dripping off her breasts. She gasps, arching her back, pushing her tits forward and rubbing me into her skin. The image is so goddamn beautiful I can hardly handle it. My palm slaps against the slippery shower tile as I struggle to find purchase, trying to keep myself upright as waves of pleasure crash over me, matching the pulses of come painting her naked body.

Eventually, the brain-shattering electricity floods away, leaving a warm glow in its place. I sag against the shower wall, panting. For the first time in forever, my brain is quiet. I’m not worried about the app, or sales, or coding bugs. I’m just content.

Beth stands, trailing her lips slowly up from my hip to my throat, then pulling my mouth to hers. With the steam hazing around us, and the water rippling

down the glass walls of the shower, the kiss feels dreamy and soft. I tug her into me and slide my hand between her legs.

She pulls away, and an indignant noise falls out of my mouth. She laughs, stretching to suck at my bottom lip. “Later. When you’ve had a few REM cycles and a burger the size of your head.”

“But—” I slide my palm over her butt, squeezing.

“Nope,” she dances out of the way again. “I’m saving myself for the celebration sex later. I want a full tank.”

I groan. “Just let me taste—” I bend, sucking her breast into my mouth. The silky softness of her wet skin makes me groan again.

“*Taste?*” She asks breathily, sounding amused. “What does it taste like? Shower gel?”

“Not the taste,” I amend, sucking in as much of her tit as I can, then slowly letting it slide back between my lips until I’m latched onto the very tip of her nipple. “It’s the *feel*,” I mutter, rolling my tongue around the hardening bead. “Of tits. In my mouth. Nothing better.”

Beth laughs. “Okay, Casanova. You are having a nap, and we are eating a meal, and when you can string together a full sentence, you can put whatever you want in your mouth.”

I moan and flop against her. Still giggling, she puts her arm around my waist, leading me out of the shower. I dry off quick, shaking my wet hair, then she drags me right back to my bedroom, switching off the lights.

“Nap time,” she orders, flattening her hands on my shoulders and shoving me face-first onto the mattress. I catch her around the waist and topple her down with me. “You want me to stay?”

“If you don’t, I’ll just get back on the computer and reread all my code.” I mean it as a playful threat, but it’s honestly the sad, pathetic truth.

She smiles. “Well, in *that* case,” she murmurs, snuggling down next to me and drawing the duvet up over our shoulders. “I guess I don’t have a choice.” I wrap an arm around her waist, holding her close. Distantly, I hear a baby’s cry. “Is Cami okay?” I mumble into Beth’s neck. “She’s been crying more this week.”

She nods. “She’s started teething, so she’s very angry and drooly. Don’t hug her with a nice shirt on.”

I frown, forcing my eyes open. “Shit. Is she in pain?”

“Some. We’ve been giving her painkillers when she gets really agitated. And cold things to chew on. It should pass soon.”

“Oh.” I feel like shit. My baby’s been in *pain*, and I didn’t even know. Because I was focussing more on a video game than a *human child*.

Beth reaches out and starts stroking down my face. “Relax,” she whispers.

My heart aches as she brushes her fingertips over my cupid’s bow.

I don’t deserve either of them. Beth or Cami. I’ve ignored Beth for the last two weeks. I’ve shut her out and locked myself in my bedroom. She’s been bringing me food, and coffee, and latching on for a cuddle every time I pass her in the hall. And I’ve given this beautiful, sweet, kind woman absolutely nothing in return.

“I’ve not been good to you,” I mumble. “You or Cami.”

She laughs. “What? What does that mean?”

“I’ve been pushing you both away.”

“You’ve been working. And I’m not your girlfriend. You don’t have to shower me with attention.” She wriggles against me and my eyes fall half-shut. “I really do miss you, though.”

“I feel like an idiot,” I mutter, winding a piece of damp red hair around my finger. Even in the low light of my bedroom, it flashes bright as fire. “For getting so worked up about this. But every time I have to put out a project, I feel like such a failure.” I let go of her hair, watching it drop onto the pillow. “I can’t stop fucking up.”

Beth sighs, propping herself up on her elbow and looking down at me. “You want me to be honest?”

“Always.”

“There will be mistakes in the game,” she says, and my stomach sinks. “There will be things you’ve missed. Most people won’t notice them. Most of the ones that do won’t care. And then a few highly critical nit-pickers will

give you bad reviews. And that's *okay*, Jack. You're one indie gamer. You can't expect to produce the same work that a fifty-strong tech team with a huge budget can. And the vast majority of people will understand that."

"But—"

She nudges me. "You're a human being, not a robot. And that's a good thing for you, because if you *were* a robot, I wouldn't shag you. So."

I consider. "That's a pretty good trade-off."

"Damn straight it is." She curls up closer to me. "Now stop worrying and go to sleep, so you can fuck me properly tonight."

I nuzzle into her neck, breathing in her sweet apple-cinnamon scent, and black out in seconds.

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FIFTY-ONE

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BETH

I wake up with my hand between my legs.

Heat is washing over my skin in tingly waves. Wetness is sticking my thighs together. My pussy feels swollen and puffy and hot. I moan quietly as large hands stroke over my naked body, rolling over and burying my face in a wall of hard abs. Mmm.

“I’m gonna die,” a low voice mumbles. “What do you think she’s dreaming about?”

“Me. Obviously.”

Dreaming. Yes. This must be some kind of sex dream. It has to be. I relax into the warm, muscled chest. A hot mouth kisses my neck. A thumb trails over my bottom lip.

“Open up.” A deep voice says.

I do, fully expecting a dream-dong in my mouth, but instead cold glass chinks against my teeth. Sweet bubbles explode against my tongue, and my eyes fly open. I sit up before I choke. Cyrus holds me closer, pouring champagne between my lips.

I swallow, then look around, disorientated. I’m in Jack’s bed, still naked from my shower, and uncomfortably wet between my legs. I lift my hand out from under the covers and flush. Jesus Christ. Did they just walk in on me touching myself in my sleep?

“You look flustered,” Cyrus murmurs, taking my hand and examining it.

“Was I just—”

“Look, it’s normal. I’m sure any sex dream that involves me is incredibly overwhelming.” His dark eyes melt into mine as he lifts my sticky fingers to his mouth and sucks them clean. My stomach bottoms out as he flicks his

tongue over my skin.

“Eat up,” Jack says, climbing into the bed behind me. He’s holding a plate of chocolate-covered strawberries. He settles my back against his chest, then selects a strawberry and holds it to my lips. “We need to revive you.”

I take an obedient bite. Juice bursts out of the ripe fruit, mingling with the sweet tastes of champagne and chocolate on my tongue. I lick my lips, my brain still fuzzy. “Okay. For the record, this is the best way anybody has ever been woken up, ever.”

Jack laughs, bending to press a kiss to my bare shoulder. “We ordered in dinner. You overslept. Come on, before it gets cold.”

I glance out of the window. It’s getting dark outside. “Shit. What time is it?”

“Almost seven. You slept for hours.” He gives me his juice-covered fingers to lick, then points to a clean t-shirt and boxers folded neatly on the end of the bed. “You can wear these.”

I wriggle into the clothes, then turn to Cyrus. He’s sitting on the mattress, watching me silently, his dark eyes hooded. “Carry me?” I ask. “Randy Romeo style?”

He chuckles, reaching for me. “That’s a pretty dangerous request. I know lots of positions.”

A memory of him flipping me upside down and wrapping my legs around his head flashes before my eyes. He must see the alarm in my face, because he snorts and settles me in a very respectable fireman’s lift, carrying me out into the lounge.

Cyrus has set out a picnic, a lot like our first date. Instead of pasta, we’ve apparently gone for steak this time; four plates are set out on a red blanket, steaming under plastic covers. He’s whipped out the electric candles again, and a couple of bottles of champagne are chilling in an ice bucket. Classical music from one of Cami’s sleep playlists is playing in the background.

“Is this our new tradition?” I ask, looking at the spread of food. “Eating on the floor?”

“It’s a lot easier to touch you when you’re not sitting at a table,” Cyrus says in my ear, pinching my butt, and I hide my smile in his shirt.

Sebastian is already sitting down, pouring flutes of champagne. “Do you want regular or pink?” he asks, glancing up at me. His mouth drops open as he takes me in, his steely eyes darkening. Spots of colour bloom on his cheekbones.

“Regular, please,” I say as Cy settles me on the blanket. My bum barely touches the floor before Seb reaches over and pulls me right into his lap, pressing a hard kiss to my mouth. When we finally gasp apart, my whole body is hot again.

“What was that for?”

He tugs the hem of the oversized men’s shirt Jack gave me, then kisses my neck, trailing his warm lips down my spine.

Jack grins. “He has a thing for girls wearing his clothes.”

Cyrus snorts. “*Thing*. It’s pretty much a kink, at this point.”

“You look good,” Sebastian rasps, trailing a hand down my bare leg.

“So do you,” I say honestly. “Much better.”

He wasn’t feeling great earlier today, so I shoved him into bed to sleep off the burgeoning headache. It’s been a difficult week. What with Cami teething, and Seb and Jack stressing over the launch, everybody’s been a bit on edge. Now, though, all of that tension has melted away. The boys look loose and relaxed, sprawled out over the floor.

“What happens now?” I ask, as Jack spoons mashed potato onto my plate. “Is the app available?” My fingers are already itching to play it. He hasn’t even let me look at it.

Jack shakes his head. “It’s in review. The app store needs to check that it meets their guidelines, then I get to press the launch button.”

“Will it be live before you get to America?”

He nods. “Hopefully. They’re usually pretty quick.”

I lean over to press a kiss to his cheek. “I’m so proud of you.” I glance across at the other men. “All of you.”

“Yeah,” Cyrus says blithely. “I reckon my body rolls really added a lot to the process.”

“You’re going with them to the convention, aren’t you?” I point out. “So I’m proud of you too. It’s crazy how hard you all work.” They all exchange a soft look over my head. “What?”

“Nothing,” Jack says. “You’re just very sweet.”

I roll my eyes. My phone chimes on the counter, but I ignore it, leaning back into Seb and studying the other two men.

I’ve not slept with all three of them yet. Because of their work schedules, I’ve spent the past week going to bed with Sebastian, and waking up with Cyrus. It’s been great spending one-on-one time with them both, but I’m dying to have them all together. Even the thought of it makes me squirm.

Cyrus leans closer, taking a sip of champagne. As I watch, he meets my gaze, grins, and then tips the glass, letting a drizzle of cold liquid drip down the side of my throat.

I grimace. “Cy—”

“Oops.” He dips his head and licks it right off, making my eyes flutter. “Sorry about that.”

“You’re awful,” I mumble, and he smiles against my skin.

“You love it.”

My phone chimes again. I ignore it, guiding Sebastian’s big palm up to my breast. He squeezes me, and my back arches, a sigh falling from my lips as Cy trails his tongue up to my earlobe.

My phone chimes again. And again. And again.

I frown. “Ugh. I should probably get that. It might be important.”

Jack leans up and grabs the phone, passing it over to me.

“Thanks, honey.” I check the screen. All of the texts are from Benny.

B: BETH CALL ME BACK

B: ANSWER YOUR PHONE

B: I DONT CARE IF YOURE SLEEPING OR CHANGING A NAPPY OR YOUVE GOT A DIFFERENT MAN IN EVERY

ORIFICE OF YOUR BODY

B: THIS IS IMPORTANT FFS

“Jesus,” I mutter, standing. “One sec.” There’s not really anywhere private I can go in the flat, so I tug my clothes back into place, brush back my ruffled hair, and head out into the hallway, tapping *return call*. Benny picks up after the first ring.

“*Beth!*”

“This better be an emergency,” I warn. “Someone better be dying.”

“*No one’s dying. But you’re not going to believe what Tony just showed me.*”

Benny and Antonio have already been on a handful of dates since the night at the club, and Benny’s been on cloud nine all week. I’m very happy for him, but I’d definitely rather not hear about all the details right now.

“Was it some kind of sex move?” I say dryly. “Because I’m pretty sure I was just about to have my first foursome, so if you interrupted me just to tell me about your boyfriend’s junk, I’m not gonna be happy.”

“*Holy shit, you’ve got like, a whole harem now. And no. This is not junk-related news.*”

“No? Okay, let me guess; he dragged you into the bathroom and screwed you so hard it hurts to sit down.”

“*What? No.*” He hesitates. “*Well...*”

“Okay. Did you perchance call to inform me that you want to stick your tongue up his—”

“*Bethany Sarah Ellis,*” he interrupts. “*Be quiet and let me speak. I’m on break, I only have a few minutes. This isn’t about me, it’s about you.*”

“Hm?”

He takes a deep breath. “*Tony thinks he’s found your birth mum.*”

FIFTY-TWO

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BETH

I go still. “What?!”

“We were talking about you the other night. He kept saying that you reminded him of an ex-colleague from one of his old pub jobs, before he moved to London. When I asked what her name was, he said Sarah Chandler.”

My mother’s name was Sarah. I can’t breathe. I lean against the wall.

“Obviously, she’s got married and changed her last name. She lives down in Cornwall. Tony knows her address.” He pauses. *“Do you want it?”*

“You’re sure it’s her?” I ask, my voice hoarse.

“One hundred percent. She has a private Facebook account, but he’s friends with her. Hang on, I’ll send a picture.” There’s a pause, and then my phone dings. I open the picture message with shaky fingers.

The photo is of a group of people standing behind a bar, posing with their arms around each other, all in matching server uniforms. It’s pretty blurry, but I can clearly make out the woman in the middle of the row. She has red hair pulled up in a ponytail, almost the exact same shade as mine. She barely looks ten years older than me. It has to be her.

“Yeah. Okay.” My hand is shaking. “Shit.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m—happy.” I’m ecstatic. Terrified. Nervous. I feel like I’m about to split out of my skin. “Tell Antonio thank you from me?”

“Sure thing, friend. Listen, I’ve got to get back to work, but text me tonight, yeah? We can talk about it. And you can update me on your new polyamorous found family.”

“They’re not my—”

“You live with your three boyfriends and their kid. Dunno what else you can call that.” There’s some shouting in the background, and he swears. *“Sorry, sorry, really have to go. The van’s about to leave. Call me.”*

He hangs up before I can respond.

For a second, I just stand there in the middle of the hall, staring at my phone. My ears are full of static. We’ve found my mum. I’ve been looking for her since I was four years old, and now, *finally*, I can see her again. I look down at the little bracelet glimmering around my wrist. *You are my sunshine.*

I hear a pop next door, followed by a burst of laughter. Taking a deep breath, I set my jaw and head back into the flat. I feel like I’m in a dream.

The boys are still sprawled on the floor, chatting, but they all stop and look up as I step inside.

“Shit,” Cy says, sitting up. “Bad news?”

I blink hard. “No, no—”

“You sure? Because you look like you’re about to pass out.”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Sebastian stands and wraps an arm around me, leading me gently back down onto the blanket. “You’re shaking, Beth,” he says quietly. “Do you need some water, or something?”

“It’s not bad news,” I repeat. “I just. Um.” I take a deep breath, then turn to Cyrus. “Tony knows my birth mum. Benny just sent me her address.”

They all freeze. For a few seconds, no one says anything.

“Wow,” Cyrus says eventually. “That’s—big.”

“What are you going to do with it?” Jack asks cautiously.

I bite my lip. “I want to go see her.”

Seb’s brow furrows. “Not just write her a letter?”

“I want to see her. And I want her to see me.” I look around at them hopefully. I’m not sure what reaction I expected, but it wasn’t this. I was hoping they’d be happy for me, but they mostly look worried. “What? Do you think that’s a bad idea?”

Cyrus shakes his head. “If it’s something you think you need to do, do it. But...” he snakes out his arm, taking my hand. “Can you wait until we get home? We’ll come with you.”

“That’s sweet, but I can go on my own. It’ll look a bit weird if I show up on her doorstep with three strange men. She’ll probably think her daughter is a reprobate.”

“We don’t have to go in,” he insists. “We can wait in the car, or hang out in a mall or a park and pick you up when you’re done. I don’t like the thought of you driving out there and dealing with everything all alone, where we can’t reach you if things go wrong.”

“Or right,” Jack adds quickly. “It could be overwhelming, either way.”

I look down, my eyes suddenly blurring.

They think my mum won’t want to see me. They think she’ll take one look at me and send me away.

I mean, I know it’s a possibility. Of course I do. But I guess I hoped the guys would be telling me, *of course she’ll want to see you, she’d be crazy not to want to meet you, you’re amazing, etc etc*, instead of immediately assuming that she’ll hate me. My throat thickens. I take a sip of champagne, pretending that it’s the bubbles making my eyes water.

“Hey.” Cyrus touches under my chin, nudging my face up until our eyes meet. “We just don’t want you to get hurt, Bethie. Parents can be shitty, sometimes. Mine are shitty. Seb’s are shitty. Jack’s—have shitty tendencies.”

“We don’t know anything about your mum,” Seb adds, on my other side. “We’re just worried about you.”

I swallow thickly, then nod. I guess I get it. They’re just being protective. They want to be there for me. “Okay. Thank you. I’ll wait.”

Instead of answering, Cyrus just leans in and kisses me softly. His lips taste like strawberry juice and champagne. I kiss him back, our mouths sliding against one another. His hand smooths under the hem of my shirt, fingertips skittering over my hot skin. “You know,” he murmurs, when we pull apart, “Seb got you a present earlier. Maybe that will cheer you up.”

I glance at Seb. “You did?”

He nods. I watch as he pulls a scrap of crumpled fabric out of his pocket and offers it to me. It takes me a second to realise what it is. A silky black blindfold edged in soft lace. My mouth goes dry.

“Why do you have that?” I whisper.

“Cyrus thought you might enjoy it.”

Cyrus nods, tucking some hair behind my ear. “Last time you came to visit me in the club, I blindfolded you with my tie during the dance.” He pauses. “You seemed to like it.”

Like it? I got so wet I almost slipped right off the damn chair.

Cyrus slides his hand down my arm, cupping my elbow. “Do you trust us?” He says in my ear.

I nod, not even hesitating. He kisses me again, deeper this time, as he leans over to take the blindfold. I tip my head back, and he slips it over my eyes, the silk fluttering over my skin. My heart pounds in my chest as the world goes black. I can feel his confident fingers firmly securing the knot behind my head, then a kiss in my hair.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmurs against my skin.

A hand brushes my arm, and I jump.

“Easy,” Jack murmurs. “Just me.”

I relax against him as he leans forward and pulls me into a kiss.

It’s one of the hottest, most sensual kisses I think I’ve ever experienced. The blindfold magnifies everything. Every spot where our bodies are pressed together burns, my clothes shifting over my skin and sending sparks through all of my nerve endings. Suddenly desperate, I blindly grab Jack’s face and pull him into me, kissing him harder. I hear him groan, feeling him harden against my belly.

Another hand touches my face, and I’m gently guided away from Jack, my mouth crashing into another deep kiss. I tangle my fingers in a crisp shirt, and know that it’s Seb. He kisses me expertly in long, strong pulls. At the same time, Cyrus slips his hands under my shirt and cups my breasts in his hot hands. After a few seconds, Sebastian leans away, and Cy claims my mouth, nipping my bottom lip playfully.

It goes on and on.

I'm shared between them all, kissing them in turn until I'm dizzy. I'm sure if I could see, the whole room would be spinning. I feel wobbly and shaky. I cling to Seb's shoulders, glad that I'm already sitting down. My breath is coming in shuddery pants. Someone slides their hand over the crotch of my borrowed boxers, and I have to pull away to moan, gasping for air.

For a moment, everyone is silent. Then a finger strokes my hot cheek.

"Oh, *sweetheart*," Cyrus says. "Look how pink she is." I flush even harder, and he laughs, hugging me from behind. "This is going to be *fun*."

"Please," I say breathily. "Take me to bed." As much as I'd like to be fucked on the living room floor, I don't want to accidentally splat my hand in a plate of cold food while I'm trying to get off.

Strong arms wrap around me, and I feel myself getting lifted off the ground. I bury my face in the hot chest I'm pressed against, but I can't tell who it is. Cyrus, maybe? Or Sebastian?

I wriggle around in his grip. "Who are you?" I hiss.

Sebastian's laugh gives him away. I hear the sound of a door getting kicked open, and then I'm laid out on a soft quilt. Sebastian draws back, and clothes rustle and drop to the floor as the three men undress. I lay there, sprawled on the sheets, my heart thumping as I wait for the first touch.

FIFTY-THREE

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JACK

I stand back and look at Beth laid out on the bed, her wild hair spread out over the pillows. Even though she sucked me off a few hours ago, my blood is already pumping through me. My balls feel like they're about to burst. There's nothing I want more than to pull her legs apart and plunge myself inside her wet heat. It's been over a week since I fucked her properly, and I'm aching all over.

But I'm not going to do that. We're going to take our time with her. This is Beth's first time ever sleeping with all three of us. Her first ever foursome. And we're going to make it special.

Cyrus catches my gaze and raises an eyebrow. I nod.

We're going to tease her.

I sit on the edge of the mattress, pulling Beth into my lap with her back against my chest. I'd much rather have her soft, full breasts pressed against me—but I'm sure the other two will want easy access to them. She stiffens, twisting and reaching for my face.

"Who are you?" She whispers, stroking my cheeks, but I don't answer, kissing her softly. Her pink lips quiver as she kisses me back.

Cyrus and Seb both kneel on the floor, sitting on her right and left respectively. Her shoulders tense as she feels their hands on her thighs. We've done this before, with our ex Chloe; she used to love when we'd blindfold her and share her between us. She liked it best when we didn't speak, during. It drove her crazy, not knowing which one of us was touching her. I wonder if Beth will enjoy it just as much.

I deepen the kiss, pulling her body closer to mine, as Cy and Seb both lean in, pressing their lips to each of her breasts. She groans, twitching with need as they start to suck on her. I slide a hand between her sticky thighs, tickling my

fingers lightly around her entrance. She immediately starts jerking over me, trying to grind down on my fingers, but I pull back until I'm just out of reach. She sobs, flopping against my chest. I bring my fingers back again and start stroking them between her folds, tracing them around her twitching bud. Her muscles wind tighter and tighter. She starts to moan, over and over again, arching her back and trying desperately to rub her tits further into Seb and Cy's mouths.

We wait until she's right on the brink, trembling and gasping against us all—then Seb taps my shoulder and I reluctantly pull back, switching positions. Cyrus takes her mouth, pulling her into a fiery kiss, while I sit on the mattress at her feet and pull her legs into my lap for a massage. She melts under our touches.

We repeat the cycle over and over, kissing her and playing with her until she's right on the edge of climax, and then swapping places, ignoring Beth's disappointed little cries. By the time half an hour has passed, we're all rock-hard and leaking, and Beth is losing her mind.

She's sitting propped against the headboard, squirming and writhing, her soft body drenched in sweat. Wetness is dripping from her flushed, sopping core, sticking to her legs. Cyrus and I are both sitting on the bed next to her, kissing either side of her neck. Seb is currently kneeling on the floor, his head pillowed against her stomach. As I watch, he presses a kiss to her thigh, and she twists painfully, bucking up, trying to guide his head between her legs. He just pulls back.

She makes a sound like she's crying. "Please," she chokes. "Please, oh God, I'm not kidding, I need—" she trails off, dropping her hand between her legs, desperate to touch herself. Cyrus grabs both of her wrists and pulls them behind her back as he kisses her fiercely. She slumps, her chest heaving for air.

I start nibbling on her nipples, sucking them slowly into my mouth, and her whole body jolts. "I can't," she says quietly, mashing her legs together, rubbing her ass helplessly into the damp sheets. "Please, please, please."

Cyrus meets my eye and nods between her legs, and I stifle a grin, standing. Cyrus gently lays her down on her back, and I take position between her crooked knees, first touching her calf, so she knows that I'm there. She jumps

a bit, and I smooth my hands up her soft legs, tugging them open to reveal her pink, glistening sex.

She looks beautiful. Absolutely stunning. I reach forward and lightly brush my fingers between her wet, shining lips, parting them. Beth makes a noise like she's dying. I watch, my cheeks flushing, as a droplet of moisture builds by her entrance, dribbling down onto her leg.

Seb gives me a harsh look from his spot on the floor, urging me to get on with it, but I can't fight the urge to drop to my knees and have a taste, slipping my tongue through her slick folds. She gasps, more wetness pooling against my lips as I drink from her, and I have to close my eyes. I want to stay down here forever, teasing out more of her juices, drinking up her arousal—but I don't have time to drag this out, as much as I want to. I give her a few quick licks, rolling her taste around in my mouth, then straighten, nudging my dick between her legs.

Beth moans loudly as I start to slide into her, tossing her head to the side, her face scrunched in pleasure. She feels incredible: hot and tight around me, but so slick with arousal that my thrust is smooth and frictionless. Cyrus kneels by her pillow, slowly making out with her, and I watch them both as I push inside, drinking in the sight of her sighing and melting against him. It's mind-blowing.

I'll never get why more people don't do this. It's like fucking a girl, and watching her star in a porno at the same time. It's a goddamn *dream*.

As I watch, Seb starts plucking at her breasts. She clenches around me, her inner muscles gripping me like she never wants me to pull out. Heat burns through me. I squeeze her hip, a little warning, then speed up my gentle, rolling rhythm to a fast, punishing pace. I fuck her so hard our bodies jolt with every pump, drilling deep into her hot depths. She meets me thrust for thrust, grinding her hips up into me desperately, fluttering and clutching around me. God knows how long I spend inside her. It could be thirty seconds, or five minutes. My head is spinning with arousal. I can feel my balls tightening and pulling. My eyes fall shut. I have to come. I *have* to come. I grip her thighs hard, my fingernails digging into her skin, and groan, feeling it rise up in me.

"Don't." Sebastian barks at me, standing up. His dark eyes are molten as he

glares at me. “*Move.*”

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FIFTY-FOUR

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BETH

I moan pathetically as I feel the hard cock inside me slowly getting drawn out. I clench around it, whining. I *need* it there. I need *more*. So much more. God, I feel like I'm about to go insane. I've never been so turned on in my life. I think the men might actually be trying to murder me.

And I love it.

I lay flat on my back, breathing hard as six hands move over my body, sending ripples of desire through me. Before I met these three men, I never even knew sex could be like this. I never knew it could be so intense or emotional. I never knew it could feel so good.

There's some shuffling noises as the guys switch places, and then a finger traces my face, rubbing over my lips. Without thinking, I open my mouth, sucking it in and swirling over it with my tongue.

"Are you okay?" Sebastian asks quietly, stroking my hair back with his other hand. "You like this?"

It's the first time any of the men have spoken to me since we started. If Seb is behind me, I wonder where Jack and Cyrus are.

I nod and toss my head. I do like it. A lot. I like not knowing where I'm going to be touched next. I like the idea of the men using me how they like. Touching whatever they want to touch, without me even knowing it's them.

But at the same time, I feel safe. Cared for. Protected. These men will use me however they want—and they *want* to make me feel good. It's a thrilling feeling.

Seb's thumb pushes between my lips. "You ready for more?" He asks, his voice husky. "You want one of us in your mouth?"

I nod frantically. He strokes my cheek again and steps away. There's some

shuffling sounds as the guys switch places again, and then someone new stands between my legs, tugging my thighs apart and sinking into my aching sex. At the same time, a smooth, dripping cock head presses against my lips. I swallow it down, savouring the taste. I was never super into sucking guys off before I met these three. I liked it fine, but it didn't get me off.

It does now. It makes me feel powerful. Important. I love tasting each of the guys, feeling them twitch in my mouth, hearing their low groans as I slowly drive them crazy.

I reach out my hand, and wordlessly, someone catches it, guiding me to wrap my fingers around his rock-hard erection. I stroke him softly, relishing in his hardness, blindly tracing all of his soft folds and ridges.

And that's how we continue. I lay flat on my back, legs parted wantonly as someone fucks me hard, simultaneously jacking and sucking off the other two men. Every few minutes, right as my back is starting to bend and my toes are starting to curl, they pull out and switch positions. A new thick, hot rod slides between my folds, presses into my mouth, slips between my fingers. And the cycle starts all over again, with me furiously rubbing and sucking as I get pounded deep inside.

And at the same time, hands rove all over me. Squeezing my bum, massaging my thighs, rolling my breasts. I can't keep up. My senses are completely overloaded. Tingles rolls through me in great roaring waves, sending my head spinning and my body trembling. I suck hard on the fat, swollen shaft in my mouth, then lick my way up to the smooth head, tonguing at the frenulum. There's a choking sound.

Cyrus. It has to be Cyrus. Cyrus *loves* when I do that.

Which means—

I twist my hand, squeezing, and there's a rough gasp. "Beth," Sebastian grates out, wrapping his fingers around mine. "You're killing me."

So Seb is in my hand, and Cyrus is in my mouth. Which means that Jack is the one rhythmically smacking into my G-spot like he's hammering a nail.

I want to plead with him, beg him to finally let me come, but my mouth is rammed full. I feel tears slipping out of my eyes, soaking into the blindfold. With every push inside me, my whole body spasms. I feel like I'm on fire.

Sebastian keeps his hand over mine, jacking himself off shakily with my fingers. “Beth,” he groans. “Can I—”

I nod. I don’t know what he’s asking, and I don’t care. He throbs in my hand, and my mouth falls open as his sizzling-hot seed showers over my body. It sprays my chest, sticking to my skin, dripping over my trembling breasts.

I lose it. My climax roars inside me, burning through my veins and setting all of my nerves alight. I shout, my whole body convulsing violently as I come, my fingers scrabbling at the sheets as I squirm in the growing wet patch. Tears of pleasure soak my blindfold.

Apparently, I’m not the only one enjoying myself. Before I’ve even come back to Earth, I feel Cyrus’s hand clench in my hair. That’s the only warning I have before the dick in my mouth swells, twitches, and then explodes. My mouth fills with hot come, and I choke, swallowing hard as his hips shudder against my face.

And through it all, I’m still getting steadily fucked. Jack lifts my thighs, locking them tighter around his waist, and slips his fingers through my slick lower lips, rubbing my swollen bud. I shout at the sudden burst of pleasure, desperately rubbing up against him. I feel another climax building, and this one feels different. Bigger. Stronger. I can’t breathe. Sweat is pouring down my body. And still, the thrusting doesn’t stop. Jack’s thick shaft saws in and out of me, filling me deep, until I’m sure I’m about to explode.

“Oh my *God*,” I yell. “Fucking Hell, just *come!*”

Three laughs burst around me.

“You heard the lady,” Cyrus says. “Just come, mate.”

“Fuck off,” Jack mutters.

“Please,” I say, my voice breaking with pleasure. “I don’t w-wanna die l-like this.”

“Worse ways to go,” Cyrus quips.

Jack ignores him, wrapping his hand around my thigh. “Baby,” he chokes. “God.”

“C-come here,” I order, holding out my arms. “I want to feel you.”

Still inside me, Jack crawls over the bed, laying his hot body on top of mine. I claw his tight buttcheeks as he dips to kiss my neck, and rolls his hips once, twice—and then, with one last shuddering thrust, he finally lets go, unloading inside me. I turn my head and muffle a scream into the pillow as my spine arches one last time, lifting right off the bed. My hands fall from Jack’s shoulders as I gasp for air, wave after wave of gushing pleasure swallowing me like a huge, swelling tide of the ocean. I flounder and choke like I’m drowning in it, grinding my hips up hard. Jack moans in my ear, nuzzling my jaw as his body shakes over mine. For a long time, we cling to each other, lost at sea. I can feel the other men touching me, stroking come into my skin, but I barely register it. All I’m thinking about right now is Jack.

I come down slowly, floating back into my body as Jack cups my face, kissing my tingling lips. I kiss him back, exhausted, then reach up and pull off the blindfold with shaky fingers, looking right into Jack’s blue eyes.

Concern flickers over his face. “Are you *crying*?” He asks incredulously. “Oh, honey. Were we too hard on you?” He hefts me up against his front and cuddles me to him. His thumb strokes down my cheek, wiping away moisture.

“I’m not crying,” I mutter. “You knobbed me too hard. My eyes are watering.”

Cyrus barks a laugh as he collapses next to me. “*Fuck*, woman. You’re a fireball.” He burrows into the curve of my neck, catching his breath. Sebastian grabs a pair of boxers and disappears to check in on Cami, and I snuggle between the other two men, completely satiated.

It’s hard to believe that just a few weeks ago, I didn’t even know these guys. I had no idea what amazing people they were.

Or what amazing shaggers. Seriously. I thought sleeping with two men was sensational. Three is... otherworldly. Absolute, utter perfection.

Sebastian comes back, holding another bottle of champagne and the rest of the strawberries.

He slips into the bed next to Jack, handing me the bottle.

“Figured there’s not much point bothering with glasses,” he mutters, and I laugh, taking a deep swig. The bubbles fizz down my throat and sparkle

through my brain.

“There comes a point where you’ve exchanged too much bodily fluid for it to matter,” I agree, passing the bottle to Cyrus.

We lay like that for ages, taking sips of celebratory champagne and cuddling. Soon, I feel my eyes falling shut. The guys talk over my head in low voices as I snuggle into Jack’s chest and tune them out, letting his steady breathing lull me to sleep.

I’m almost there when my phone chimes on the bedside table. I groan deeply.

“It’s yours,” Seb says, reaching for it.

“It’s probably Benny. Tell him to call back later, my *harem* fucked me unconscious.”

“I’m not sure that would be professional.”

I scrunch up my face. “Professional? He’s my mate, not my co-worker.”

“It’s not him.” His voice hardens. “It looks like you’ve got a job offer.”

FIFTY-FIVE

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BETH

“Huh?” I say, rubbing my eyes. “Job offer?”

“It’s from a woman called Maria. She wants to know if you’d like to nanny her kid this summer. Maisie.”

“Ooh.” I sit up, pushing fuzzy curls out of my face, and reach for the phone. “I love Maisie. I swear to god, she is the cutest little kid. I haven’t seen her since the beginning of last year, she’ll be so big!” I tap out a quick message.

Hi Maria, I’m not sure what my schedule will be like this summer, do you have a deadline you need to know by? Give Maisie my love, tell her I miss her!

I feel breath on my shoulder, and glance up to see Seb watching the screen. “You’re considering it?” He sounds shocked. “Are you still advertising for work online?”

“Well. Yeah. My details and stuff are all available. Obviously, I can’t work full-time, but I wouldn’t mind picking up an odd weekend or evening job.”

“*Maisie* doesn’t sound like a weekend job,” he points out reproachfully. “It sounds like she wants you full-time.”

“Yeah, probably.”

“So,” he prompts after a pause. “Are you going to do it?”

I smile. “Uh, that’s kind of up to you, babe.”

“Up to me?”

“Yeah. You never told me how long you wanted me to nanny for Cami. If you’re done with me by the summer, then I’ll take Maisie on. She’s got some sensory processing issues, it would probably be a lot easier for her if her nanny is someone she already knows.”

I've been thinking about this for a while. This hasn't been a normal nanny job. Instead of just taking care of Cami, I've been teaching Seb the skills to look after her himself. He's learned so much, and gained so much confidence, that soon he won't need me at all, especially with Jack and Cyrus to help him. Sooner or later, I'm going to have to bow out and let him take over.

I'll miss nannying for Cami, of course, but I'll still see her every day. I practically live here.

I wriggle as Cyrus rolls closer and sucks my nipple into his mouth. "Fuck, Cy —"

"Don't mind me," he mumbles sleepily, laving me with his tongue. "Just suckin' a tit."

I can feel the tension in Seb's body behind me. "So?" I wiggle my phone at him. "Any ideas? It's fine if you want to leave it open-ended, but I really think you're getting to the point where I'm a bit redundant. You're a great dad." I squeeze his thigh. "You can do most of this by yourself."

Seb doesn't say anything for a few long moments, his face in shadow. Eventually, he nods, as if he's come to some sort of decision. "Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that."

"My employment? Uh oh." I jolt as Cyrus nibbles me gently, pushing his head away. "Let me guess. I'm getting fired for fucking my bosses."

"What—no?"

"You're getting *promoted* for fucking your bosses," Cyrus says. "I will personally give you a bonus every time you suck my dick."

I roll my eyes. "Kinda making me sound like a hooker, Cy."

"I know loads of hookers. They're great girls." He trails his finger up the side of my ribcage. "Okay, what about, I give you a lap dance every time you suck my dick?"

I consider. "Can I pick the music?"

He narrows his eyes at me. "No. I know how your mind works. I'm not grinding on you to 'Is This The Way to Amarillo', or any song from *Six the Musical*."

I grin. “Please? It would be so funny—”

“I’m taking Cami to New York with us,” Sebastian says.

We all go silent. I stare at him, shocked. “What?” I whisper.

“I’m sorry, since when?” Cy says. “I mean, I’d love to have ladybug with me. But she doesn’t even have a passport.”

I’m glad he’s as surprised as I am. We haven’t discussed this at all. I assumed that I’d be staying in the guys’ flat and looking after Cami for the next week. I’ve already drawn up a whole schedule of activities we can do, so she won’t miss her dads too much.

Sebastian nods. “I fast-tracked the paperwork. Her passport arrived this morning. I want her to come with us to America.”

“Oh.” I bite my lip. “Um, are you sure? She’s very small. Travelling with tiny babies is hard enough when you’re on holiday; how are you going to manage when you have work to do?”

He shrugs. “There’s three of us, isn’t there? I’m sure we can do it.”

“But—”

His eyes flare. “You said I can look after her myself,” he says firmly. “That’s what I’m going to do.”

“Right.” I was going to suggest a slightly more gradual shift of responsibility, but okay. Going from having a full-time nanny to taking an infant on a business trip alone seems like kind of a leap. I rub the edge of the sheet between my fingers. “Um, a little bit more warning would be nice.”

He nods. “It was an eleventh-hour decision. I know it’s inconvenient for you. We can pay you for the time that we’re out there.”

I shake my head. “You’re not paying me for work I’ve not done.” I glance back at my phone. “It’s fine. I’m sure I’ll find something else to do.”

Cyrus starts mouthing at my cleavage again, making me twitch.

“Maybe you should call Maisie’s mum,” Seb offers, an odd edge in his voice.

“Yeah. I guess.”

There’s a sudden shout from the lounge. I check the clock on the bedside

table. “Baby’s past due some more painkillers.”

Seb goes to slide off the bed, but I put a hand on his thigh to stop him. “I’ll do it. We only have a tiny bottle. Can’t have her spitting it all back on you.”

Sebastian hasn’t quite gotten the hang of giving babies medicine yet, and Cami really doesn’t like the taste. I think one of his fancy shirts is probably stained irrevocably.

Cyrus moans deeply as I pull away from him, reaching after me. “Hey! I was busy!”

“Suck Jack’s nips,” I offer, grabbing one of the guys’ shirts.

When I step into the lounge, it’s dark, only illuminated by the city lights outside the windows and the little teddy-shaped night light glowing by the crib. Cami is whimpering in her cot, rubbing her pink cheek with her tiny hand.

“Oh, poor baby.” I pick her up, cuddling her close. “It hurts, huh? It’s okay, it’ll stop soon, love, I promise.”

She looks up at me with huge, wet eyes, then flops against my chest and sobs quietly.

I keep her on my hip as I pour out the spoonful of medicine, then sit on the exercise ball Cyrus brought home last week, bouncing her gently as I coax the pink syrup into her mouth. When she finally swallows it, grimacing, I take her on a little walk around the apartment, trying to soothe her back to sleep. As we pass Cyrus’s room, I can hear the guys talking.

“—we’re taking Cami, why not just take Beth as well?” Cyrus asks, his voice low. “The suite is already paid for, and the convention said they could comp us a couple more plane tickets. They’re loaded, they don’t give a shit.”

My eyes widen. I go still, clutching Cami to me.

I don’t particularly *want* to go to America—I hate flying with a burning passion—but I think I could get over my fear for a week with these guys. Even if they’re working twenty-four-seven, it would still be better than being completely alone all week. Sebastian and Jack would probably be busy, but I bet Cyrus would have some free time. We could take Cami to zoos and parks,

maybe go out for dinner a couple of nights—

“No,” Sebastian says, effortlessly popping my daydream bubble. “She can’t come.”

His tone makes my blood go cold.

“Why not?” Cyrus asks. “It makes way more sense to bring her. She can help take care of ladybug when we’re doing panels and presentations, and whatever. Cami would be much happier going out, than being stuck in our suite for a whole week.”

“We don’t *need* her,” Sebastian insists. “I don’t need her.”

My heart squeezes. I lean against the wall, blood thumping in my ears. “Beth isn’t going to work for us forever,” he continues, his voice hard. “We need to stop relying on her so much.”

“I don’t think she should come, either,” Jack says quietly. “She’ll just be a distraction.”

Cyrus sounds exasperated. “She’s a *nanny*. She’s supposed to make your life easier, not harder.”

“Well. She doesn’t.” Jack pauses. “I don’t want her there.”

I feel like I’ve been stabbed through the ribs by a javelin.

I don’t want her there.

Cami finally sighs and softens in my arms, her little head thunking down against my shoulder. I kiss her and pop her back into her crib, my movements automatic and robotic. My mind is whirring as I stand and stare at her, sleeping peacefully on the crumpled sheets.

A light flicks on in the hallway, and I hear footsteps behind me. Two strong arms wind around my waist, and I’m pulled into a hard, muscled chest.

“Come to bed?” Jack murmurs in my ear, and I nod, letting him lead me back into the bedroom.

FIFTY-SIX

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BETH

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I ask three days later, as Jack carries the last of their seven suitcases out into the hallway. The boys were shocked when I helped them pack last night, and they realised just how much stuff a baby needs for one week abroad.

“I can do it,” Seb says determinedly. “I want to do it.” He checks his watch. “The car should be here now. The flight leaves in four hours.”

I worry my lip, staring at Cami. She’s strapped against his chest, sleeping peacefully. Her long lashes are stroking her fat cheeks. “I know that I said you needed to take responsibility for her. But really, travelling with a baby is *hard*, especially when you’re on a work trip—”

I trail off as Jack cups my cheeks, tilting my face up to his. “Hey,” he says gently.

He looks much better today; the dark circles under his eyes are fading, and his cheeks have some colour back in them. A couple days of rest and regular meals have done wonders for him; although he insists that it’s the sex that revived him. “We’ll be fine,” he says firmly. “We’ve got this. There’s three of us. We can handle one baby.”

“Yeah, we’ll call you when everything inevitably goes to shit,” Cyrus drawls, leaning against the wall and opening his arms. “C’mere, Bethie.”

I step into him, and he wraps me into a tight hug. His warm, spicy scent fills my nose, and I bury my face into his shirt, breathing him in.

“I’ll miss you,” he says in my ear, nuzzling me. “So much.”

“Me, too.”

He gives me one last squeeze and finally lets me go. I turn to the other two, worry still churning in my stomach. “You guys remembered the changing

pad, right? And enough nappies in your hand luggage to last the whole flight?”

“Yes,” Seb says patiently.

“If you make her a bottle on the plane, don’t use the hot water the flight attendants give you,” I instruct. “I saw a YouTube video where a stewardess said they never clean the hot water jugs. Just make it with cold water, and put the bottle *in* the hot water to warm it up.” Sebastian nods. “And if she gets fussy on the flight, you can always try walking her up the aisle, the vibrations might soothe—” His lips curve, amused, and I shut my mouth. “Sorry. You’ve got it. You’ve got it, you’ll do great.” I twist my hands together. “You’re sure you don’t want me to drive you to the airport?”

“The company car is picking us up,” Seb reminds me, and I nod, anxiety bubbling in my gut. He studies my face for a few seconds, then bends and gives me a quick kiss, his stubble stroking my cheek. “Get some sleep,” he says quietly. “You were up all night. We’ll see you in a week.”

I nod, giving Cami one last kiss on the nose. “Be good,” I tell her. “Don’t traumatise your dads too much.”

She smiles up at me like butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth. The guys turn to go, lugging their bags down the corridor. I watch them all step into the lift, my throat squeezing as the doors slide shut behind them.

Something feels wrong.

I know I’m being overdramatic. It’s just a week, for God’s sake. But for some reason, I just can’t shake the feeling that something awful is going to happen while they’re away.

I shake my head hard, like I can dislodge all of my stupid, needy thoughts. The truth is, I don’t do well with goodbyes. It’s probably some deep-rooted childhood trauma from my time in foster care. I can never really trust that the person is going to come back again.

But it’s fine. I am not an abandoned child anymore.

I walk downstairs to my flat in a haze, unlocking the door and looking around. I hardly recognise the place. I’ve been spending so much time with the guys, I’ve barely been living here. Sighing, I head to the bathroom to

brush my teeth. Seb's right. I'm exhausted. I may as well take a nap.

But when I step inside my tiny ensuite, my toothbrush isn't there. I must have left it in the guys' flat. Swearing, I pull open the cupboard under my bathroom sink to check if I have a spare—

And stare at the boxes of tampons and pads stacked neatly in one corner. Brand new. Unopened.

I frown. That isn't right. I bought those *ages* ago. I remember, there was a sale in the pharmacy a couple of months ago, so I stocked up. There's no way I haven't had my period since then.

I think back, my blood pressure rising. Now that I think about it, I don't think I've had my period the entire time I've been hanging out with the guys. I'm pretty sure it was due around the week I started sleeping with them. But it never came.

Oh my God.

Nausea rises up in my stomach. I flip down the toilet lid and pull out my phone with shaky hands, tapping open my cycle tracker app. It might be nothing, I tell myself. My periods have been going haywire for the last few years. Sometimes they're a week or two late. Sometimes they're weirdly light, or only last a couple of days. It's not a big deal.

But I've never completely missed one.

The app loads, and my mouth dries out as I stare at the number on the screen. I haven't had my period in almost two months.

Shit.

FIFTY-SEVEN

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SEBASTIAN

Cami is peaceful as anything as we drive to the airport, check in, and wait for the plane. She eats some mashed banana while we sit in Costa, then snoozes the whole time we're boarding. As we settle into our seats on the plane, I'm feeling almost proud. Maybe I'm not a completely and utterly shit father, after all. Maybe I don't need Beth.

Then the plane takes off. It turns out, our little baby is afraid of flying.

One hour into the flight, and I think I'm going deaf. She's been wailing in my ear, screaming at the top of her lungs, ever since the wheels left the ground. Other passengers are tutting and frowning. My head is starting to pound. I dry off her wet cheeks and try giving her a dummy, but she just spits it out and cries even louder. I'm so frustrated I want to scream. I don't know what I'm doing wrong.

Bringing Cami to America with us was supposed to be an experiment. Beth's incredible, but she's a crutch. I realised it the other day, when we were lying in bed, and she told us that she was still taking on other jobs. She's looking after other children. She *loves* other children.

It hit me like a bucket of cold water: Beth's not our girlfriend. She's not Cami's mum. We're not a family. Cami is a job to her. A job she will probably choose to move on from one day.

I love having Beth around. But I need to be able to look after Cami alone.

The only problem is, I don't think that I can.

"I'll take her," Jack offers, opening his arms. "Maybe she just wants a walk."

"Ah, yes," Cyrus drawls from my other side. "Take her on a scenic tour of the tiny flying metal tube. Maybe a visit to the coffin-sized bathroom will calm her down."

Jack flips him off and scoops a wailing Cami up, bouncing her in his arms as he carries her away.

“Excuse me?” I turn to see a middle-aged woman across the aisle leaning towards us, disapproval all over her face. “But *where* is that child’s mother?”

Cyrus slings an arm around me and puts his head on my shoulder. “She doesn’t have one. Don’t be homophobic.”

The woman shuts up quickly. I shove him off, pulling my laptop out of my computer bag and setting it on the tray table. With my hands free, I can finally get some work done. I go straight to my email and start scanning through my inbox. A message from our landlord pops out at me.

“You still haven’t paid your part of the rent,” I tell Cy, scanning the contents. “You got it?”

“Shit, sorry. Yeah, I have it.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I’ve actually been thinking; we should probably move out, right? Our place isn’t exactly baby-friendly. We can get somewhere with a nursery, or a playroom. Between Beth and the baby, I don’t think our three-bedroom is really cutting it.” He squints down the aisle. “We need one of those massive beds kings used to have orgies in.”

“Agreed. Cami needs her own space. And I’d like her to have a garden to play in. We’ll start looking as soon as we get back to England.” I start typing a message to Bill. “I’ll tell him we’ll pay rent monthly instead of quarterly.”

A flight attendant walks by, pushing the drinks trolley in front of her. “Can I get you guys anything?” She asks sweetly, unabashedly checking Cyrus out. He doesn’t even look at her. “Tea? Coffee?”

I remember Beth’s advice about the hot water and grimace. “I think we’re fine,” I tell her, and she gives Cyrus one last longing look, trundling the cart past us.

Cyrus frowns after her, fiddling with his bracelets. “D’you think we should ask Beth to move in with us?”

My fingers freeze over the keyboard. I clear my throat to ease the sudden tension. “I suppose having a live-in nanny is pretty common—”

He rolls his eyes. “Cut the crap. You know what I mean. We should ask her

to move in as our *girlfriend*.”

“She’s made her opinions on dating pretty clear,” I point out. “Multiple times. It would be disrespectful to ignore that.”

“I’m not suggesting we hold the girl at gunpoint and force her to marry us. We’d just be putting the option on the table. Letting her know that, if she ever does feel ready for a relationship, we’re down.”

I hesitate. Even if Beth did want to move in—which I really doubt—I don’t know if it’s a good idea. Cami’s already lost one mother; it seems cruel to make Beth an important part of her life, when we don’t even know if she’ll stay.

Before I can formulate a response, I hear the familiar sound of my daughter’s wails coming down the aisle. The walk has not calmed Cami down. She’s shrieking like an air-raid siren. Jack slumps back into his seat.

“It’s useless,” he mutters. “Let’s be honest, we all know why she’s crying.” He pats her back, pressing a kiss to her hair.

“She misses Beth,” Cyrus finishes. “Look, ladybug. I miss her, too. But I’m not deafening innocent bystanders. I keep all my crying on the inside. You’ll learn to do that when you’re older.” He strokes her wet cheek, then pulls her toy bunny out of his satchel. “Here. Cuddle your *favourite* teddy.”

She takes the bunny, then drops it sulkily. Cyrus sighs, and Jack grabs his stuffed lion. They both bend over the baby, trying to distract her with her toys.

I tune them out, scrolling down my inbox—then freeze, as I see a flagged email from my lawyer. I open it and scan the first few lines, my heart sinking. Shit. Shit. Shit. “We have to call Cami’s mother,” I say suddenly.

Jack and Cyrus both look up with identical looks of horror. “*What?*”

“She’s just got out of rehab,” I read. “We need to speak with her about Cami.” I open a new email and start drafting a response. “We need to ask her what her intentions were when she left Cami with us. She never said if it was meant to be long-term, or she just wanted someone to take care of her while she got clean.”

“No,” Cy snaps. “No way.”

“What if she takes one look at Cami and decides she wants her back?” Jack points out. “Who the Hell wouldn’t want her as their daughter?”

“Then we talk about it,” I say, nausea squeezing my throat.

Cyrus’s mouth falls open. “Are you freaking *kidding me*? She doesn’t belong to that woman, she’s *ours*.”

“We have to speak to her,” I insist. “I don’t care if it’s in-person, or over Skype, or in a bloody email. But we *need* to know that she really doesn’t want her. That she’s not going to try and take her back.”

Even the thought of losing Cami is horrendous at this point. I have plenty of sympathy for addicts; addiction is a disease, and it should be treated like one. But, addiction or not, Cami’s mother is still responsible for her actions. My sympathy doesn’t stretch to someone abandoning my child on a fucking doorstep, where she could have been kidnapped or hurt or frozen to death.

I press my lips together as I type out the email. I seriously doubt her mother could regain custody of Cami soon; but in a year or two, if she stays clean and has a change of heart, she might want her kid back. I know the court is often skewed in the mother’s favour in custody cases. I need to know I can keep Cami with me. I can’t spend her whole childhood wondering if she’s going to get taken away.

The guys lapse into silence. Cami’s wailing reaches a new crescendo, and a very familiar smell reaches my nostrils.

“Oh, *fu—dge*,” Cyrus says. “Crap. Crap, crap, crap.” He lifts Cami, who is now squirming in her extremely full nappy, and passes her to me. “Your sperm, man.”

“We have to change her in that broom closet?” Jack asks, sounding horrified. “How is that even possible?”

“What if there’s turbulence?” I mutter, clutching Cami closer. She presses her face into my neck, wetting my collar with tears. “What if I drop her?”

There’s a long pause. Cyrus slumps back in his seat. “I miss Beth,” he mutters.

FIFTY-EIGHT

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BETH

As soon as I realise how late I am, I grab my keys and run to the local pharmacy. I buy three pregnancy tests, from three different brands, and the cashier gives me a sympathetic look as she prints my receipt. When I get home, I sprint into the bathroom and rip them open, taking them one by one.

Every single one comes out negative. I sit on my toilet seat, staring at the three little *negative* symbols.

This makes no sense.

Maybe it's all in my head, but I feel different. I've felt different for the past few weeks, but I haven't been able to put my finger on it. It's like something in my body has changed. I've been emotional and bloated. My boobs have been more tender. I've felt sick and hot a lot. And now my periods have stopped. How the Hell can I *not* be pregnant?

So I book an appointment at the clinic for later today.

It all happens very quickly. I see the doctor at two. He makes me fill in a survey about my symptoms. There are over a hundred questions, asking about everything from headaches, to hot flashes, to mood swings. When he reads my answers over, he immediately orders a blood draw and an ultrasound. I have to go to the hospital to get the tests done.

As I lay back in the hospital bed, getting cold goop spread over my stomach by a nurse, I can't help but feel sad. I always imagined that the first time I had an ultrasound, I'd have a man sitting in the chair next to me, holding my hand. I consider texting the guys to tell them what I'm doing, but they're still travelling. After some deliberation, I figure I should wait until I have a solid answer. It's stressful enough, flying internationally with a baby, and the convention is really important. There's no point scaring the shit out of them if this turns out to be a false alarm.

Besides, whatever the result, I'd really like to tell them face-to-face.

The next morning, I get the call. By nine AM, I'm sitting in the doctor's office again, waiting for the results. My hands are sweating with nerves. While I wait for the doctor to come in, I pull out my phone.

I only got one message from the guys last night: a quick photo message from Cyrus, showing Jack and Seb sprawled in a big double bed. Seb is holding a crying Cami, trying to feed her, while Jack is trying to distract her with her lion. They both look exhausted.

Got in safe, Cyrus texted underneath. *Cami misses you xxx*

I trace the picture with my eyes, taking a deep breath.

I'm scared. I know right now, if I am pregnant, I'm going to keep it. It will be hard—I'm nowhere near ready—but I'll get by. Worse comes to the worst, Cami has a sibling to play with. Right?

My pep talk doesn't work. Nausea slides down my throat. I'm not sure if it's morning sickness or just anxiety. I clutch my mum's bracelet, hoping it'll give me a tiny scrap of strength.

The doctor steps into the room, holding a clipboard. He's a tall man with white hair and a thick moustache. "Good morning, Beth," he greets, settling down in the chair opposite mine.

"Morning." I smile at him nervously, but he doesn't smile back. His face is grave. Which it shouldn't be, should it? Whether I'm pregnant or not, there's no reason to look at me like I'm dying.

Oh my God. Am I dying?

"So?" I prompt, when he doesn't say anything. "Am I pregnant?"

He hesitates, then pushes a box of tissues across the desk to me. I stare at it, fear beating in my throat.

"What?" I whisper. "What's wrong?"

He clears his throat. "Your blood tests came back negative for pregnancy."

"Oh." I consider that. I'm not sure how I feel. I didn't really *want* to be pregnant; now isn't the right time at all. But I can't help the little pang of disappointment that ripples through me. "Then why did I miss my period?"

“I’m afraid that your blood tests revealed an issue with your hormone levels. It appears that you’re currently going through a premature menopause.”

I stare at him. “Menopause? I’m only twenty-six.”

“Premature menopause can happen at virtually any age. It can be triggered by medical treatments and autoimmune issues, but the largest risk factor is genetic. Did any of the women in your family go through menopause in their twenties?”

My head is spinning. “I don’t know. I don’t know any of my family.” He raises an eyebrow. “I grew up in care.”

“Ah. I see how that could be an issue.”

I swallow hard. “So... what does this mean? Will I have to take hormones, or something?”

He nods. “Yes, you’ll have to undertake some hormone treatment to counteract any potential health issues later in life. Early menopause can lead to osteoporosis and cardiovascular issues.”

“But I’ll be fine as long as I take the pills?”

He gives me a sympathetic look. “For the most part. Unfortunately, in terms of fertility, the effects of the menopause cannot be reversed.”

My heart starts beating faster. “What do you mean?”

“Your ovaries are no longer releasing eggs. You cannot have children.”

“But—I only just started feeling symptoms.” My voice is getting higher as I start to panic. “Doesn’t it take, like, years to go through menopause?”

“Judging by the FSH levels in your blood, it’s likely you’ve been feeling symptoms for years. The symptoms of perimenopause are very similar to premenstrual syndrome symptoms.”

I stare at him. “Can’t I freeze my eggs, or something? I had a period—” I try to count back the weeks, but my brain is filling with static. “It wasn’t that long ago!”

“Since you’re still getting occasional periods, it’s possible that you’ll still have some viable eggs. But...” He hesitates, sympathy softening his eyes. “I really wouldn’t get your hopes up, Beth. The chances are low. Maybe, if we

caught it earlier...”

He keeps talking, but I can't hear him. All I can hear is my own shaky breathing in my ears, and the rain starting to splash against the windowpanes of the surgery. I flex my fingers, trembling. My skin is fizzing and numb. I'm so full of emotions, I don't even know what I'm feeling. All I know is it hurts.

The doctor finishes talking and looks at me expectantly.

“Thank you,” I whisper, standing shakily and taking the prescription he hands me. “Thanks so much.”

I turn and walk back through the waiting room in a haze, barely registering the receptionist saying goodbye to me. Right as I reach the door, it opens. A heavily pregnant woman steps inside, holding hands with a man. They're both laughing, shaking rainwater out of their clothes and hair. I freeze, staring at them, my heart beating out of my chest.

She's normal. She can have a baby. Why? Why? What does she have that I haven't? I start breathing harder, tears pressing behind my eyes.

“Are you alright, love?” The woman asks. “You look like you've seen a ghost!”

I nod silently, slipping past her and heading out into the rain.

It's falling in buckets. I'm immediately drenched as I run back to my car, clutching my purse to my chest. I climb inside, slamming the door behind me, and then just sit there, soaked and panting, listening to the water drumming against the windows and car doors.

Then I start to cry quietly, pulling out my phone.

It's four-thirty AM in New York, but I figure the boys might be jet lagged. It's not like Seb and Jack ever sleep, anyway. Someone must be awake. I need someone to be awake. I can't do this by myself.

I hold my breath as the phone rings. It rings, and rings, and rings, and finally disconnects. More tears slip down my face. I end the call and try Cyrus. Then Jack. Nothing. By this time, I'm openly sobbing. I try Seb one last time, this time letting the call run over to the answering machine. When the automated voice tells me to leave a message, I open my mouth, but all the words dry up

in my throat. It hurts too much to even say out loud.

“Um, hi,” I say eventually. “Sorry to call you in the middle of the night. I know you guys are busy. When you can, can you please call me back? Um, thanks.” I take a deep breath. “I just really need—”

The call cuts off. I swallow hard, lowering the phone shakily back into my lap. Rain crashes against the car windows, blowing wildly outside, and I curl up in the driver’s seat, running my hands over my face.

Realistically, I know they haven’t abandoned me. I know they’re just sleeping. But sitting out here, in the rain, with no one answering my calls—I feel just as alone as I did, each time my foster parents drove me back to the care home. I feel just as unwanted.

Swallowing down a sob, I click on Benny’s contact. He probably won’t be awake yet, but he will be in a few hours. I can still message him. I stab the button, opening up our text thread, and my mother’s address shines up at me from the screen. I stare at it, my mouth drying. The doctor’s voice echoes through my head.

The largest risk factor is genetic. Did any of the women in your family go through menopause in their twenties?

I know I told the guys that I would wait for them to come back before contacting my birth family. But they won’t be back for a week, and I suddenly don’t know if I can wait that long.

I don’t have anybody who loves me right now. No mum. No sister. No boyfriend. At the end of the day, the guys are just my employers. Friends with benefits. There’s nothing tying us together. I need someone who *loves* me. Unconditionally. Someone who I know won’t leave me.

I take a deep, gulping breath. What’s wrong with me? How can life be this unfair? It’s like the universe is laughing at me. First, my own parents didn’t want me. My grandparents handed me over into care. Countless foster families tried me out and decided they wouldn’t keep me. My whole life, I’ve been completely alone. I’ve had no one.

What did I do wrong? Why am I not allowed to have a family? Everybody else has one; why can’t I?

I don't have anyone. Anyone at all. For fuck's sake, I just need *one person*.
Someone who cares that my heart has just broken.

I think for a long, long time, weighing up my options. Then I start the car,
and settle in for the long drive down to Cornwall.

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FIFTY-NINE

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CYRUS

“I can’t believe you’re wearing a bloody t-shirt,” I mutter, as all four of us jog down the corridor towards the gold-plated lift. We’re on our way to our first presentation of the conference, and we’re running late. After the horrendous flight last night, we just fed Cami, settled her down, and then passed out. We woke up this morning to the sound of the hotel phone ringing with our wake-up call, half an hour before our first presentation.

Like total idiots, we assumed half an hour would be enough time to get ready. Between feeding Cami, burping her, bathing her, and changing her, we barely had enough time to get dressed ourselves. I’m fixing my cufflinks as I run, and Seb is trying to simultaneously comb through his hair with his fingers and knot his tie. Several posh-looking guests side-eye us as we pass them, our footsteps too loud in the echoing, glittering hallway.

The hotel the conference put us up in is sexy as fuck. I’ve never been in a place so fancy. Our suite is huge; three king-sized beds, a kitchen and living area, and a massive terrace that looks out over the New York skyline. The building has three separate swimming pools, and the room service is catered by a Michelin star chef. The whole hotel has been taken over for the conference, and everywhere we go, we’re passing tech billionaires in perfectly pressed suits, talking quietly about investments and sales.

Which makes Jack’s casual graphic tee look even stupider.

“I’m a game designer,” Jack points out, glancing down at Cami. She’s frowny and red-faced in her carrier, but she’s not started crying yet, which must be some kind of miracle. “They *expect* me to turn up in a t-shirt and jeans.”

“Look at these people.” I wave at a couple walking past. The woman is decked out in louboutins and a diamond necklace. She looks stunning. “Would it kill you to put on a suit?”

“I *tried* to,” he reminds me through gritted teeth, “but you said I wasn’t allowed to wear my bow tie!”

I put my hand on his shoulder as we pull up next to the lifts, panting. “So help me God,” I say quietly. “If you ever—*ever* wear a *novelty bow tie* again, I’m moving out. I refuse to be seen in public with a man who dresses like Doctor fucking Who.”

“What’s wrong with Doctor Who?”

“He’s a dorky white guy! My whole career depends on my sex appeal! You’ll ruin my brand!”

“Stop arguing,” Sebastian orders, stabbing the *call lift* button. Cami squawks unhappily, and Jack sets down the carrier, picking her up and holding her against him. That calms her down, and she cuddles into his incredibly inappropriate t-shirt.

“It’s okay to puke on it,” I tell her in a stage whisper. “In fact, it’s encouraged.”

The lift doors open with a *ding*, and we step inside. “Do you remember your lines?” Sebastian asks me, pressing the button for the parking lot.

I sigh. “Yes. Jesus Christ. I might be shit at reading, but I don’t actually have a five-second memory.” I’m great at public speaking. When you shake your balls onstage five days a week, you lose your self-consciousness pretty quickly. “If any one of us messes up, it won’t be me.”

We both glance at Jack. His hands are clenched by his sides, and his face is white. His lips are moving as he repeats his part of the script over and over in his head. He’s obviously scared shitless. I don’t get why he’s so nervous. I’ve played Legend of Azaran multiple times, and his work is more than good enough to speak for itself. Apparently, he’s the only one who doesn’t see how great it is.

I clap a hand on his back. “You’ll be fine, man,” I assure him. “The game is solid. People will like it.”

“I just wish I had some more *time*—” he starts, and I shake my head.

“The game is out there. It’s great. Stop trying to pick holes in it and *relax*.”

He nods jerkily. The lift shudders to a stop, and we all step back as the doors

slide open again. A short, portly man in a pinstriped suit steps inside, and Jack goes completely still.

I recognise the guy immediately. Hamish Cavendish. He's the CEO of Cavendish Industries, one of the biggest gaming companies in the world.

Jack *loves* this guy. Watches all of his online TED talks religiously. He once made me watch one with him, and I came to the conclusion that Hamish is an arrogant, disgustingly wealthy knobhead, who has made way too much money and developed a God complex.

But hey, that's just me.

Hamish gives us a mild smile and pulls out his phone, then freezes, looking up at Jack. His eyes focus on the pass hanging around his neck.

"Trinity Games?" He reads. "You wouldn't happen to be Jack Insley, would you?"

Jack turns, his eyes wide. "Y-yeah?" He stammers, and I fight the urge to roll my eyes. The guy can talk about RPG stats and pixel counts until the cows come home, but put an important man in a suit in front of him and he dries up like a salted slug.

The man nods, offering Jack his hand. "Hamish Cavendish. I'm the head CEO of Cavendish industries."

Jack shifts Cami to his hip and shakes his hand numbly. "I know who you are," he gushes. "I... oh my god. I love your work. *Under the Red Sky* is one of my favourite games ever."

Hamish raises an eyebrow. "Deep cut. Not a fan of my newer stuff?"

Jack turns bright red. "No, sir. I mean, yes! I just think it's incredible how you wrote such a complex game in your twenties. It's very inspiring. But I like all your later releases too. *Knight Takes Rook* was amazing, the graphics were stunning—"

I stamp on his foot to shut him up.

Hamish grins. "I was just kidding. Thank you, kid. We've been following your game development journey. You're very talented." He glances between us. "Is this your team?"

“I just work admin and finances,” Seb says, then nods at me. “Cyrus is advertising. The development is all Jack.”

Jack looks like he’s about to die. I try to hold in my amusement.

Hamish nods. “That’s impressive. How did you get started developing games?”

“Oh.” Jack looks down. “When I was younger, my dad used to play a lot of text-based adventure games. I used to make my own—write them out on bits of paper. When I was in high school, I took some programming courses, and worked out how to turn them into playable PC games.” He shrugs. “Then I just kept going.”

“That’s fascinating. I’d love to hear some more about it.” Hamish pulls a business card out of his pocket, handing it over. “I’m afraid my diary is *packed* until Tuesday night—we get most of the year’s business done this week, you know. But if you’re free then, I’d love to have dinner with you three.” He gives Cami an uncomfortable smile. “I know the hotel has a creche.”

I snort. We’ve had this kid three weeks; there’s no way I’m letting some stranger take care of her. Right now, the only four people I trust her with are myself, Seb, Jack, and Beth.

“I’ll have to pass, man,” I say, fixing Cami’s hair. She stares at me with huge eyes, then crumples up her face and starts to cry quietly. I take her off Jack and press a kiss to her cheek, cuddling her. “I’ll be looking after ladybug, here.”

Hamish looks slightly relieved. “Oh, good. She’s yours.”

Sebastian frowns. “Do you have a problem with hiring parents?”

Hamish waves him off. “Not so much in the later years, but definitely when there are babies involved. I find family life and business don’t mix well together, you know? I can’t stand when new recruits start having kids.”

“Oh, is *that* why all of your employees are men?” I ask lightly, tickling Cami’s belly. Seb cuts me a glare. “What? It’s true.” I’ve seen their website. Most of their employees are identical private-school old boys. I probably never would have noticed before Cami came into our lives, but now I have a

tiny baby girl to look after. The idea of anyone underestimating her or refusing her job opportunities because of her *gender* is enough to make my blood boil.

Incredibly, Hamish doesn't even deny it. "Yes. Not very politically correct, of course, but the truth of the matter is, it's impractical to place females in high-ranking positions."

Sebastian coughs. Cami frowns. She's either outraged by the injustice against her sex, or about to poop.

Hamish sighs heavily. "They always promise they're career-oriented in interviews, then inevitably choose to have families after a few years, and demand maternity leave. Hiring them is just bad business."

I give him a flat look. "Well, thanks for your kind offer, but we're due to go home Sunday. So I guess—"

Sebastian cuts me off. "We can extend the trip for another few days."

I stare at him.

"Please do," Hamish beams at Jack. "We've been looking to bring fresh developers into the company, and you're in our top twenty candidates. I'm glad I got to speak to you." He checks his watch. "I've got to run now, but my assistant will contact you with the details."

The lift dings, and he gives Jack a warm handshake and a smile as the doors slide open. We all watch after him as he saunters out into the lobby. The other two seem too shocked to move, so I press the button for the parking lot, and the doors hiss shut again.

"Seriously?" I ask, unimpressed. "You want to work for that creep?"

"I am going to pass out," Jack says faintly. "What the Hell just happened? I—we're going to *dinner* with Hamish Cavendish? What am I going to *wear*?"

"Not a bloody bow tie, that's for sure," I mutter, jogging Cami. Now that the creepy man is gone, she's calmed down again, and is trying to strangle me by yanking on my necklaces.

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" I ask her. "Is this your way of saying I'm your least favourite?"

A smile spreads over her face. She squeals delightedly and almost garottes me again.

“Top *twenty*?” Jack practically moans. “There’s no way I can beat out nineteen other candidates. I’m shit at networking. And interviews. Oh fuck, I’m gonna screw this up—”

“There’s not twenty candidates,” I say flatly. “He’s just saying that to make you shit yourself. Because he’s a knob. Now calm *down*, you need to be onstage in twenty minutes.”

“Right.” Jack takes a deep breath, running a hand through his hair. “Right. Yeah.”

Rolling my eyes, I pull out my phone. I haven’t even had time to check it since I woke up. I have a missed call and a voice message from Beth. I smile when I see the notifications, my insides warming, then swipe to text her back.

C: Heads up, babe, looks like we’re staying another few days. Wednesday at least. Jack has some more asses to kiss.

C: We’ll call later xx

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SIXTY

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BETH

I pull up at the address Benny sent me and sit in the car, staring up at the house.

It's huge. Three floors, with a long, pebble-covered drive and a small fountain in the front garden. Expensive cars with custom plates fill the driveway. The windows are covered with fancy lace curtains, but I can see movement inside. They're home.

I take a deep breath. My mum's clearly done well for herself. This is a far cry from my own cheap, mouldy apartment. I feel out of place already, like I'm too poor to even park my car here.

I brace myself, going over what I want to say in my head.

Hey! How are you? I'm Bethany!

I don't know if you remember me—I'm your daughter.

I know you decided you didn't want me, but that's okay, no hard feelings! I just wanted to reconnect with my biological family. Maybe snag a hug or two.

Crap. I can't say any of that, I'll sound like a total psycho. I pull down the sun visor and examine my face in the mirror. I look like shit. I'm not wearing any makeup, I'm exhausted, and my hair is frizzing around my head. I was planning on a doctor's visit today, not meeting my long-lost mother. I try rearranging my hair and pinching my cheeks. So sue me, if I want my mum to think I'm pretty.

I glance again at the house and notice one of the lace curtains twitch. Shit. They've seen me. I probably look like a total creep, hanging around outside their house like a stalker.

I take a deep breath and pull myself together, sliding out of the car. It's now or never. I have to do this. I'm shaking hard as I walk up the drive, small

round pebbles shifting under my shoes. I reach the door, squeeze my eyes shut, and touch my bracelet quickly, for good luck.

Then I press the doorbell. A pretty chiming sound echoes inside the house. I hear dogs barking and a burst of laughter.

“Don’t get up, mum, I’ll get it!” A woman calls. I hear footsteps coming down the corridor, then the lock clicking. The door opens, and I look right into the face of my mother.

For a moment, I’m completely speechless.

Oh, God. Oh, God. She looks just like me.

Red, curly hair. Freckles. She’s wearing a tank top and pajama bottoms, lazy weekend clothes, and her hair is pulled back in a knot behind her head. She’s an inch or two taller than me, and her pale face is slightly wrinkled, but apart from that, she could be my older sister. My throat tightens.

This is her. This is the woman who called me Bethany. Who carried me for nine months. Who gave birth to me.

The woman who didn’t want me in her life. Who never checked up on me. Who never asked to meet me.

When I don’t say anything, she tilts her head, smiling politely. “Yes? Can I help you?”

I open my mouth. “Hi,” I manage, my voice squeaking.

She frowns. “Sorry, do I know you?”

“Yes.” I swallow. “I’m Bethany.”

“Bethany who?” She squints at me. “I don’t remember any Bethanies.”

“Bethany Sarah Ellis.” I say the words carefully, pronouncing every syllable.

The smile drops right off her face. Her cheeks go white. “*What?*” She whispers.

I give her a weak grin. “Hi, Sarah.”

For a few moments, we just stare at each other. Her brown eyes rove over me, drinking in my appearance. “Wh-what are you doing here?” She stutters.

I shrug. “Um. I was in the area. Just thought I’d check in.” I clear my throat. “Um. Can I come in?”

Her eyes widen. “What? No! Oh my God, no, you have to leave!”

Hurt pangs through my stomach. “What?”

“Is it a door salesman, honey?” A man’s voice calls from behind her. “Need some help getting rid of him?”

Sarah grips the doorframe, fear flooding her face. “It’s nothing, Carl,” she calls over her shoulder. “Just someone who needs directions.”

I gape at her. She steps out into the driveway and slams the door behind her. “You have to *leave*,” she repeats. “Now!”

“But—”

Her pretty face pinkens with anger. “*What made you think this was okay?*” She hisses. “I have a family now! I have a husband, and kids, and a house—I’ve finally got my life sorted out! Do you want to come and ruin it again? What do you want from me?”

“I—”

She pats down her pockets. “You want money? I’ll wire you as much as you need, if you just *leave now*—”

Tears press against the back of my eyes. This isn’t what I expected at all. Back when I was a kid, the social workers at the home always told me *your mum loves you so much. She just can’t take care of you, right now.* And I believed them. I had to. That thought kept me going. I always assumed that my mum still wanted me. That if we met again, she’d still feel *some* connection to me. If I were in her shoes, I’m sure I’d love my kid until the day I died, even after I gave them up for adoption.

But she doesn’t care. She doesn’t even want to invite me in for a fucking cup of tea.

“I didn’t ruin your life,” I say quietly. Anger is simmering under my skin. Years of sadness and heartbreak are bubbling up inside me.

She laughs. The sound is slightly hysterical. “I had everything, before you came along. My boyfriend, my future, my career—I had to give that all up as

a teenager, because of *you*. You don't get to come back and fuck shit up again, when I'm finally *happy*, for God's sake." The squeals of young children float from the back garden, and she winces. "So *please*, just go—"

Something in me snaps. "Fuck you!" I shout. My voice echoes around the quiet, well-manicured drive, making her jump. "I didn't ruin your life! It's *not my fault* I was *born*. That was *your decision*. *Yours!* If you hated me that much, why didn't you just get rid of me?"

"I did the best thing I could for you!" She snaps back. "I was a *kid*, I couldn't give you a family. So I gave you up, so a new family could take you in! I did the right thing! Now, for the love of God, just—"

I stare at her. "Are you serious?" My voice is spiralling higher. "You didn't follow my case at all? You just gave me away and washed your hands of me?!"

"What are you talking a—"

"I never *got* adopted," I bite out. "I never had a family. And now I never will."

She swallows, looking down at the drive. "Oh."

I shake my head. Tears sting my eyes. "I didn't come here for money. Or to *tear apart your family*. I came here, because I just got back from the doctor's. He... he said I can't have kids."

Sarah's lips part. "Oh."

I take a deep breath. "They say it's genetic."

She nods jerkily. "I—yeah. It runs in the family. Oh, God."

There's another childlike yell from the garden. "I bet I can beat you!" A little girl shouts, her voice carrying on the wind. "Ready, steady, go!"

My throat squeezes. "You have kids?"

Shame colours her cheeks. "I knew it might happen, so mum told me to freeze my eggs."

I nod slowly. My jaw is clenched tight. My hands are curled into fists. I take a deep breath through my nose. "You couldn't send me an email?" I ask. "It didn't cross your mind that maybe you should tell your *biological daughter*"

about your *genetic* condition?”

She won't meet my gaze. “I'm sorry.”

“Why?” I ask, my voice breaking. “Why didn't you tell me? Do you hate me that much? I get that you don't want me anymore, but you've just taken away my ability to have *kids*, for God's sake. You've taken away any chance of me ever having a family. *Why?*”

She looks me dead in the eye. Her face is very pale. “Because I forgot.”

I look down, tears rolling down my face. She *forgot*.

Through all of the doctor's visits, and the hormone therapy, and freezing her eggs, she never once thought of me. Through IVF, and going through labour, and giving birth, and holding her newborn babies—her first pregnancy never once crossed her mind.

It seems impossible. How is that possible? Am I that insignificant? Do I matter that little?

Sarah starts to sob quietly, her slim shoulders shaking. I feel like I'm about to collapse into pieces.

Before I can think of what to say next, there's a rattle at the front door. We both jump as it cracks open, and a very familiar voice echoes down the drive.

“Sarah, love, can you come and help set the table?”

A shiver rolls down my spine. Sarah wipes her eyes. “Mum,” she sobs. “She won't go. She came back, and she won't go.”

“What? Who won't go? Are you *crying?*” My grandmother steps out onto the driveway, and my mouth goes dry.

SIXTY-ONE

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BETH

I haven't seen Nonna since I was four years old, but I still remember her face. Hell, how could I forget? For a few years, she was essentially my mother. When I was in the care home, I wished on every birthday candle I blew out that she'd come to pick me up and take me back home.

"Hey, Nonna." I say bitterly. Her face screws up as if she's swallowed a lemon wedge.

"Bethany." She glances down at her daughter and sighs. "Come to ask for a cheque, I suppose. What is it? Tuition fees? Low on your rent?"

I sputter. "I don't want your *fucking money!*"

"I'm sure." There's another squeal from the garden, and the sound of a man's laughter.

Sarah grabs Nonna's arm. "He can't see her," she hisses.

Nonna nods and steps forward. "You need to leave," she tells me sternly. "Hattie and Henri are out in the garden. I won't have you upsetting my grandchildren."

I stare at her. "*Upsetting your grandchildren?*" I repeat, incredulously. "Are you kidding me? I'm your grandchild! Your firstborn fucking granddaughter!"

Her face pinches with fury. "You need to leave."

"That's it? You don't want to ask how I am? What I'm doing with my life? Whether I'm dating, or married, or I have kids? You don't give a fuck?"

"Do not talk to me like that."

I shake my head, tears popping into my eyes. In the garden, I hear the creak of trampoline springs, and two little faces bounce up from behind a hedge. I

see two shocks of bright red hair.

Hattie and Henri. I have *siblings*. God, I would *kill* to get to know those kids. But apparently, I'm deemed too shameful to even be seen by them. "I don't understand why," I whisper. "Why are they good enough for you, and I'm not?"

Nonna takes a deep breath through her nose. "Perhaps," she says icily, "you should consider why we couldn't keep you. Because I can assure you, we damn well tried to love you." Her eyes glint nastily. "You were an insufferable child."

I stagger back a step. I feel like I've been kicked in the chest.

"And now you've come here," she continues, "swearing, and shouting, disrupting our family with your own selfishness. You clearly haven't grown up at all."

"Stop," I whisper. "Please, just—"

The front door opens again. "What's going on out here?" A male voice calls. Sarah and Nonna both freeze as an attractive blonde guy steps out of the house. His eyes widen when he sees my tear-stained cheeks. "Wow, hey, are you okay?" He glances across at Sarah, who's still quietly crying. "Babe!" He wraps an arm around her, dismayed. "Hey, what's wrong? Why are you crying?" He looks between us all. "What's going on?"

Nonna sniffs. "Nothing is going on," she says crisply. "Bethany here was just *leaving*."

"Bethany..." He squints at me. "Damn, babe, she looks *just like you* when we first met. Woah. Are you guys cousins, or something?"

My mouth falls open. "She didn't tell you about me?"

He looks confused. "Tell me what, love?" Sarah's sobs get louder, and he strokes her hair back. "Hey, it's okay."

A wrinkled hand closes around my arm like a vice. "You're leaving," Nonna spits, dragging me back across the drive. "Now."

"But—"

"I don't know *what* you were shooting for when you came here," she growls.

She must be over seventy now, but her grip is iron-clad as she tugs me along.

“I don’t want anything!” I protest. “I just needed—” My shoes slip on the pebbly drive, and I stumble. She yanks me upright, shoving me towards my cheap, second-hand car. I slam into the door, my palms stinging from the force. I’m shaking all over. I can’t believe this is happening. I can hear raised voices coming from further up in the drive.

“Why didn’t she tell him about me?” I demand. “He’s her *husband*. Am I really that much of an embarrassment, she can’t even admit to her husband that I exist?!”

Nonna huffs. “Carl is soft. If he knew his kids had a half-sister, he would’ve tried to contact you.”

“And that would be so bad, would it?! It would be so awful for me to have one person who actually wants me around?! It would be *so awful* for me to get to know my own bloody *siblings*?”

“They’re not your siblings!”

“They’re more related to me than they are to you!”

Her jaw tightens. “Look.” She squares up to me, looking me straight in the eye. “My daughter made a mistake having you. She was fifteen. Do you really think she should be punished for the rest of her life for a stupid teenage mistake?”

“I’m not a punishment,” I choke. “I’m a *person*.”

She shakes her head. “Look at this place! She’s finally moving forward in life. She’s working on her degree. She has a good job. She found a well-off husband who worships the ground she walks on. She has two beautiful, intelligent, *well-behaved* children. She wouldn’t have been able to have any of this, if she’d kept you. And she *deserves* a good life, Bethany. She deserves all of this.” Her nostrils flare. “I won’t have you ruining it for her. If I see you around here again, I will call the police.”

I yank my arm away. Heat is flushing my face. I can’t stop the tears rolling down my cheeks. “Don’t worry about that,” I snap, pulling open the car door. “You won’t ever see me again.”

I slide into the car seat and slam the door shut, starting the engine. Dimly,

over the sound of my car sputtering to life, I hear someone call out my name. I look up to see Carl jogging towards me, shock all over his face. Sarah stops him, holding him back as I pull out into the road. Fury lashes through me. I wind down the window and tug my bracelet off my wrist for the first time in years. It gleams bright gold between my fingers.

I've worn this bracelet my whole life. On my first day of school. When I started new jobs. When I went on first dates. Whenever I got broken up with, or rejected, or hurt, I was wearing this bracelet. Every time I needed my mum, I looked at it, and it gave me the strength I needed.

And it means absolutely fuck all. It's just a piece of jewellery she probably bought at the hospital gift shop.

You are my sunshine. What a load of fucking horse crap.

I toss it out of the window, and it lands at Sarah's feet. She starts crying harder, sobbing into her hands. Carl shouts something after me, but I slam my foot on the gas and speed away, driving until my mother's house is completely out of sight.

For a long time, I drive in silence, not stopping to turn on the radio or the GPS. Rain starts to splash over the windshield and cold fills the car. I barely notice. Nonna's voice swirls around my head, over and over, on a loop.

You're upsetting my grandchildren. They're not your siblings. You were an insufferable child. We damn well tried to love you.

My hands shake on the steering wheel. I just don't understand. I don't understand why I've never been important enough for people to care about. I don't understand why I'm so *difficult* to love.

As if in answer, my phone buzzes in my pocket. My stomach flips.

I pull up at the side of the road and pick it up numbly, praying that it's one of the boys. My heart lurches when I see Cyrus's name. Thank *God*. I swipe to open the message, my fingers fumbling.

C: Heads up, babe, looks like we're staying another few days. Wednesday at least. Jack has some more asses to kiss. We'll call later xx

I feel like I've swallowed a lump of ice. I called them crying in a voice message, and they responded telling me that they're extending their trip.

I squeeze my eyes shut, taking a few deep breaths, then tap out a reply.

B: Okay, great! Proud of you x

I send the text off with shaky hands, then slip the phone back into my pocket, reversing into the road again. The rain gets heavier as I make my way back to London. I only stop once on the way, to pick up my new prescription and two bottles of wine.

When I finally make it back to my flat, I'm exhausted. My whole body is aching. I lean heavily against the door and toss my keys onto the counter. They skitter across the surface, sliding to a stop next to the three empty pregnancy test packages I dumped there last night.

I stare at them. Just twenty-four hours ago, I was pacing up and down my flat, scared and nervous and excited. And now I have nothing. Nothing.

I put down my shopping bag and crack open the first bottle of wine.

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SIXTY-TWO

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CYRUS

“Something is wrong,” I insist, setting my beer glass down and squinting at my phone screen.

Neither of the others respond. I glare at them both.

It’s our eighth day in New York, and we’re at the hotel’s poolside cafe, eating lunch. The sun is beating down over our heads, and a cool breeze is rippling over the turquoise pool. Kids are playing in the water, splashing each other, sending little sparkling droplets into the air.

It’s been a busy day; we’ve already attended two panels this morning, and we’re giving a presentation on indie mobile app games in just a few hours.

For the most part, the conference is going perfectly. We have a pretty slick routine down—Sebastian and Jack write out a script for me to learn the night before, I give the presentation, and then the two of them chip in with extra info, and answer questions at the end. *Legend of Azaran 2: The Forgotten War* has been stuck at number one on the paid game charts for days, and Jack has had more offers than we can count.

Not that he cares. I watch him, sitting opposite me with Cami in his lap. He’s feeding her some gross-looking pumpkin and carrot baby food we bought at a local store. His leg is jiggling nervously, bopping her up and down as she tries to eat.

Ever since we met Hamish in the lift, he’s been jittery about their little dinner date. It’s all he talks about, and it’s pissing me off. Both him and Seb have been so busy planning and presenting and networking, they’re completely ignoring the massive problem staring us in the face.

Beth.

It’s been seven days since she spoke to us, and I’m going out of my mind. The last text was from our very first day, when I messaged her about our

extended stay. She replied a few hours later.

B: Okay, great! Proud of you x

I've sent her a million messages since then. Updates. Pictures of Cami. Requests to video chat. And she hasn't seen any of them.

"She probably just wants a break from us," Seb mutters, for the fiftieth time. "Seriously, Cyrus. Drop it."

I scowl. Seb has been sulky for days, ever since he texted Beth to ask for advice about calling Cami's mum. She ignored him, so now he's convinced that she hates us.

"*This isn't right*," I insist. "She wouldn't just cut contact. It's not like her."

"I messaged her *multiple times* about our upcoming call with Anisha. She didn't respond."

I bite my lip. That's another thing to worry about. We've scheduled a Skype call with Cami's mum for this evening. I'm absolutely dreading it. I don't know what to do. I can't stand the thought of Anisha changing her mind and trying to take her back.

As if she shares my sentiment, Cami suddenly shouts and knocks over her plastic bowl. Orange goop spills over the table and splatters my sleeve. I pick up a napkin and wipe off my cuffs as Sebastian scoops baby food off the tablecloth.

"Beth's our employee," Seb continues, his voice flat. "She's on holiday. She probably just wanted to turn off her phone, and not talk to us for a few days."

My hackles rise. "Even if she was just an employee, which she's obviously not, you fu—friggin' *idiot*, there's no way in Hell that she wouldn't try to check in on Cami."

A muscle tics in his jaw. "The last time I knocked on her door on her day off, she was very unhappy with me. I don't want to keep hounding her."

"Yeah, because you were being an entitled prick." I shake my head. "Something is *wrong*—"

Sebastian snaps. "What's *wrong*, is you're falling for our bloody nanny, after

she very clearly said she didn't want to date you."

I scoff. "Oh, *I'm* falling for her? And I'm the only one?"

His eyes narrow. "You're the only one blowing up her phone like a teenage boy who's been stood up. If she's not interested in dating one guy, why the Hell would she want three?"

"At least I'm not so emotionally constipated I can *tell* when I'm falling for someone. You two are pathetic." I shove my phone in his face, showing him the chain of text messages I've sent Beth. "*Look* at this!"

Sebastian scans the messages silently. I've reread them so many times, I know them all by heart.

Beth?

Are u ok?

Why aren't you answering??

Do u want to speak with Cami?

The panel went well today. Jack nearly pissed his pants on-stage when a member of the audience asked him a question. It was great

BETHIE

Youre freaking me out, has something hapenned??

Beth, you're scaring me

Please answer.

"She would have responded to these," I insist.

Jack sighs. "Cyrus—"

I slam my hand on the table. All of the cutlery rattles. "I'm not overreacting!" I shout.

My voice echoes around the swimming pool. Several women in bikinis look over from their sun loungers. Cami pouts, covering her eyes with her chubby hands.

I take a deep breath. "Look," I say, turning to Seb, "I know that you think no

woman would ever love you, because you're the Incredible Hulk, or whatever," I jab my thumb at Jack, "and *you* think your app is the most important thing about you. But can you please get over your stupid issues and actually *think* for a second? That girl practically climbed into the taxi when we left for the airport. *She likes us*. She cares about us. She wouldn't do this to us." I run a hand through my hair, stressed. "What if she got really sick? Or—or she fainted in her apartment and cracked her head open? She could have slipped in the shower. Someone could have broken in. She lives alone, no one would know if she was hurt."

They both go pale. Sebastian's hand grips the edge of the table so tightly that his knuckles bleach. For a moment, no one says anything.

"We'll call the landlord," he decides eventually, pulling out his phone. "Ask him to check in on her. He can knock on her door and see if she responds."

"He won't do that," Jack says softly. Bill is kind of a prick. He flat-out ignores us if a pipe bursts, but tries to fleece us out of money every chance he gets. I seriously doubt he's going to be any help.

"He will if we request a welfare check," Sebastian says grimly. "If only to make sure he gets his rent on time." He starts tapping at his phone screen.

I flop back in my seat, relieved. Cami lifts her arms to me, so I take her off Jack and put her in my lap. She buries her face in my shirt and starts to cry. I'm very tempted to join her.

SIXTY-THREE

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BETH

I don't know how long passes. I really, honestly don't know. The days are blurring together. The nights feel too long. I spend all my time lying in bed and crying.

I'm *sad*. I'm so sad, it feels like there's an anvil sitting on my chest. I wake up every day, and for a few tiny seconds, I feel okay—until I remember the doctor's visit. I remember meeting my mother. I remember that I'm never, ever going to have the family I wanted. And then I get sad again. So sad, I can't even bring myself to move.

I've felt like this before, but not for a long time. Not since I was a kid. I felt it every time a foster family I'd fallen in love with sent me back to the care home. I don't know if *depression* is the right word for it, exactly. I think maybe *grief* would be more accurate. It's like I'm in mourning.

Which would make sense, right? I feel like I've lost a lot in one day.

Then again, I'm apparently fucking *menopausal*, so maybe it's just my out-of-whack hormones. Or the pills my doctor prescribed me. At the end of the day, it doesn't really matter what's wrong with me, does it? Nothing matters. Nothing at all.

I try calling the boys a few more times, but none of them respond. After the first day, I give up. They obviously don't want to speak to me. I put my phone down somewhere, and then lose it immediately in all of my crap. My flat is a mess. I can't eat or sleep. I just lay in bed all day, watching my crappy little TV set and drinking cheap wine.

That is, until the landlord comes and thumps on my door.

"Bethany!" He shouts through the wood. "Open up. It's Bill."

Panic floods me. I jump out of bed, looking down at myself. I'm wearing a stained t-shirt that hasn't properly fit me since I was fifteen, and a pair of

pink knickers with holes worn in the crotch. I haven't showered in days, and my apartment looks like a tip. I wouldn't be surprised if the dirty plates in my sink are growing mould.

He's going to *kill* me.

"Shit," I mutter, yanking open my wardrobe. It takes me a few minutes to scrounge up clean clothes, and by the time I'm changed, his knocks have become a steady, full-on pounding. I can hear him swearing under his breath behind the door.

"Coming!" I call, stumbling across my flat. I trip over some shoes strewn on the floor and collapse against the front door. "Sorry, I'm coming." My fingers fumble on the latch. They're shaky and weak. I don't remember the last time I ate. I should probably do that.

I eventually get the door unlocked and yank it open. My landlord glares at me. He somehow looks imposing, even though he's five-two and has a fluffy white Santa Claus beard.

"Rent," he grunts. "You're late."

Fuck. "Shit. Oh, God, I'm so sorry. It completely slipped my mind."

It's weird; I've been late with the rent before, and Bill's never come to ask me for it in person. Then again, I've been pretty off-the-grid. For all I know, my email is filled with angry messages from him.

He studies me closely, taking in my unkempt appearance. I shift in the doorway, trying to block his view of the messy flat. "You don't have the money?" He asks shortly.

"No, I do, I do. I'll transfer it right away. I'm so sorry I forgot." I pat down my pants, then remember my phone is AWOL. "Um, can you take a cheque?"

"Yes."

I run to my little desk and yank open the top drawer, unearthing my cheque book. I have written exactly one cheque in my life, but luckily I still keep the thing lying around. "How much is it again?" I ask, grabbing a pen.

"Two thousand seven hundred for the quarter."

Shit, that's a lot of money. Thanks to the guys, I have enough, but I'll be pretty much wiped out until they come back. If they still want me.

The thought slams into me like a truck. There's no guarantee that Sebastian will still want to hire me when he gets home from the US. He's certainly not in a hurry to fly back. Or call me.

I remember his words in the bedroom.

I don't need her.

You're overreacting, a voice says in the back of my mind. They're busy. That's why they've not been calling you. They're not abandoning you.

The thing is, it wouldn't even be abandoning me, would it? I'm not their girlfriend, I'm their employee. They can fire me whenever they want.

You're just fragile and overemotional, the tiny voice insists. You're not thinking straight.

Even so. If there's one thing I've learned in my life, it's to never depend fully on someone else. Especially someone that hasn't bothered to contact you for a full week. Always have a back-up plan.

"Um." I rub my eyes. "Can I pay just one month, instead of the full quarter?"

Bill's eyebrows fly up. "You don't like it here?"

"No, I just..." I remember Maisie. "I got offered a job up in Bristol. Probably won't take it. But I'd like to keep my options open, just in case."

"Is there something wrong with my building?" He asks, his voice rising.

"No, Bill."

"Then why is everyone leaving? How am I supposed to find new tenants at this time of year?! The men upstairs rang and told me the exact same thing."

My stomach goes cold. "What men upstairs?"

"Your friends. The tech guys."

I stare at him. "They got a job in Bristol?"

"They're planning on moving out, and want to pay rent monthly."

I feel the blood rush out of my face. "Oh. Well. This is London. I'm sure

you'll find new tenants soon. Students, or something.”

His scowl deepens. “Do I look like a bloody university hall? I’m not taking in *students!* I swear to God, if I find out some other landlord is trying to poach my business—”

I cut him off. “That’s nine hundred for a month, right?”

He nods. I write out the cheque, and he snatches it out of my hand, muttering to himself as he stamps back down the corridor. I stand still for a moment, staring after him. My mind is racing, but I feel too tired to move.

They’re leaving. Without even telling me. They want to move away. Slowly, I close my door and lean against the wall, running a hand through my hair. My skin is boiling hot under my clothes.

I feel so fucking *stupid*.

Why am I like this? Why am I so desperate? It’s like I never grew up at all. I might be a grown woman now, but on the inside, I’m still the same terrified, hungry girl I was as a child. So desperate to be loved and cared-for that she clings to everyone who shows her a crumb of affection. Who falls head-over-heels for a guy in a matter of weeks.

And then another guy.

And another.

This is why I’ve been so careful not to date. Because I’m absolutely pathetic. When am I going to stop being such a fucking leech, and just stand on my own two feet? I obviously need to; clearly, I was never meant to have a family. I was *meant* to be alone. The universe has practically told me as much. No parents. No kids.

I need to get over this idea that I can ever have anybody.

I’m so fucking *sad* I just don’t know what to do anymore. I want to crumble into atoms and disappear.

SIXTY-FOUR

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JACK

Nerves pulse through me as I tip the baby bottle into Cami's tiny mouth. She frowns at me, hiding her face in my arm, and I realise I'm holding her too stiffly. I force myself to take a deep breath, relaxing my muscles.

It's a few hours before my meeting with Hamish, and I'm sitting in our hotel room feeding Cami. She's lolling against the crook of my arm in her new dinosaur onesie, gumming dejectedly at her bottle.

As she drinks, my eyes flick back to the suit hanging on the back of the wardrobe door. Cyrus rented it for me for my meeting tonight. It stares back at me, taunting me. My leg starts to bounce as anxiety crunches my stomach.

I'm not looking forward to the dinner. I already know I'm going to flub it. I don't interview well—I get all stressed and nervous and can't even answer basic questions. Normally, that's not too much of a big deal, since people don't usually expect programmers to be social butterflies. But tonight, I really have to knock it out of the park.

God. Maybe I should take a shot of whiskey before I go down, or something.

Cami bleats angrily as my bouncing knee accidentally knocks the bottle out of her mouth.

I go still. "Sorry, baby."

She glares up at me and latches on again. I sigh, glancing back at the suit.

I know Cyrus is pissed off at me for being so preoccupied with Hamish. I'm pretty sure he thinks Beth's radio silence is partly because of me ignoring her and focussing on the convention. Even Seb's been getting irritated with me; although he's been irritated in general the last few days. Ever since Beth stopped responding to his calls.

I get it. I'm probably being really annoying. But neither of them seem to

understand how much this means to me. My whole life, I've flown under the radar. I was the kid who locked himself in his room all summer, while my siblings went out and won pre-Olympic tournaments. They were getting interviewed by newspapers while I sat at home and played video games all day.

My parents tried everything to get me to be more social. They hid my consoles. Signed me up for clubs. Forced me to play sports. Nothing ever stuck. I was perfectly happy being introverted and quiet and nerdy, but that didn't matter; everybody else just wanted me to be like my siblings.

Over time, I got used to being the unimpressive one. I got used to my parents spending all day driving their other kids to and from practices, but expecting me to sit on the bus for six hours to get to a gaming convention. I got used to them spending every single weekend at gymnastics competitions or football games, and not giving a shit when I won a county chess tournament. I got used to them forking out thousands of pounds a month for new trainers and leotards and private classes whenever my siblings asked for them, but refusing to let me join a junior coding course because the five-quid weekly fee was too steep.

I got the message loud and clear—what I wanted just wasn't as important as what my brothers and sister wanted. And that was okay, because I figured that I was playing the long game. One day, I'd become successful, and I'd prove to everyone that I wasn't just a stupid kid messing around with video games. I'd prove that I was actually *good* at this. I had value, even if they didn't notice it right away.

Being signed on by a massive gaming corp is all I've wanted for so, so long, and now it's hanging right in front of me, close enough to touch. All I have to do is reach out and take it.

Cami finishes her bottle and flops dramatically over in my lap, her face scrunching up. I touch her cheek, and she pouts up at me, her big brown eyes tearing.

"Oh, baby," I murmur, as she starts to cry again, soaking the front of my shirt. "It's okay. We'll be home soon."

Poor Cami's hated almost every second of this trip. She's been sad and grumbly almost the entire time we've been here. I wipe off her face and give

her a kiss, and she just cries harder, making fists in my shirt. I burp her, but even after, she keeps sobbing like she's heartbroken.

"I shouldn't have brought her here."

I look up at Sebastian. He's standing in the doorway of the bathroom while Cyrus shaves, watching his daughter with a blank look on his face. He looks exhausted. I'm sure we all do—Cami's been waking up every half an hour at night. We've barely slept all week.

"Maybe she wasn't ready for a holiday," I admit. "It's probably odd for her, being in a new place—"

"It's not the new place," he says shortly. "She was left on a bloody doorstep, and a few hours later she was laughing and smiling. Because of Beth." He looks down at his daughter. "I thought I would be enough for her. But I'm not. I can't make her happy like Beth can."

I rub my eyes. "Beth's a trained professional. You've only been a dad for a few weeks. Give yourself a break."

He looks out of the window, his jaw working. "I'm not good enough for her," he says quietly. I'm not sure if he's talking about Beth or Cami.

Before I can ask, my phone rings. I look down and see our landlord's number flashing across the screen. I immediately accept the call, switching it to speakerphone. "Hello?" I ask. "Is this Bill?"

Seb and Cyrus perk up immediately, coming to sit next to me on the bed.

"*This is he,*" our landlord grumbles. Even down the line, his annoyance is clear.

Not that I care. "Great. Did you see Beth?" I ask, getting straight to the point.

"*She's fine,*" he says shortly. I glance up at Cyrus, confused.

"Did she look upset?" He asks over my shoulder.

"*She had her makeup all smeared around her face. So either she's trying a new style I don't know about, or she's been crying. You know it's not my job to spy for you?*"

"Shit," Cyrus moans, running his hands over his face. "Oh, God. Something's happened. She's hurt."

Seb leans forward. “We’re concerned about her well-being,” he says into the receiver. “Did she seem ill? Hurt?”

“No. She seems perfectly fine.” He pauses. *“So what is it? Is Enzo giving you a better price? That bastard’s always trying to steal my tenants.”*

“What?”

“She’s taking a leaf out of your books, apparently. Said she’s moving out next month. Got a job up in Bristol.” His voice is dripping with disgust. *“Come on, Jack. You boys have lived here for years. Don’t you think you owe me a bit of loyalty? At least tell me when some other landlord is trying to fuck me over. That wasteman’s had it out for me ever since I bought this bloody building. I guess this is his idea of revenge, huh?”*

“What?” I ask numbly. “I’m sorry, did you say Beth is moving?”

“I’ll tell you this for free—” Bill keeps on ranting. *“Enzo might have lower prices, but that idiot’s known for dodging his mortgage payments. If you don’t want to get evicted, you’ll stay here. If I decide to keep you.”*

My heart stops in my chest. Cami looks up at me and starts wailing.

“Is that a baby?” Bill asks, sounding suspicious. *“I’ve had other tenants complaining about a baby crying. It’s not yours, is it?”*

“Thank you,” I tell him, and end the call without saying goodbye. None of us say anything for a few seconds. I pull Cami closer to me, trying to comfort her as my mind whirrs.

Beth is upset. She’s ignoring our calls. She’s moving away. Why? What the Hell has happened in these last few days for her to want to cut contact with us? Why does she want to leave us? Why does she want to leave *Cami*?

Cyrus stands suddenly, bending and yanking his suitcase out from under the bed. I watch as he tugs the wardrobe door open and starts haphazardly pulling out his expensive silk shirts.

“What are you doing?” I ask stupidly.

“Packing.”

“But what about the dinner—”

He whirls on me, his eyes flashing. “What do you care about more, Jack?”

Beth, or making bloody *video games*?”

Without meaning to, I look up again at the suit hanging from the door, my convention pass sticking out of the front pocket. Being invited to a huge event like the AGAME Summit used to be my dream. As a teenager, I imagined what it would be like thousands of times.

But now I'm here—and if I'm honest, I've hated almost every moment. The whole time I've been here, I've been wishing I was somewhere else. With someone else.

“Beth,” I say. “I care about Beth more.” I take a deep breath. “You're right. We have to go home.”

“Why?” He demands. “You adore your work. You bloody *love* your work. But you'd drop it to run after Beth. Why?”

“I...” I look down at the baby in my arms. Cami tips her head and looks back at me, her tiny lips pouting.

“You *love your work*,” Cyrus practically growls, tugging at his hair. “Jesus bloody Christ, Jack, you're so goddamn *thick*, I swear to God—”

“I love her more,” I finish. “Beth. I love her.”

Cyrus shakes his head. “God, you're so bloody stupid.” He kicks his suitcase shut. “There'll be other work opportunities. Someone book the seats.”

“On it,” Seb says, already tapping at his phone.

SIXTY-FIVE

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JACK

If the flight to America was bad, the flight back to England is nothing short of torturous. All three of us are scared and worried. Seb is massaging his temples, and Cyrus is checking his watch every minute, desperate for the journey to go quicker. Cami can sense the tension, and she screams steadily from takeoff to landing. Soon, the other passengers' glares and comments turn into outright complaints. The cabin crew flock over to help, trying to distract her with toys and baby food, but nothing works. Eventually, Sebastian reaches into his wallet, pulls out some notes, and shoves them at the flight attendant. "Just buy everyone a drink on me," he mutters, rubbing his eyes. "That's the best we can do."

After an equally terrible taxi drive, we finally make it back to our building. We don't bother stopping at our flat first, dragging our suitcases right to Beth's hallway. Cami calms down as soon as we reach her door, like she knows she's finally going to see her nanny again.

Seb raps at Beth's door, hard. We all wait anxiously. Cami squirms in my arms.

There's no response. Seb knocks again, and again, but there's no reply.

His face turns red. "Open the damn door, Beth," he calls. "For God's sake. Why are you doing this?"

"Stop yelling at her," Cyrus mutters.

Seb ignores him, pounding on the door again. "Beth, *open the door*. You don't have to talk to us. Just let us *see you*, for God's sake. Cami misses you. At least let her see you, you can't just cut her out—"

There's a *ding* from behind us. We all turn to see the lift doors sliding open. Beth steps out, holding two plastic bags of shopping. Her mouth falls open when she sees us standing outside of her flat.

I'm pretty sure I look just as shocked as she does.

She looks *awful*. Like, I almost can't believe that the girl in front of me is Beth. Has she just not eaten at all for a full week? Has she been deathly sick? She's lost so much weight. Her hair is limp and tangled, and there are huge bags under her eyes. Cami gurgles in my arms, reaching out for her. Beth's eyes flick to her, but she stays rooted to the spot.

Cyrus is the first to break the silence. "Baby, what happened? Are you okay?" He swoops in for a hug. Beth jerks away violently, flinching like he's going to hit her. He steps back, his eyes widening.

Something's wrong. Something's really, really wrong. Something has happened to her. Jesus, has somebody hurt her?

She looks at the floor. "Why are you here?" She asks quietly. "You're meant to be in New York."

"Change of plans," I say softly. "We were worried when you stopped answering our calls. We came back to check you were okay."

Her face turns bright red. "Oh no," she whispers. "I'm so sorry. I never wanted you to mess up your trip for me."

"What did you expect?" Sebastian snaps. "For all we knew, you were dead. You think we were just going to stay out there, giving fucking PowerPoint presentations?"

She turns glassy brown eyes on him, but doesn't say anything. Her bottom lip trembles.

I take a step forward, handing Cami off to Seb, then taking her shopping bags. "Let me take these inside for you," I say, keeping my voice level and soothing. "You go upstairs with the others. I know Cami wants a cuddle."

She frowns. "I can—"

I pull her keys out of her unresisting hands. "Go," I say again. There's no way I'm letting her lock herself back inside her flat. She might not let us in again. We have to get to the bottom of this.

She hesitates for a moment, but Cyrus puts a hand on the small of her back, steering her up the hallway, and she lets him lead her away. I watch her go, then slip her key into the lock, pushing open the door to her flat.

Her place is a tip. Her sink is full of dirty dishes, and there are unwashed clothes strewn all over the floor. Her bed is unmade and surrounded by crumpled balls of tissues. She's either been sick or crying.

The clutter wouldn't worry me so much if she was a messy person; but this is the girl who organised all of Cami's clothes in rainbow order, and filled our freezer with carefully labelled pots of homemade baby food. She'd never live like this, unless she physically couldn't bring herself to clean.

Swallowing hard, I go to set the shopping on the counter. I unpack toilet roll, painkillers, six cans of soup, and three bottles of wine. As I put the food away, I can't help but notice how bare her fridge is. It's practically empty, and pretty much everything left in it is expired. I carefully pick out a Chinese takeaway container that's growing mould, tossing it into her overflowing dustbin.

When I go to the bathroom to put away the loo roll, there are damp, soap-stained towels just dumped on the floor, and her bathroom bin is overflowing with more crumpled tissues. Her whole flat smells damp and musty, like she hasn't opened a window in days.

I don't understand what possibly could have happened. Did someone die? Did she suddenly get depressed?

I head back to the front door with my heart in my throat. As I pass the counter, I notice her phone lying underneath a pile of junk mail. I pick it up, pressing the home button, but the screen stays black. Maybe it's broken? If it is, I can probably fix it up. I shove it in my pocket to look at later, and leave her flat, locking the door behind me.

When I step back into my own apartment, the mood is scarily sombre. Beth is standing in the middle of the living room, hugging Cami. She looks like she's about to burst into tears. Cami, on her part, seems thrilled. She keeps trying to snuggle up into Beth's neck. Cyrus is leaning against the breakfast bar, dismay all over his face. Seb is pacing up and down, jaw clenched.

He turns on me as I shut the door softly behind me. "She wouldn't talk until you got here."

"I didn't want to say it all twice," Beth whispers.

I step towards her and open up my arms. Whatever she's about to tell us, I

want to hold her while she does it. I've been dying to touch her for days.

My heart breaks a little bit when she steps backwards, clutching Cami to her chest like a shield. "Well?" Seb barks. "He's here now. So talk."

She ducks her head. "What do you want to know?" she mutters.

"What's going on with you? Why are you moving out? Or maybe you should start with *why the Hell* you've been ignoring our calls?" She doesn't say anything, nuzzling Cami's pigtail.

Seb huffs. "Do you have any idea how worried we were? We thought something had happened to you! You can't just cut contact with us out of nowhere! For all we knew, you could've gotten sick! Or died! You could've been hit by a car! Someone could have broken into your shitty flat!"

"Seb," I start, but the man shakes his head, his eyes wild.

"No, it's not okay. You scared the *shit* out of us. How the Hell could you see the messages we were sending you and not want to respond? Do you really care about us that little?"

"I didn't mean to," she says. "I'm sorry. I lost my phone."

I pull the mobile out of my back pocket, setting it carefully on the coffee table. "It was on your counter," I say quietly. She stares at it, eyes shimmering. Seb's face darkens with fury.

"On your *counter*," he repeats. "Where were you looking, your fridge? Your toilet bowl? Or were you just *ignoring us*—"

"Shut up!" She bursts out. "Just... please. Shut up. I can't think with you shouting at me."

Seb goes silent. We all watch as Beth sits heavily down on the sofa, pressing a kiss to Cami's head. "I'm sorry," she says quietly. "I never meant to scare you guys. This is the last thing I wanted."

I decide to start from the beginning. "Something happened," I hedge, sitting next to her. "You sounded upset in the voice message you sent us."

She nods, taking a deep breath. "I... I went to the doctor," she starts.

Cyrus stiffens. "Are you okay? Are you sick?"

She shakes her head. “I’m fine. But I missed my period, and I thought—”

Seb spins to face her. “Are you *pregnant?*” He demands.

“No,” she snaps out. “I’m not.”

“Oh.” His shoulders relax. “What is it, then?”

She opens her mouth. Closes it again. Shakes her head. I watch in horror as tears start spilling down over her cheeks and soaking into Cami’s soft hair. Cyrus, Seb and I share a look.

“*Were* you pregnant?” I guess. “Did something happen? Did you lose the baby? Or did you—”

“*I was never pregnant,*” she half-shouts, effectively shutting me up. Cami stares up at her, wide-eyed, then starts to cry loudly. Beth’s face crumples.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbles, pulling Cami closer to her chest. More tears streak down her face. “God, I’m so sorry, please don’t cry.” She rubs her cheek against Cami’s head, pressing a kiss into her curls. “Please, please don’t cry.”

Cami just wails louder, her hands curling into tiny fists.

Beth takes a breath, staring at the baby in her lap—and then just completely breaks down.

SIXTY-SIX

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BETH

Once I start crying, I just can't stop. I *can't*. I've been in so much pain for the last week, and now I finally have the chance to tell somebody, I'm so choked up with emotions that I can't actually get the words out.

The guys try to help. Jack brings me tissues and water. Cyrus squishes up on the sofa next to me and holds me, his head tipped on my shoulder. Sebastian takes Cami off me, jogging her until she calms down. His face is like a mask.

Eventually, I manage to pull myself together enough to speak. In sputtery, sobbing spurts, I tell them what the doctor said and watch their faces fall.

"Oh, God, Beth," Jack mutters, pressing his lips to my hair. "Fuck. I'm so, so sorry."

Cyrus looks heartbroken. He doesn't say anything; just puts his head in my lap, burying his face in my stomach. My hands automatically go into his hair, threading through the shiny strands.

"It's just—" I take a shuddery breath. "Um, it's been a lot to deal with? And now I'm on hormone pills, and I think they're making me loopy. And I feel like I've lost... everything. A whole future I built up for myself in my head. I don't know where I want my life to go, anymore." I bite my lip, looking up at Cami. She's watching me and frowning, her little pink lips pursed as she clings to her dad's neck. Pain echoes through me. I love nannying, but I just don't know if I'll be able to do it anymore. It'll probably slowly kill me inside, looking after all of those children, but only ever being an employee to them. The thought makes my insides shrivel.

Sebastian's silent for a long time. "We spoke to Cami's mother," he says eventually.

Shock stabs me. I stare at him. "*What?*"

"When we were in America." His face is cold and inscrutable. "She's out of

rehab. We all Skyped her. With Cami.”

I mean, if he wanted me to stop crying, it definitely worked. Mostly because I can't even breathe anymore. I gulp. My fingers clench into fists at my sides. “No,” I whisper. “No, no.”

He doesn't respond. Cami looks between us, her eyes wide, then cuddles into her dad's chest. My heart breaks. He's going to leave her. He's going to give her back. “No,” I repeat. “You *can't*.”

“Beth—” Jack starts.

“You're *getting rid of her?*” I'm shouting now. “How *could you?!*”

Sebastian raises an eyebrow, like *I'm* the one being unreasonable. And not him, the man who is literally abandoning his child with a woman who left her on a doorstep like a motherfucking *hamper*. “We're not getting rid of her—” He starts.

“Oh, shut up. Of course you are. Let me guess, you're going to schedule weekend visits. Then they'll become bi-weekly visits, then monthly, then yearly, until in a few years' time, the only contact she'll have with you is the occasional birthday card, when you remember that she exists. I *know* how this works, Seb, I've *seen it* over, and over, and *over again*—”

“We're. Not. Getting. Rid. Of. Her,” he says again, enunciating every word slowly. “We had to talk to Anisha. She's clean. She's doing better. And, like it or not, Cami is her *child*.”

“She doesn't deserve to be! I'm sorry, but abandoning her baby on a stranger's doorstep isn't exactly evidence of great childcare!” I shake my head. “Cami could've died! It was cold outside! Why the Hell would you let that woman anywhere near her again? How could you *do that* to your *daughter?*” I look between the other men, my eyes blazing. “Is that it? You go on one work trip, you get one amazing offer, and suddenly, you're ready to abandon your whole family because you figure your bloody *game* company is more important?”

Seb steps forward. “*We're not getting rid of her!*” He barks. “How many times do I have to say it?” His cheeks are red with anger. “For God's sake, what the Hell have I done to make you think I would just give up my daughter?!”

“You talked about putting her in care!”

“What?” Cyrus says.

Seb’s face is thunderous. “That was before. Before *you* told me all the shit in my head was wrong, and I could be a good father to her.” His jaw locks. He’s breathing hard. “You said I could *do this*. You were *a hundred percent sure*.”

“I still am. You’re a great father.”

He laughs, but the sound is hollow. “I’m obviously not, if you think I’ll give my child to the woman who abandoned her.” Cami pats his cheek, smiling, and he takes a deep breath, obviously trying to calm himself down. “I called Anisha because I wanted to make sure she was certain. I needed to know if she’d ever come back and try to take Cami away from us.”

That takes the wind out of my sails. I look at him, breathing hard. “What did she say?”

“She doesn’t want anything to do with her. She’s willing to sign away custody.” He looks down at his daughter. “Cami’s mine.”

My head is whirling. “But what if she said she wanted her back? What would you have done then?”

“Then I’d call my lawyers. And fight like Hell for our daughter.”

My stomach sours. “*Your* daughter,” I point out. “I’m not her mother. I’m her nanny.”

His eyes narrow on me. “She might be my child, but she loves you. For God’s sake, Bethany. I don’t understand how, after everything you’ve been through growing up, you’d let her fall in love with you, and then leave her.”

I blink. “What?”

“Bill said that you were moving to Bristol.” A muscle tics in his jaw. “You can’t just bloody abandon her,” he snaps. “What the Hell, Beth? I understand if our... relationship makes you uncomfortable. If you don’t want to be with us, that’s fine, but you should’ve just *said*.” He points at Cami. She starts sucking his finger. “This little girl will always be more important than us. She is our first priority. And you just want to up and leave her for some other job as soon as things get difficult? Does the other position pay more, or something? You want a raise?”

I scowl. “Oh, piss off. *You’re* moving, too. Bill told me. You have no right to be mad at me.”

Seb’s eyes flash. He opens his mouth to argue, but Jack glares up at him, taking my hand.

“We’re not mad at you,” he says softly. “We just want to understand. Why would you want to move?”

His gentleness melts away the anger burning inside me. I sag against the couch cushions. “It wasn’t a proper plan,” I whisper. “It was a... safety measure. I needed something. Just in case...” I trail off.

“In case of what?” He asks quietly.

I shrug. Saying it sounds pathetic. I sound pathetic. “In case you didn’t want me, anymore. In case you left me. You weren’t answering my calls. Bill told me that you three were moving. I figured, if you decided to up and leave, I’d lose all of you, and Cami, and a job, and like, most of my friends. I had to have a backup plan.”

“Why would you jump to that conclusion?” Sebastian snaps. Irritation flares back up in me.

“Why do you think?” I practically growl. “What fucking *massive life event* have I been through that *might possibly* lead me to the conclusion that *no one actually ever fucking wants me?*” I push my hair back with shaking hands. “I’m not being insecure, I’m being *logical*. I’ve been rejected by every family I’ve ever had. I...” I swallow hard, choking into silence.

“What?” Cyrus mumbles into my stomach. He sounds pained. “You what, Bethie?”

“I went to see my birth mum,” I admit, and he groans. “And my grandma. I just felt so lonely. And they were the only family I had.” A dry sob bursts from my throat. “Th-they told me to piss off. My mum has a husband. They have kids. They’re only a few years younger than me, for God’s sake. And she loves *them*. She loves them to death, but she won’t even let me step onto the property.”

Cyrus burrows closer. “Beth—”

I wipe my cheeks. “I wasn’t asking to call her *mum*. I didn’t want money. I

didn't want her to treat me like her child. I just wanted to talk to her. To... learn about my family. I—" My hand floats to my stomach. "This thing that I have, it's genetic. And I don't know, because even though she's forty years old, she still refuses to come to terms with the fact that *I'm her child*. She could've told me, and I would've frozen my eggs. She's had more than enough time. But she didn't." I swallow thickly. "And my grandma. She said that she tried to love me, but she couldn't. That I was an insufferable child. And..." I trail off, my breath hiccuping in my chest, and bury my face in my hands. "I don't know," I whisper. "It just got *loud*. I'm sorry."

"*Sugar.*" And then Cyrus is holding me. "Oh my God. Baby." He nuzzles into my neck. "You couldn't tell us?"

"I tried. I called so many times, and you were always busy. And..." I lick my lips. "It's hard for me. To keep calling. I've done it before. Hundreds of times, when I was a kid. I hung on to foster parents like a starving dog begging for treats. Now that I'm older, I know what it means. I've been rejected by everyone that I ever wanted to love me." I look up at Sebastian, tears streaming down my face. "So, I'm sorry I didn't call. I'm sorry I thought about moving. I didn't know what else to do."

Sebastian's silent for a moment, his eyes tight. Very slowly, he hands Cami to Jack, then turns back to me. "You," he says quietly, "are so dumb."

"Wh-what?" I choke.

"We're trying to comfort her, stop insulting her," Cy mutters. Seb shakes his head.

"You're *dumb*," he insists, dropping to his knees in front of the sofa and reaching for me. His lips crush against mine, and I gasp as he kisses me hard, his hands coming to thread in my greasy, gross hair. It's a desperate kiss, full of pain and longing and fear. I quiver underneath him.

"We love you," he says, pulling back to look me in the eyes. "*I* love you. We're not going anywhere without you."

"What?" I whisper, my heart pounding. "But you're moving."

Seb nods, stroking back my curls. "We want you to move with us. We need someplace bigger. You can have your own bedroom. We'd have space for Cami. A proper kitchen, so we can all sit and eat together. A garden. We

don't want to raise this baby in a bachelor pad. We haven't started looking at houses yet; we were going to do it with you, when we got home. But the landlord was asking for rent, so we warned him in advance that we might not be living here for the next three months. That's it."

I can't breathe. I'm still crying. "You're n-not going?"

He touches our foreheads together, his eyes burning fiercely into mine. "We're not going *anywhere* without you. As long as you want us, you're part of this family." He kisses me again. "We *love you*," he repeats fiercely.

"I can't believe you were scared to tell us," Cyrus whispers. I look up at him. His brown eyes are shiny.

I cup his cheek. "Jesus. No. Don't cry."

"You were hurting so much. All alone." He grabs my hand, squeezing. "*Baby*. None of us want to leave you. I can't even imagine a life without you."

Jack shifts, passing Cami to me. "Please don't leave us," he says quietly. "We need you. She needs you."

I look down at Cami in my arms. She's nestled herself happily inside my boobs, mouthing at my t-shirt. My throat burns with tears.

"No one's ever needed me," I whisper. "Not once in my life."

All three men groan simultaneously. I take a deep, shaky breath and look between each of them. "I love you," I say. It's the first time I've said those words in years. "All of you. I love you."

"We love you too, Bethie." Cy whispers, kissing frantically down the crook of my neck. "We love you. Love you, love you, love you."

"So much," Jack adds. "Please don't move to Bristol. We'll miss you so much we'll have to follow you. I don't wanna live in Bristol."

Seb gives me one last kiss, his lips lingering on mine. "You're our family now," he murmurs, and my heart just about breaks. "You belong with us."

SIXTY-SEVEN

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BETH

The rest of the day passes quickly.

Cami goes for her nap, and the guys help me fix up my flat. I insist that they don't need to, but they won't take no for an answer, so in the end I just give up and pitch in. Together, we get my place cleaned and hoovered. The trash is taken out and all of my dirty sheets and clothes are taken down to the laundromat. Cyrus even nips out to the local shop and buys enough food to stock my fridge. It's so sweet I'm a little overwhelmed. I'm not used to people looking after me. I'm not used to people seeing that I'm struggling, and stepping in to help.

While the guys make lunch, I take a thirty-minute shower. I wash my hair for the first time in ten days. Shave. Moisturise. When I get out, Jack has made us soup and coffee and toasties. By mid-afternoon, we're all sprawled on the boys' sofa, curled up together, and I feel halfway human again.

The boys are all glued to me. I'm sitting in Seb's lap; Jack is pressed against my left side, and Cy is positioned on my right, one hand planted possessively on my thigh. I don't think I could pay them to let go of me.

Not that I mind. I feel like a wilting plant that's being watered for the first time in weeks. Every little kiss and caress is refuelling me, soothing the panicky voice at the back of my head screaming '*You'll never have a family. No one loves you. No one ever has, and no one ever will.*'

I shake my head hard and bury my face in Jack's shoulder. He looks down at me, then starts to stroke my hair, his expression blank. I reach for his hand, but he pulls it gently away, turning back to the TV.

As per our agreement, *Love Island* is currently playing, with the volume turned way down. We all watch two very attractive people making out sloppily on screen.

“Ew,” Cyrus comments. “Is he kissing her or licking out the inside of a crisp packet?”

Seb stands, going to check on Cami’s cot. “She’s still asleep,” he says. “Should we wake her up?”

“Did she sleep on the plane?” I mumble into Jack’s hoodie. All three men laugh.

“She’s barely slept since we’ve been away,” Cy says. “She hated it out there. Nothing we could do would settle her.” He glances at the cot. “Five minutes here, and she’s out like a light.”

“She must feel really safe here,” I note. Sebastian heads into the kitchen and opens a cupboard, but I don’t miss the hopeless, dopey smile that spreads across his face.

Cyrus lolls his head against me. “So what about your no-relationship pact? Is it finally over? Please say it’s over.”

I nod slowly. “I decided to stop having relationships because they always made me feel like I had to change myself. But I’ve never really felt like I had to change myself for you guys.”

“Apart from when I shouted at you,” Seb mumbles, rattling through glassware. I shake my head.

“That was different. I was more worried about my job, and you sending Cami away.” I examine my jagged nailbeds. “I think honestly, in all my past relationships, I was terrified my partner was going to leave me. It was some kind of subconscious effort to make him stay. If I could be the perfect girlfriend, he wouldn’t leave.” I look around at the three men. “But I never felt the urge to do it with you.”

“You never felt like we were going to leave you,” Cyrus practically purrs, his happiness rumbling loudly out of his chest.

“No. At least, not until you went to America. And by then it was too late.” I lick my lips. “You’ve never really made me feel insecure. I knew that you liked me for how I was.”

“Good,” Seb says, clunking glasses on the counter. Cyrus rumbles even louder, beaming like the Cheshire Cat.

Jack stays quiet, focussing on the telly. I watch his fingers tapping a frenetic beat against the sofa arm. His whole body is tight with tension. He's upset about something, and I think I know what.

I nudge him. "I'm sorry," I say quietly.

He blinks. "What. Why?"

"You didn't get to have your meeting with that guy. I'm assuming you can't reschedule? Video chat, or something?"

He smiles, but it doesn't meet his eyes. "Hamish isn't really a guy who reschedules. You make time for him, not the other way around."

"Which is why we should all be thankful that he didn't hire you," Cyrus says. "If he won't even reschedule a meeting when he's bloody courting you, what do you think working for him will be like?" He nods at Cami's cot. "You're not a bachelor anymore. We have a kid now. A girlfriend. Do you want to be working overtime every evening, waking up in the middle of the night to check your email, and completely ignoring your own family? Why the Hell would you want to tie yourself to a guy who *refuses to hire women*, because he's scared they'll get pregnant and ask for maternity leave?" He flicks the back of Jack's head, making the blonde wince. "I think you dodged a bullet with that idiot."

"Even so," I say, "you must be disappointed. I know you were excited about him being interested in your stuff."

Jack stares at me. "Beth, if I cared about the job, I would've stayed in New York while the others flew back, and caught the next flight out. But I couldn't." I don't say anything. "I *couldn't*," he repeats. "I couldn't sit in a fucking dinner meeting, knowing you were hurting. I *had* to be here with you. I *had* to see you myself." He shakes his head. "I'm not upset about *Hamish Cavendish*. I'm upset at *myself*."

"What? Why?"

He sighs. "This is my fault. I didn't answer your texts. I pushed you away for weeks up until the launch. I argued against you coming to America. I extended our trip out there. No wonder you thought we'd abandoned you. I *did* abandon you." He presses his lips together so hard they turn white. "I'm sorry. I never meant to put my job before you. I was just worried that I

wouldn't be able to focus if you came with us to the convention. It's the biggest thing that's ever happened in my career, and I was terrified I'd screw it up. I was an ass."

"Jack, this wasn't your fault. It was just a really shit situation. None of us could've predicted it."

"But—"

"I would've gone to the doctor sooner or later," I point out. "I would have contacted my mum sooner or later. Yes, it would've been easier with you guys here to support me, but honestly, I'd probably still have had some kind of emotional breakdown. How could I not?" I shake my head. "This was about me, not you."

"Still—"

I snuggle into him. "Please stop apologising. It means a lot that you chose me over your interview. I'm just sorry that I put you in that position."

"You know," Sebastian says from the kitchen, "Hamish wasn't the only person who gave us an offer. He was the biggest by far, but there are others we can look into."

I look up at Jack. "Really? You didn't tell me that!"

Jack nods and fiddles with his watch. "I don't know," he says slowly. "I'm thinking, maybe staying indie is better. Cy's right," he nods to Cyrus. "I want to be able to prioritise you and Cami, now. I can do that best if I work for myself."

"You could find a few really good freelancers," Cy suggests. "Invest the money the app is making into building your own team." He pushes back my hair and squeezes the juncture between my neck and shoulder. "Christ," he mutters, frowning. "You're so stiff, Bethie."

"Hm?" I shudder as he starts massaging me. It feels incredible; I can practically feel my tense muscles warming and softening like butter. "Stress, I guess."

He tuts. "We can't have that."

Jack picks up my hand and rubs his thumb into the centre of my palm. My mouth falls open. "Seb, take her feet."

“I—” I start to protest, but Seb sits down and swings my legs into his lap. His strong hands find my feet, drawing firm circles into the aching arches, and I practically melt.

“Oh.”

The three men all laugh, continuing to work up and down my body. Soon, I’m just a Beth-shaped blob of jelly, lying floppy and boneless between them.

It doesn’t take long for their hands to wander. First, Cyrus starts working on my thighs, squeezing my legs deliciously. Then Jack’s big palms slide to my front, kneading my breasts through my t-shirt. I bite my lip and squirm as heat starts to pool in my core. I assumed that after the last ten days, my libido would be out of order until further notice, but apparently that isn’t the case.

Cyrus notices, shooting me an amused look, and starts sliding his hands higher and higher, until the heel of his hand is pressing right between my legs, brushing my apex. I gasp. My hand flies out and catches his wrist. All three men look at me, and I feel my cheeks pinkening.

“Guess what medication my doctor put me on?” I ask, my voice hoarse. They all shrug. I bite my lip. “The pill. So I guess we don’t need to use protection anymore, right?”

Jack’s lips part. Cy takes a deep breath. I reach across and fiddle with the drawstring on his sweatpants. “He did my bloodwork, too,” I say quietly. “Are you guys clean?”

They all nod.

Jack raises an eyebrow at Cyrus. “What, even you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Jack shrugs. “It’s just, I know you must meet a lot of girls at the club—”

“For the last time! I! Don’t! Put! My! Dick! In! My! Clients!”

I laugh, kissing the curve of his throat. “I know, baby. He’s just teasing.”

Cyrus lays his head on my shoulder, looking up at me through his impossibly long lashes. My heartbeat raises as his breath touches my lips. “Well. Just one,” he amends. He trails a dark hand up my arm, raising a line of prickling goosebumps. “You want that, sweetheart? You want us inside you? All three

of us?”

A shiver clutches me, and his mouth softens into a small smile. “I want there to be nothing in between us,” I whisper. “I want you to take... all of me.”

“All of you?” Jack rasps. “You mean...?”

I nod slowly. “Whenever I looked up foursomes online, they always involved anal. I want to try that. I want all of you inside me.”

There’s a brief silence, then Jack nods. “We can do that,” he says, his voice higher than usual.

Cyrus leans forward and presses his lips to mine gently. “It would be our honour to fuck you in the ass,” he declares, sliding my legs off his knees and standing.

Laughing, I go to stand as well, but Sebastian catches my hand. “Are you sure?” He asks, his eyes boring into me.

I frown. “You don’t want to?”

“Of course. But a few hours ago, you were crying your heart out.”

Jack strokes down my arms. “We don’t just want you for sex,” he says. “If you’re still feeling a bit—”

I snort. “Weepy? Hormonal? Sensitive?”

“Fragile,” he corrects, “we don’t have to do this now, Beth.”

I bite my lip. “I want to be close to you. I want to feel you all.” I think I need it. I’ve felt so alone for so long. I need to feel them all around me, their bodies pressing into mine. I need to feel them inside me.

Sebastian nods and stands, taking my hand. “Come on, then,” he says quietly. “Come see how much we missed you.”

SIXTY-EIGHT

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BETH

Surprisingly, Sebastian leads us into his room. We haven't all had sex in here yet; I assumed he'd find it too messy, but he doesn't seem concerned as Cyrus lays me gently onto his white sheets and climbs up next to me, kissing me hard. Three sets of hands travel over my body, plucking at my clothes, and I'm quickly relieved of my t-shirt and pajama shorts. I didn't bother putting on underwear after my shower, and when Cyrus realises, he groans, parting my knees and pressing his hand between my thighs.

"Christ, honey," he murmurs, and I squirm as he strokes a finger delicately through my hot folds. "You're soaked." He lifts his hand to his mouth and sucks it clean. His eyes fall half-shut. "God, I've missed you," he tells my crotch.

I snort. "Are you talking to me or my vagina?"

He blinks innocently. "Both, baby!"

The mattress shifts as someone settles in the bed behind me, and I glance over my shoulder at Jack. He's fiddling with a bottle of lube. My eyes widen.

"*You?*" My insides cramp with desire, even as nerves flood through me. All of the men are big, but Jack is on another level. Not just long, but thick. I don't think my ass can handle him.

"You don't want me?" He murmurs, pressing a kiss to my bare back.

"Yeah," I blurt out, "but it'll be like having a can of Monster shoved up my butt."

Cyrus practically falls off the bed laughing. Even Sebastian breaks into a grin.

"I'll warm you up," Jack says, his face bright red. It's so cute that I can't keep myself from reaching for him and pulling his mouth to mine.

When we eventually pull apart, I turn back—and am suddenly face to face with two impressive hard-ons. Both Seb and Cyrus have undressed, their clothes puddled on the floor. Seb climbs onto the bed next to me. His erection bobs against my stomach, rock-hard and already drizzling pre come on my skin.

“You want me?” He asks quietly. I nod and wrap my arms around his neck, sliding into his lap. Our chests crush together. I can feel his heart hammering.

Part of me wants to drag this out. I want to touch the guys, tease them until we’re all too desperate to hold back anymore. But I don’t think I can do it. The need simmering under my skin is too insistent. And judging by the tightness on Seb’s face, I’m not the only one who’s struggled in the last week we’ve spent apart.

So I resist the urge to reach down and play with him. Instead, I push him flat on his back, settling my hips over his, and slowly start to sink down onto his length.

The muscles in his arms clench, and he swears under his breath, grabbing at my hips and holding me still. Our eyes meet, and for a second, something important and emotional seems to pass between us. He leans forward and presses a tiny kiss to the corner of my mouth.

Then he lifts his hips and buries himself fully inside me.

I cry out as he spears into me. My hands claw at his neck, scratching marks into his skin as I start to ride him, rocking our bodies together. Maybe it’s the position, but I could swear I’ve never felt him this deep before. It feels like he’s touching parts of me that have never been touched.

Behind me, I feel Jack pushing me gently forward, so I’m on all fours over Sebastian. He parts my asscheeks, and then there’s a warm, wet feeling that makes me shiver. I realise he’s applying the lube, stroking it around my tight hole. It tingles pleasantly, warming against my skin.

“Slow, please,” I murmur, and he kisses my shoulder.

“I’ll take care of you,” he promises, and I nod, tears blurring my eyes again. I know he’ll take care of me. All of the men will.

“I love you,” I whisper, and get a chorus of *I love you’s* in response. A tear

rolls down my cheek and melts into the sheets. Seb notices and tucks his face into the crook of my neck, still thrusting his hips up into me.

As Seb fucks me, Jack presses his finger against my asshole, gently probing the tight ring of muscle. I honestly don't see how he's going to fit, but he pushes forward steadily, massaging into me. At the same time, Seb slips a hand between my legs, tickling his fingers over my wet, throbbing bud. I shout, bucking and squirming on top of him, and he grins, grinding his hips up into mine.

If he was aiming to distract me, it certainly worked. I'm so busy rubbing desperately against his hand, I almost don't register Jack's finger sinking in to the first knuckle.

I freeze when the sensation hits me. "God!"

"Good?" Jack asks huskily. I feel him twitch slightly against my buttocks.

"I feel like I'm going to burst," I whisper. I've never had two holes filled before. It's... unusual. I lean back, pushing against his finger.

He swears under his breath. "Another?"

I nod frantically, feeling another slick finger press against my backside. The pressure makes me wince a little, and Cyrus shifts closer on the bed, swooping down to catch my breast in his mouth. I forget about the tiny pinch of pain as he starts to suckle at me, hard.

The boys keep on like this for what feels like forever: Sebastian lying underneath me, stroking between my legs as he fucks me, and Cyrus kneeling at my side, nibbling and licking at my tits. I'm so turned on, I barely notice as Jack adds a third finger, scissoring them inside of me, stretching out my asshole. It doesn't hurt at all; just adds to the cacophony of pleasure whirling inside me. I tremble between the three men, desire making my blood roar in my ears. A few times, I edge close to a climax, but the guys always pull back, teasing me, making me wait. It's maddening.

Eventually, Jack's satisfied with his preparations, sliding his fingers free. I whimper, but Seb pinches my sensitive nub, and I choke as lightning forks through me, sizzling across my nerves. I don't exactly come, but it almost feels like a mini-climax as energy shoots through me, leaving me sweaty and panting and desperate for more. I'm still gasping when I feel Jack's smooth

tip trace down between my cheeks.

All three men hold me still as his thick dick rubs against my back entrance, slick and wet with lube. I grimace. The pressure builds and builds as he pushes harder against me, until, finally, my muscles give, and I feel him push inside my ass.

“Oh!” I say, and he strokes a hand over my hip.

“Okay?”

“Yeah.” It’s an odd feeling—hot, tingly pressure. I try to look over my shoulder. “Are you in?”

He chuckles. “Just the tip, love.”

“Oh.” Despite myself, I arch my back, wanting more. Jack grips my hips and presses forward. Now that the initial push is over, it’s surprisingly painless as he slides in slowly, pushing deeper and deeper until he finally bottoms out inside my ass. I quiver, my eyes widening.

“Christ,” he whispers in my ear, shifting slightly. “Jesus. You’re strangling me, love.”

I don’t respond. I’m frozen, trying to understand all the sensations happening inside of me. My backside is stretched and filled. Seb is still underneath me, his thick hard-on buried balls-deep inside me. I’ve never felt so full in my life. Every part of me is stuffed solid.

“Ready?” Seb asks, grazing his stubbled cheek against mine. I nod, and both he and Jack start to move, drawing back and then shoving into me hard.

One thrust. That’s all it takes before a spasm rushes through me, shaking my whole body.

I tighten my grip on Sebastian’s shoulders and shout as I come.

SIXTY-NINE

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BETH

All three men let out low, shocked noises. Six hands grab me, holding me as I convulse. It's a short, sweet climax that fills me up inside like a bubble, then bursts, sending heat flooding through me. I gasp through it, overwhelmed by its suddenness.

Holy shit. That was unexpected.

"*Baby,*" Cyrus coos, sounding absolutely delighted. "You *like* this."

I glare at him as I come back down. All of my insides are tingling. I already want more.

"Move," I order. Jack and Seb share one last amused look, then resume their slow thrusts. This time, I manage to make it more than one stroke before spontaneously orgasming. The three of us fall into a steady rhythm, my body rocking between them; me on all fours, with Sebastian flat on his back underneath me, and Jack taking my ass doggy style.

It's an odd position, but it feels surprisingly natural. Primal. Like our bodies know what to do. There's only one thing missing.

I glance across at Cyrus. He's kneeling at my side, watching us all with dark eyes. "Please," I say.

He grins crookedly and slides off the bed, coming to stand in front of me. His erection bobs by my face. It's flushed and swollen, the tip glistening. My mouth practically waters. I arch my neck to wrap my lips around him, but he pulls away, instead bending down to kiss me. I moan into his mouth as his fingers tangle in my hair. Our tongues dance, hot and passionate. We're kissing like a couple of teenagers, drowning ourselves in each other, our mouths thudding together in time with Seb and Jack's thrusts. I can't get enough of him. I need more. My skin is burning up like I've been set on fire. I squirm. I can feel my pussy fluttering desperately around Seb's shaft,

clenching and squeezing with need.

“More,” I rasp, stretching up to try and force more friction. “*Please*. I can’t handle it.”

“Yeah?” Jack asks, giving my calf a little squeeze. I buck, making Sebastian groan. “How do you want it, honey? Faster? Harder?”

“Just *more*,” I moan, and he laughs.

“I reckon we can do that.”

All of a sudden, their slow caresses and rolling thrusts speed up. My mouth falls open as pleasure reverberates through my body, and Cy takes advantage of this to push between my open lips. He tastes divine; musky and salty and male. I lunge forward, shoving him so deep that my eyes water. He notices and tries to pull away, but I make a disapproving noise. I don’t mind it. I like it. He could fuck me hoarse for all I care. I want all of my men inside me, as deep as they can get.

He looks down at me, his cheeks flushed. “Fuck,” He breathes. “You look so goddamn incredible, Beth. Your *mouth*—”

I slip my tongue underneath his shaft, sucking hard, and he shouts, his eyelashes fluttering. His body is already tensing and hardening. I try to suck him harder, to swirl my tongue the way I know he likes, but it’s hard; I can’t help getting distracted by the two men sawing into me.

It feels like Seb and Jack are pounding into the same special, sensitive spot inside of me, alternatively thudding either side of the thin membrane. I can’t stop moaning, my hands fisting at the sheets as my body contorts with pleasure. Sweat dampens my skin. I can feel heat building up inside of me, mounting and growing, until I’m sure I can’t handle it anymore. I need to come. I have to. My belly tightens, and I gasp in a breath, bracing myself for a mind-blowing climax—

But somehow, Cyrus beats me to it.

I jolt in surprise as he throws back his head and shouts. His hot load explodes into my mouth, running down my throat. I reach up to caress his balls, and take him in deep, swallowing down everything he has to give me. Well, I try to, anyway. It’s a Hell of a lot more come than I’m used to. After a few

seconds, I start to choke. He pulls out, letting the rest of his release splash over my neck and back, glazing my shivering body.

“What the fuck,” Jack grunts behind me as I kneel, gasping and hot, drenched in his release.

Cyrus scoops up a handful of my hair and tugs my mouth to his. “It’s been a long time,” he mutters between kisses. “What did you expect?” He licks my bottom lip, and I shudder against him. “Sorry,” he murmurs. “Didn’t mean to drown you.”

I snort. There’s a low groan underneath me, and Sebastian’s muscles start to clench. He buries his face in my chest, roaring as he comes. I feel the powerful gush of his release shoot into me, coating my channel.

“*Fuck*,” I swear, riding him harder, milking his climax out of him. His grip on my arms tightens so hard he’ll probably leave bruises, and his face twists in agonised pleasure as I rut into him, desperately forcing every last drop of his seed inside of me.

Eventually, his shuddering body calms, and I feel a soft kiss against my shoulder. “Good girl,” Seb says quietly. “God, you’re so damn sweet, Beth. You’re so sweet.”

I don’t answer. I can’t. I’m balanced *right* on the precipice. Each one of Jack’s hard, thudding thrusts in my ass is pushing me further and further. I grit my teeth, squeezing my eyes shut, sweat pouring down my back, my whole body straining and tensing—

Jack pounds into my backside one last time, and I lose it. I cry out as my vision flashes. Seb and Cyrus hold me steady as I start to shudder, wracked with pleasure. My core clenches and relaxes in rhythmic waves, sending spasms through my lower stomach. Cyrus bends and sucks one of my tits into his mouth, laving it with his tongue while he pinches the other, and I arch, desperate for breath. My hand flies out and grips Seb’s leg.

It’s too much. With Jack still furiously drilling me from within, it’s like I can’t stop. There’s no relief. I just keep coming, one spike of ecstasy rolling right into the next, two, three, four times.

“*Jack*,” I choke, squeezing my buttocks together. “*Please!*”

Jack shudders as he explodes inside of me, flooding my ass with heat. The gush of come stretches out my climax even further; right when I think the pleasure will fade, one last wave crashes over me with a vengeance. My mouth falls open. My toes curl. My muscles tense painfully. The men all hold me as I shake uncontrollably. Cyrus starts tugging hungrily at my breasts, groaning, and Jack keeps sliding in and out of me from behind, his strokes slick with his release. I can barely register any of it. I'm hardly in my body. My mind is somewhere quiet and empty, a thrumming plane of pure ecstasy. I sink into the pleasure, letting it swallow me whole.

When I finally come back, I realise I'm lying down. Sebastian is touching my face, and Jack is easing himself out of me, stroking my back. I'm so exhausted, I don't even bother to roll over. I can feel the three mens' release seeping out between my legs, mixing with my own wetness and sticking to my thighs.

Jesus. It's a good thing I don't really need that birth control. I'd probably have to take a triple dose to handle these three. I close my eyes, lolling against the damp sheets, and sigh, finally relaxing.

"You need a shower," Seb says over my head.

"Hey," I protest, and he laughs, picking me up. I let him carry me into the shower and wash me off, cleaning the sweat and come off my skin. After the past week of barely sleeping, I'm almost too tired to stand, but he still manages to coax one last climax out of me, thumbing and tugging at my softening nipples while he massages slowly between my legs. I come with a moan, clinging to him as he holds me up under the rush of steaming water.

When I'm clean, he towels me off and brings me back into his bedroom. Someone has changed his bedsheets. He lays me out gently in the middle of the mattress, and the other men all slump down around me. I stretch out my tired body, my eyes falling shut.

"How do you feel?" Jack asks, pulling me against his chest.

I consider. There's some soreness, especially in my backside, but it's fading into a nice warm sensation.

"Good," I murmur, snuggling into him. "I love you."

He kisses my cheek. Cyrus curls against my back. Sebastian reaches across and squeezes my hand. "We love you, too."

Still smiling, I fall asleep in seconds.

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SEVENTY

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BETH

I wake up in an empty bed.

It's evening now; red and gold light filters into the dim room through the cracks in Sebastian's blinds. I lie there for a second, touching the cold pillow by my head. Now that I'm alone again, the old sadness comes creeping back, squeezing my throat, pressing into my chest. I roll onto my side, curling a hand over my stomach. Guilt weighs down on me.

I should be happy. I'm so glad that the guys are here. I'm so glad that they want to be with me. But even that's not enough to ease the ache inside me. It's going to take more than a week and a shag to get over the news of my infertility.

But that's not the point of having boyfriends, is it? The people you love aren't meant to heal your pain. No one can do that for you. But they can support you while you work through it.

I hear giggles coming from the living room and sit up. There are more giggles, a squeal, and then deep, male laughter. The pain in my chest eases slightly. I slip out of bed, dress quickly, and follow the sound of the noise.

Seb and Jack are in the lounge, playing with Cami. I lean in the doorway and watch. They've laid out Cami's playmat, and Sebastian is stacking her favourite pink blocks in towers. Cami is bopping up and down in Jack's arms, giggling as she watches. She's wearing a green dinosaur onesie with little felt spikes running down the back. I've never seen it before, so I guess the guys must have picked it up in America.

As I watch, Sebastian takes Cami and holds her upright, walking her through the piles of blocks. She starts kicking them over, beaming, while Jack narrates in a grave voice.

"Cami the Giant Chameleon made her way through the great city, leaving

chaos in her wake. Buildings collapsed before her. The city streets were filled with flame. Bridges crumbled and trees were ripped from their roots. But the Giant Cami showed no mercy.”

Cami almost trips over her bunny toy, and he swoops in to pull it out of the way.

“Citizens ran screaming, desperate to get away from her huge feet.” He tickles one of Cami’s feet, making her kick and squeal. Seb walks her over to the tallest tower of blocks.

Jack gasps. “She approached the clock tower. It was the tallest, strongest building in the city. Surely even the Cami monster couldn’t topple such a massive structure!”

Cami tries to kick it over—and misses. Her foot goes wide. She tries again and almost falls over. Sebastian swings her in his arms, and she flies into the tower. Cubes rain onto the floor, scattering across the living room.

“It was over!” Jack cries. “The Giant Chameleon had crushed the last building in the city! She raised her fists in triumph—”

Cami giggles and flops onto her stomach.

“—And then she had a rest,” Jack improvises. “Her energy was spent. The ashes of the once-thriving metropolis burned and glowed around her. She had completed her quest. She had razed the evil city of Bristol to the ground.” He reaches over and picks her up, tossing her into the air. She shouts happily, grabbing at his hair.

I lean in the doorway, my eyes burning as I watch them play together. Jack and Seb look more relaxed than I’ve ever seen them. And Cami is absolutely delighted, basking in the attention from her dads.

There’s a footstep in the corridor, then I feel a warm body behind me. I lean back into Cyrus, letting him wrap his arms around my waist.

“How do you feel?” He asks quietly, his breath brushing my hair.

“Fine. Happy.”

I expect him to nod and drop it, but he just frowns. His face is pinched. “I’m serious. Are you okay?” He rubs his eyes. “Shit, that’s a stupid question. Of course, you’re not okay. I just...” He sighs, touching my cheek. “I’m so

sorry, babe. I know you really wanted kids.”

I look down. I manage to keep it together for about two seconds before I start to cry.

Cyrus makes a low noise deep in his chest. “Bethie.” He pulls me into him, and I press my face into his shirt, letting the tears soak into the soft cotton. His hand sifts slowly through my hair.

“It still hurts,” I admit. My throat is so tight it hurts to speak. “So much.”

“I know,” he whispers. “I’m so sorry. So sorry, honey.”

I cry for a while as he holds me. The sobs are silent; the others don’t hear them. It’s like me and Cyrus are in our own little private bubble. Eventually, I pull away, wiping my cheeks dry. In the background, Cami gabbles happily.

“It’ll take a while for it to stop hurting. Maybe it always will.” I sniffle, and he kisses the top of my head. “But this helps.”

“This?” He points at himself, then the other guys. “Sex?”

“No. Well, yes, but.” I nod at the lounge. We both watch as Cami pats Seb’s stomach, and he pretends to fall to the ground, knocked flat by her enormous strength. She laughs uproariously. “This. I thought I was going to be alone. But I’m not.”

Cyrus is silent for a long time. So long, I think he hasn’t heard me. Then he presses his face into my neck. “Me, neither,” he murmurs, and I almost break apart.

All this time, I’ve been so caught up in my own shitty drama that I didn’t stop to think about the guys’ less-than-ideal family situations. Cyrus got disowned. Seb’s parents abandoned and lied to him. Jack’s family ignored him in favour of his athletic siblings. None of them have perfect families, but that hasn’t stopped them from making their own.

“You’re not,” I say quietly. “None of us are, anymore.”

He presses his lips gently to mine. Warmth courses through me like sunlight. The ache in my chest eases slightly. I lean forward, trying to deepen the kiss

—

Something soft hits the side of my face, and we pull apart, looking down at

the pink block at our feet. Cami laughs and claps her hands together on the mat.

“Holy shit,” Cyrus says. “Did she throw that?”

“She’s got a good overhand,” Jack mutters. “Don’t worry, honey. Even if you turn out to like sports, I’ll still love you.”

“I think that’s our cue to join them,” I say, and Cyrus nods, taking my hand and leading me to the crinkly play mat. Cami beams as we sit down, rolling sideways to land between our laps. I stroke her little dinosaur spikes, and she wriggles happily.

Seb checks his smart watch. “Takeaway’s here.” He stands up and heads out, dropping one last kiss on my head.

Jack leans over and unplugs my phone from the socket in the wall. “I charged your phone, Beth. You’ll probably want to catch up. It’s been dinging like mad.”

I groan. “Oh, God. I can’t look. How bad is it?”

He laughs, scanning the screen. “Well, Cyrus probably drained your battery all by himself, with the number of notifications from him. You’ve got a lot from Benny, too.” He scrolls down. “There’s also some guy called Carl? His email is marked as urgent, so you should probably check it out.”

“Carl?” It takes me a second to place that name, and then I lunge forward, grabbing the phone. I cuddle Cami to me as I scan the email, my blood rushing.

Hello Bethany, it’s Carl, Sarah’s husband. We met briefly a few days ago. I hope you don’t mind, I found your email address on an online job listing.

Sarah told me everything. I had no idea that she had another child, and I’m so sorry that you received such a poor welcome at our house. I can’t imagine how you must have felt.

The twins (Hattie and Henri, they’re both six years old and terrible) happened to eavesdrop on us while we were discussing you (they’re going through a spy phase), and now they’re dying to meet their older sister. They talk about you every day. If you want

to, I'd love to arrange a meeting. I know it would mean a lot to them. I doubt Sarah would come, but I think it's important that the twins know their family, and I'd love to meet a daughter-in-law.

Regards,

Carl

My mouth falls open.

Cyrus leans over my shoulder, bouncing Cami's toy bunny onto her lap. "What is it?"

"My birth mum's husband. He wants me to meet my sister and brother." I lick my lips, my heart thumping. "He called me his 'daughter-in-law'."

That can't be right, can it? I think I'm fully denounced as Sarah's daughter, so any father-in-law duties have been waived.

But, hey. I'm not one to look a gift horse in the mouth. He wants me to meet my siblings. *They* want to meet *me*. I could honestly cry.

I show the phone to Cyrus, and his face breaks into a smile. "*Finally*. Someone who realises how lucky they are to be related to you. I like this Carl guy."

Cami squeals in my lap, smacking the phone out of my hand and frowning at me.

"Oh, I'm sorry, was I ignoring you?" I ask, tickling her cheek. "Do you need some attention? Maybe some kisses?" I pick her up and start covering her in kisses, and she roars with laughter as Cyrus joins in.

"I love you," I tell her, pressing one last kiss to her tiny nose. She throws her arms up in triumph.

A key rattles in the door. "Food's here," Seb calls, stepping back into the flat holding two delicious-smelling bags of fried chicken. We shuffle up, and he lays out the food and plastic cutlery on the floor, picnic-style.

We don't say much as we eat. The sun sets behind us, flooding the guys' living room with gold light. I'm curled up between Jack and Seb while Cyrus sprawls on the mat, feeding Cami her baby food. It may just be fried chicken on the floor, but it's the best meal I've had in ages.

“No!” Cyrus says suddenly. “That’s not for you, ladybug!”

I look down to see Cami sticking her hand in my gravy. She licks it off, then smiles up at me, her pink cheeks smeared with pureed carrot, her little pigtails lopsided.

My chest fills with so much love I can barely breathe. I close my eyes. Sunlight warms my back. Someone kisses my cheek, but I don’t know who.

Three boyfriends, shut-down ovaries, and a secret doorstep baby are hardly what I envisioned when I used to imagine my future family. But right now, they’re more than enough.

So much more.

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EPILOGUE

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EIGHTEEN MONTHS LATER

On the second Sunday in March, I wake up in an empty bed. I stretch, patting around the pillows for a warm body to cuddle into, and find nothing.

Which is odd. Normally I'm the first up. Maybe the second, if Cami decides she needs her breakfast at some ungodly hour, or Seb has an international phone call he needs to take. But I don't even remember the last time I woke up without at least one of my men sprawled in the bed with me.

I sit up, looking around the master bedroom. When we first moved in here, it was sophisticated and elegant: all glossy white walls and hardwood floors. In the last year and a half, however, it's been thoroughly Cami-fied. There are toys and story books piled up on the floor, and tiny clothes draped over the back of the armchair. The walls are covered with drawings and framed photographs. I smile as I let my eyes drift over them. There's one of Cami and Seb in the kitchen, stirring a bowl of cake mixture on Jack's birthday. One of us all at the swimming pool, splashing each other while Cami sits on Cyrus's shoulders in her little pink armbands. One from last winter, of me and Cami making snow angels in the park. Cyrus's little sister is in the background, beaming at her tiny niece.

It took a while, but all of the boys eventually told their families about me and Cami. Jack's parents welcomed us both with open arms. They might be rigidly sport-obsessed, but they have surprisingly relaxed views about relationships. And they're so proud of Jack. When he sat them down and actually explained to them what he did for work, they were over the moon. His mum texts me every day, asking for help solving a new level. She's not very phone-savvy, but she's still determined to play every one of her son's games. It's very sweet.

Cyrus hasn't invited his parents to visit, but his sisters drop in and out of the house whenever they like. They're all enamoured with Cami. Lucy finally got to hook up with Hunky Harry, and they promptly got pregnant, so she's

always dragging him over to ‘practise’ looking after a kid.

We’ve seen Ellen and Steve once since our disastrous visit up to Macclesfield. They came to dinner a few weeks after we moved house. I’d hoped that they would apologise for their behaviour, but they were just as rude and abrasive as last time. I endured roughly thirty minutes of them smack-talking Seb and Cami, before I gave up and ordered them both to leave. I’m not letting them come into my house and degrade the people I love. It’s not good for Seb, and it’s certainly not a good environment for Cami.

I see Carl and the twins pretty often, too; whenever he comes to London for work. Sarah never visits, but I don’t care. I don’t want to see her anyway. It’s an odd family we’ve built ourselves, but in a lot of ways, it’s better than a blood family. We only surround ourselves with people that really care about us. We don’t have to love anybody who doesn’t love us back. It’s the kind of family I used to dream of as a child.

I hear low voices coming from the kitchen and slide out of bed, grabbing my dressing gown and toeing my feet into my bunny slippers. I need my morning cuddles, stat.

I pad down the hallway and put my hand on the kitchen door handle, but before I can turn it, the door swings open. Jack steps in front of me, blocking my path.

“Hey, baby,” I smile up at him.

He always looks adorable first thing in the morning, with his blue eyes all sleepy behind his glasses. He hasn’t shaved yet, and gold stubble glints on his jaw. I pop up onto my tiptoes for a quick kiss, then try to duck under his arm. “I need caffeine, please.”

He steps in my path. “You can’t go in there,” he declares.

I blink up at him. “Why not? I just want some coffee.”

“We... uh.” He looks behind him. There’s a sudden loud clatter from inside the kitchen. “I was trying to make pancakes. But I screwed up and burned them.”

I try to look over his shoulder. He’s over a foot taller than me, so it doesn’t

really work. “Really? It’s probably not that bad. I don’t smell burning.”

Jack hesitates. “I mean, I exploded them. Not burned. Exploded. I get those words mixed up sometimes.”

I frown. “How did you explode a pancake—”

“I used the mixer and got batter everywhere,” he says quickly. “Absolute carnage. Seb’s trying to get it off the ceiling tiles right now.”

“That’s okay, babe. I can help clean it up.” I try to push past him.

He grabs my shoulders, pushing me back. “I’m afraid that’s not possible,” he says, wide-eyed. “It’s too shameful. You’ll fall out of love with me immediately. For the sake of our relationship, you cannot go in there.”

I sigh. “Jack, what’s going on? I just want a coffee, I don’t give a shit if you spilled some batter.”

He looks panicked. “Look, just—”

Seb appears in the doorway and hands Jack two mugs of coffee without a word. Relief floods Jack’s face. He pushes them at me. “There we go. Lovely coffee. Cy’s in the living room, you should take it to him.”

I stare at him. “Okay,” I say slowly. “Do I have a choice?”

“Absolutely not.” He spins me around, giving me an encouraging pat on the butt. “Off you go.”

Bemused, I follow orders, obediently carrying the mugs into the living room.

Cy is sitting in his favourite armchair with Cami on his lap, brushing out her hair and chattering to her in a mixture of English and Bengali. “You want one or two pigtails?” He asks, bunching up her hair in a pineapple on top of her head, then repeating the question in Bengali.

She considers, then bounces in his arms, babbling. I’ve picked up enough of the language to know she’s said *two*. He quickly ties up her hair in bunches, fastening them with her favourite rainbow glitter scrunchies, then presses a kiss to her head.

“You look stunning,” he tells her seriously. “Very sparkly.” He glances up as I step closer. “Hey, baby.” I pass him the coffee, and he tips his lips up to kiss me. “You look hot.”

I snort. He says that to me every morning, whether I'm in lingerie, or hungover in old, stained pajamas. "So do you, Romeo."

He pulls a face. "Will you ever let that go?"

"I'm carving it into your gravestone, gorgeous." I perch on the chair's arm and take a deep swig from my mug.

Tragically, Randy Romeo has finally been retired. After doing the show for so many years, Cyrus eventually got bored of it. He now works as a dance instructor at the local gym, and also gets paid a pretty hefty salary as the official spokesperson for Trinity Games.

That's not to say he's stopped *stripping*, mind. I get a front-row seat to a private show whenever I like. Which is usually at least once a week.

Cami tugs on my dressing gown. I smile down at her. "Good morning, baby."

"Herro mummy," she says, beaming up at me. I tickle her neck, hiding the sudden pang that hits my stomach. Cami's just turned two, and her speech is coming along great. Unfortunately, she insists on calling me *mummy*. I don't know where she's getting it from. I've never called myself *mummy* in front of her. I guess she must have picked it up from TV or a picture book.

It hurts. I actually applied to adopt her a few months ago, but nothing came of it. I can't say that I'm surprised, considering our unconventional living situation, but it still felt like a kick in the guts.

I run my fingers through Cy's hair. "Do you know what Seb and Jack are up to? I'm banned from the kitchen."

Cy nods. "They have a surprise for you. They're just setting it up."

"A surprise? What for?"

He smiles, his eyes secretive. "Can't say, sugar. But you'll find out soon enough." He grabs me by the hips and pulls me onto his lap, making me squeak as I lose my balance.

"Cy!"

"What? You know I love chucking girls around." Cami crawls up onto my lap, so Cyrus is squished under both of us. He sighs happily, patting around the sofa for his phone. "We've got an hour to kill. Cartoon time?" He brings

up YouTube.

“Arfur!” Cami demands, dropping her sippy cup of juice.

“We can do *Arthur*,” I agree, picking it up again.

“Anything but *Caillou*,” Cyrus mutters, zapping the telly. We curl up together as the show starts. I sip my coffee, Cami chugs happily at her juice, and Cyrus strokes his big hand up and down my arm, occasionally pressing a kiss to both of our cheeks. I can’t help but smile to myself. I love these easy, mundane moments. We’re just watching cartoons on a Sunday morning, but I couldn’t be happier.

As the episode finishes, a YouTube ad starts to play. One that I’m very familiar with.

“Oh, look!” Cy says loudly, turning up the volume. “It’s the most stunning video game character ever created!”

I groan. I swear to God, this advert is haunting me. It’s for Jack’s latest game, *Spear*. Trinity Games has been going from strength to strength. Jack and Seb now have a crew of twenty full-time employees, and for their latest game, they got a contract with a major advertising company. Now the commercial is everywhere on the internet. The game is awesome: a cross between Indiana Jones and Tomb Raider. The only problem is—

Cami examines the screen. “Is mummy.”

They based the artwork for the main female character on me. I thought it was cute at the time; but now my digitalised face is splashed on YouTube ads and posters and game sites. I even have people recognising me in the street, which the boys find hilarious.

“Yep.” Cyrus looks at me slyly. “Isn’t mummy pretty?”

“Yes!” Cami giggles, like it’s a stupid question.

I elbow him. “Don’t call me that,” I hiss.

He snorts. “What is she supposed to call you? Bethany?”

I lunge for his phone. “Skip the ad.”

“Nope. I have a crush on that character. I think I might be in love with her.” He sighs. “If only she were real.”

I try to grab the phone again, but I'm interrupted when the door to the kitchen swings open, and Jack steps into the lounge. He's got flour smudged over his cheek.

"We're ready!" He announces. "You have to go back to the bedroom, sweetheart."

I snort, snuggling into Cyrus's chest. You couldn't pay me to move right now. "Make me."

"Okay," Cyrus says cheerfully, nipping my earlobe as Jack takes Cami out of my arms. Cy waits until she's safely out of reach, then stands, picking me up and carrying me towards the bedroom. I hook my arms around his neck and kiss his throat, trying to distract him. He just grumbles and gives my bum a slap, pushing through our bedroom door. When we step inside, my mouth falls open.

The bedroom has been transformed. There are pink streamers on the walls and vases of fresh flowers on the bedside tables. Bunches of pink and white balloons float around the bed. Cami stares at them like she's been hypnotised.

Cyrus deposits me neatly in the middle of the mattress, and Sebastian appears, placing a large tray in front of me. I stare at the spread that they've laid out; four giant stacks of pancakes, chocolate sauce, syrup, blueberries, tea, orange juice. There's a carnation sitting in a glass of water, and a box of chocolates tied up in a silky ribbon.

"Yikes. This is awkward," I say. "Guys, my birthday was last month, remember? Are you all going simultaneously senile?"

Cyrus pinches my hip.

"Cami's not really big enough to cook you pancakes yet," Jack explains. "So we've taken over this year."

I laugh. "What does that mean? Why would jellybean be cooking my breakfast?"

"It's traditional," Seb says, which makes absolutely no sense. Still, I don't want to look a gift horse in the mouth. Cami crawls across the bed towards me, and I tuck her under my arm, ripping off a piece of pancake and holding it to her mouth. "Want the first taste, baby?"

She takes a little bite and chews thoughtfully, her tiny face scrunching into a frown. “Yummy?” I ask. “Or did your daddies burn it again?”

“Is yummy!” She declares, throwing her hands up.

Jack pretends to wipe sweat off his forehead. “Thank *God*.” He sits on the corner of the mattress and picks the box of chocolates off the tray. “Cami picked these out for you.” He smiles. “Well. I held her up in front of the shelves in the candy aisle, and they were the first ones she grabbed.”

“You have great taste, baby,” I tell her, tickling her belly. “Seriously, guys, what’s all this for? I don’t understand. Are we just having a Beth Appreciation day?”

They all share a look. Cyrus elbows Sebastian in the ribs, and he steps forward, sliding into the bed next to me.

“Hey,” he says quietly.

“Hey.” I push back the coppery hair flopping over his forehead. “Was this your idea?”

“Kind of.” He cuts a forkful of pancake and holds it up to my lips. I take the bite, humming happily as the chocolate chips melt over my tongue. He smiles. “There’s one more present. Cami, will you please do the honours?”

I look up to see Cami holding an A4 envelope, happily gnawing on one corner. Jack gently pulls it away from her mouth.

“Nooo, don’t eat it. Give it to mummy. Go on.”

“Don’t call me that,” I groan.

He just gives me a sparkly look. “Yes, it’s for your *mum*. Your mama. Hand it over, baby.”

With some coaxing, Cami hands the envelope over to me. I slip my finger under the flap and peel it up, shaking out a familiar-looking piece of paper.

“Cami’s birth certificate?” I ask, confused.

Cyrus looks like he’s about to explode. “Oh my *God read it*.”

I frown, scanning down the page. It looks the same as always; it has Cami’s name, her date of birth, the hospital she was born in. Her father’s name:

Sebastian Turner Bright.

Her mother's name: *Bethany Sarah Ellis*.

"Oh," I whisper.

And then I start crying. Not sweet, cute crying. Full-on ugly sobbing. Cami looks up at me wide-eyed, then offers me her bunny.

"Thanks, baby," I whisper, re-reading the birth certificate again and again and again. It's right there, printed in black and white. *Mother, name and surname: Bethany Sarah Ellis*.

I can't breathe. I'm shaking all over. The men are all laughing around me. I hear a pop as someone breaks open a bottle of champagne. Three pairs of arms wrap around me as I'm covered in kisses. "When did it come through?" I gasp, pulling Cami—my *daughter*—onto my lap.

"A couple of weeks ago," Sebastian admits. "We wanted to save it for today."

I slap his arm. "You mean I've been her mum for two weeks and you didn't tell me?!"

Jack laughs. "Don't you get it, Beth? You've been her mum for ages. Ever since you started treating her like your daughter."

I look down at Cami. She's wriggling on my lap, singing under her breath. When she meets my eyes, she smiles widely, and my heart melts.

Jack's right. Cami's been my daughter for one and a half years now. It might finally be legal and official; but I've been *acting* as her mum for a long, long time. I've been a mother without even realising it. A piece of paper doesn't make a family. A thought occurs to me, as I cuddle my daughter close, dropping kisses into her hair.

I'm never going to have a piece of paper that says I'm married.

When we were having issues with the adoption papers, we all talked about me marrying Seb. It would've been a lot easier for me to get approved as his wife instead of his girlfriend. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't. Even if we were doing it for the good of the family, I hated the idea of being officially connected to only one of them. I was so scared Jack and Cyrus would feel left out.

I sniff, looking up at the men over Cami's pigtails. "Will you guys marry me?"

They all freeze.

"What?" Seb asks, his voice hoarse. "What did you say?"

I swallow, gathering Cami closer like a comfort blanket. "I mean, obviously, we can't legally get married, but we can still have a ceremony, and rings, and promises, right? I can still call you all my husbands?"

No one says anything.

I take a shaky breath. "I just—I love you all so much. *So much*. And I want you to be mine. I want us all to be a family. Forever."

There's a few more seconds of silence, and then I'm suddenly flattened against the bed as Cyrus bowls me over in a hug. Cami laughs uproariously, wriggling between us.

"Sammich!" She announces.

"You're our ladybug sandwich," I agree, as Cyrus starts peppering my neck and shoulders with kisses. "Oh my God, Cy, stop, you're gonna squash me —"

"He's been wanting to ask you forever," Jack says, laughing. "But he was waiting for you to be ready."

"You want to be my wife?" Cyrus breathes against my skin. "Really?"

"Yes!" I wriggle underneath him. "Get off me before I die. I need to call Benny and Tony. Benny's going to freak out."

My flighty, permanently unattached best friend finally tied the knot with his husband last year. Their wedding was amazing; Tony set up a whole mixology bar, and we got served a different drink with every one of the seven dinner courses. I haven't gotten that drunk since I was a teenager. Poor Seb had to pour me into bed that night.

Cyrus frowns, pulling back. "This isn't the engagement," he warns, his face serious. "I don't have the rings yet."

I laugh. "I don't need rings, baby."

“Yes, you do,” he insists. “We’re going to do this properly.”

“We want to take you somewhere,” Jack adds. “Maybe we’ll go on holiday. Somewhere tropical.”

“Or Paris,” Seb says behind me. He bands his arms around my waist and gently pulls me upright, drawing me into his lap. “We have lots of ideas.”

“But you’ll say yes?” Cyrus checks.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Yes, yes, yes.”

He makes a punched-out noise and grabs my cheeks, pulling me into a kiss. Cami squeals indignantly, and he kisses her cheek too, nuzzling her tiny ear.

Jack grins, squeezing in next to me and taking my hand. “We love you,” he says softly.

“I love you, too,” I choke out. “All of you.”

He beams and curls a finger under my chin, kissing me gently. He tastes like chocolate chips and coffee, and I fall into him, my body melting into his. When we finally gasp apart, I look up at Sebastian, tears rolling down my face.

“Happy Mother’s day,” he says with a small smile, and I pull his lips down to mine.

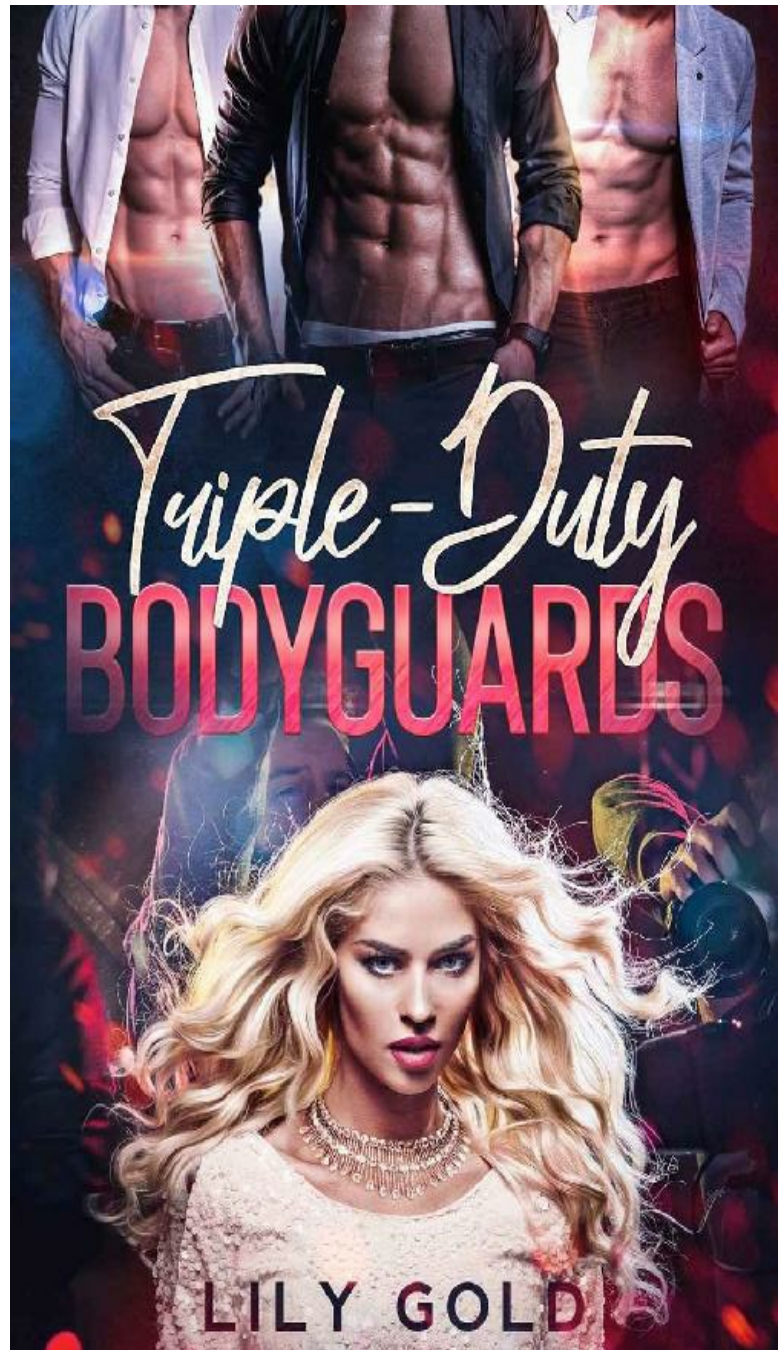


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CHAPTER ONE - BRIAR

“Now, don’t be dramatic, darling,” my PR manager drawls, examining her nail beds. “It’s not like the man was trying to *kill* you.”

I close my eyes, rubbing my temples. It’s just turned four AM, and my head is still spinning from last night’s rosé. Red and blue lights flash through the window of my little pink-tiled kitchen, shining in from the police car parked in my drive. Over my head, I can hear the heavy footsteps and low voices of the police officers investigating upstairs.

I am tired.

“A stranger climbed the side of my house, broke my bedroom window, and jerked off in my bed,” I say slowly. “I’m not being dramatic.”

Julie shrugs from her position at the marble breakfast bar, fishing her compact out of her designer purse. “He didn’t even touch you, babe,” she mumbles, patting powder over her pert nose. “This hardly seems like a reason to fire poor Rodriguez.”

My eyes slide to Rodriguez, my home security guard. He refuses to look at me, shifting uncomfortably in his spot next to Julie. His hair is ruffled, his fly is undone, and his shirt is unbuttoned. Julie’s red lipstick is all over his neck.

It’s not too difficult to work out how the intruder managed to get past my gate.

“Yes,” I say flatly. “It is. Rodriguez, do up your trousers and go.”

His eyes widen. “But, ma’am—”

“Don’t *ma’am* me. You don’t work for me anymore.” I wave at the front door. “Go.”

He stands, puffing his chest out. “Ma’am, really, that’s not fair—”

“Of course it’s *fair*,” I snap. “You were too busy shagging my staff to notice the strange man *breaking into my bedroom*. I pay you six figures, and you still can’t get through an eight-hour shift without getting your rocks off. You’re fired. Now get out of my house, before I call your wife and tell her why you no longer have a job.”

I turn on my heel and leave the kitchen, ignoring the muttered ‘*bitch*’ behind my back.

Right. That’s me. I’m not the one who screwed around on the job and cheated on my pregnant wife. But as per usual, *I’m* the bitch.

Of course, most people would agree with him. I’m a well-renowned cow. I even have titles: you are talking to the proud three-time winner of *Goss* magazine’s ‘Biggest Celebrity Diva’ award. A major UK newspaper crowned me ‘Britain’s Biggest Bitch’ just a couple of weeks ago. I don’t think they’re actually *supposed* to be awards, but I’ll take them all the same.

I suppose it is kind of my fault. As I step into the corridor, I catch a glimpse of myself in the diamond-studded hallway mirror. Highlighted blonde hair. Veneers. Fake nails. I’m the kind of woman people *love* to call a bitch.

There’s footsteps on the stairs, and I look up to see a policeman stepping onto the landing, holding a clear evidence bag.

“You got a sample?” I ask, leaning heavily against the wall.

He nods. “Doesn’t guarantee we’ll find the guy, though. If he’s not a repeat UK offender, we won’t have his DNA to match with.”

“Don’t you have databases? Hospital records, or something?”

He rolls his eyes. “We might do that for a more high-profile case, ma’am. Nothin’ as minor as a break-in.” He pulls his phone out of the back pocket of his pants and wiggles his thick black eyebrows. “By the way, my daughter was a massive fan of that TV show you were in, back in the day. You don’t mind snapping me a quick pic, do you?”

I look down at myself. I’m wearing a stained Minnie Mouse pyjama set. Last night’s makeup is smeared around my eyes, which are red, because I’ve been crying. Because I was just the victim of a home invasion.

“Yes,” I tell him, trying to keep my anger under control. “I do mind,

actually.”

His face hardens. He turns towards the door, then pauses like he’s remembered something. “Oh. I think this is yours.” He hands me the clear plastic baggie.

I frown, taking it. There’s a Polaroid inside. “What is it?”

“It was under your pillow. Very dramatic.” He presses his lips together. “I have to wonder exactly *how* someone would manage to lift up your pillow and put something under it whilst you were sleeping. Unless the intruder was the tooth fairy, it doesn’t seem very likely, does it?”

I don’t respond, taking out the photograph.

It’s a picture of me asleep. I’m sprawled over my sheets, my mouth open, my arms both flung out. Tight bands suddenly squeeze around my chest.

“The note was a nice touch,” the man adds, grabbing his jacket from my coat rack.

“Note?” I say numbly. He makes a spinning motion with his finger, and I flip over the picture. Scrawled on the back in florid cursive are the words:

You look beautiful when you’re asleep, my angel. And soon, we’ll be sleeping next to each other forever. X

“Oh my God,” I whisper, staggering back into the wall. I can’t breathe. “Oh my *God*. Please, just—” I try to pass the photograph back to the policeman, but he steps away, putting his hands up.

“That’s for you.”

I frown. “You don’t need to take it?”

He shrugs. “Don’t know how much good it would do us, ma’am.”

“What do you mean?” I demand. “It’s evidence!”

He huffs a laugh under his breath. “Right. Do you know what the penalty is for wasting police time, Miss Saint?”

“What? I didn’t waste your time, this is your damn job!”

He gives me a nasty look. “And I’m sure the paparazzi who photographed

our cars coming onto your property just *happened* to be hanging outside your house at four AM on a Tuesday morning?”

I’m gobsmacked. “Probably! It’s not *my* fault they make their living by invading my privacy! If I set all of this up, how exactly did I get a pile of come in my bed?!”

He shrugs. “You got your boyfriend to do it? I don’t know, ma’am, but I *do* know that my officers don’t appreciate being used in your publicity stunts.”

I gape at him.

There’s a scuffle behind me. Rodriguez and Julie both step out of the kitchen, whispering to each other. I snap my mouth shut and wave them to the door. “You. Both. Out. I’ll send you your severances. Enjoy unemployment.”

Julie runs a hand through her platinum curls. “C’mon, Briar,” she wheedles. “It was just a mistake. How was I supposed to know one of your creepy fans would try and break in tonight?”

I stare her down. Julie has been my PR manager for the last eight years. She’s a typical rich Chelsea girl: blonde, always made up, and constantly draped in a fur coat. During her time working for me, I’ve almost fired her about fifty times, but she somehow always manages to worm her way back into my life.

She apparently finds my silence encouraging, grabbing my hand. “Listen, will you forgive me if I get you a new security team?” Rodriguez looks hurt.

“No,” I tell her.

“But—”

“You got me *this* security team,” I point out. “And then you *slept with* my security team. So, no, I’m not letting you pick out my new guards.” I shake her off me. “You’re fired. Get out.”

She pouts. “But—”

My last fibre of control snaps. “For God’s sake, will everyone just get the Hell out of my house!” I shout. I’m shaking. The Polaroid drops out of my hand and flutters to the carpet.

There’s a few seconds of silence, then the front door opens, and everyone starts to file out. I swallow hard, feeling tears roll down my cheeks. I lift a

hand to swipe them away.

There's a sudden flash of light. I look up, and see the policeman facing me in the doorway, holding his phone up and snapping a nice little shot of my breakdown. He flashes me a smarmy grin. "Preciate it, Briar Saint."

I step forward to grab the phone out of his hand, but he slams the door shut behind him.

I stare at the door for a second, breathing hard. Then all of the energy drains out of me, and I sink to the ground, wrapping my arms around my knees. The Polaroid lies on the floor by my elbow. The note on the back stares up at me.

Soon, we'll be sleeping next to each other forever.

I bury my face in my hands. I'm so screwed.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lily Gold is a contemporary romance author living in London, England. A big supporter of unconventional relationships, she believes that *love is better shared*.

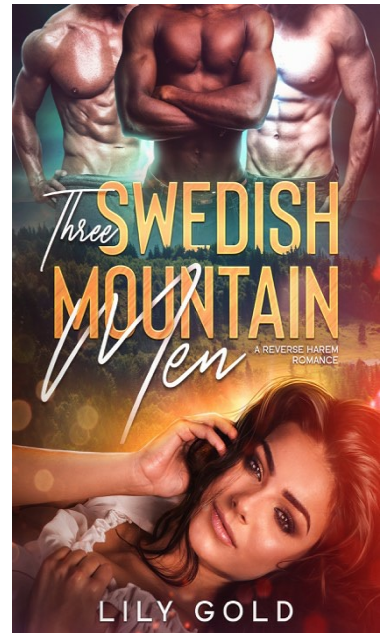
She writes stories about complex, strong women, and the harems of beautiful, protective men they fall in love with. When she's not writing, she's usually reading, accidentally killing her potted plants, or playing with whatever pet she can get her hands on.

You can connect with her at <https://www.lilygoldauthor.com/>

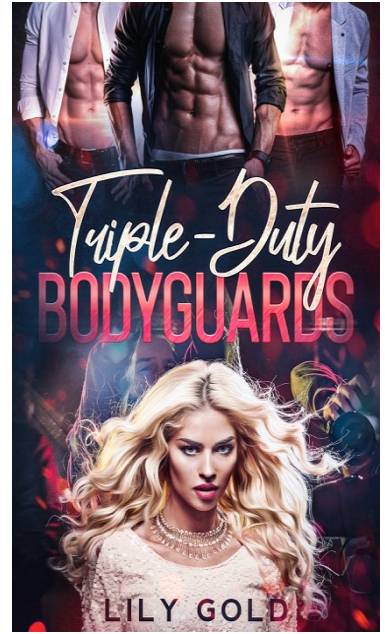


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