

*August and
the Night*



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all the women who refuse to settle, to all the women who know their worth, and to all the women who love themselves more than any man. If he isn't on his knees...We don't want him.

1

August



Drip, drip, drip. The sound of rain hitting my car fills my ears as I observe the beautiful woman sitting on one of the rusty café chairs. Despite the café's grim exterior and the subpar coffee it serves, she seems to enjoy being here. It's her favorite place, where she and her cousin always meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 9 am sharp to chat over coffee.

Today, she sits alone, exuding an air of elegance. Her petite frame is accentuated by unruly waves of dark, lustrous hair. With furrowed brows, she appears fully immersed in the book she's reading, as always, oblivious to the world around her. It's as if she could be engrossed in a fictional kiss that happened in one of her books even if a war unfolds around her.

The gentle winter sun's rays dance upon her nearly flawless complexion, marred only by a faint scar on her forehead—a reminder of a bike accident, according to my meticulous research. However, what truly draws me to her are her eyes—a captivating shade of chocolate brown, innocent and brimming with life. Yet, it's a life she doesn't deserve, just as her entire wretched family doesn't. They will pay for their sins, and the price will be steep. It's a promise.

Drip, drip, drip. The rain intensifies, mimicking the fire burning in my chest. The sound reminds me of my father's blood dripping onto the car seat as he took his final breaths. They will pay, and I will make sure they suffer. It's a promise I don't take lightly. I will ruin them, make them yearn for death.

Drip, drip, drip. The rain pours relentlessly, drenching the streets and me as I step out of my car, standing outside that rundown coffee shop. My gaze remains fixed on her—Layla Lexington, the woman who holds the key to my revenge. Today, the wheels of my plan will be set in motion. The storm outside mirrors the storm of emotions brewing inside me—darkness and an insatiable thirst for vengeance.

Adjusting my suit, raindrops cascade off my coat as I enter the coffee shop. Every step is calculated, and my eyes never stray from Layla, who

remains engrossed in her book, oblivious to her cooling coffee. With a practiced smile, I approach her table. The pages of "Sense and Sensibility" are delicately held in her hands, a book I know she started reading last week. I've been observing her for some time, understanding her cautious nature, knowing she won't easily let a stranger approach, especially a man like me. And who could blame her? My imposing stature often intimidates people. She's the polar opposite of her cousin, who would have been an easier target, but that huge diamond engagement ring on her finger complicates matters. So, the second-best option for my plan is the little dove sitting before me.

I'm a smart man, and I know we need a common interest. If it's discussing a tedious 19th-century book, then so be it. Charm drips into my voice as I speak. "Jane Austen has a way of capturing the intricacies of the human heart, don't you think?" I gesture towards the book, seeking to engage her in conversation.

Her gaze lifts from the pages, surprise evident in her eyes. Momentary wariness flickers across her features before comprehension dawns, and she regards me with interest. "Oh, absolutely," she replies, her voice laced with intrigue. "Austen's insights into human emotions and the complexities of relationships are truly captivating."

Taking the seat opposite her, I ensure my voice brims with anticipation and genuine interest. "I couldn't agree more. I love how 'Sense and Sensibility' explores the contrast of reason and emotion. It is a beautiful read."

Her eyes sparkle with enthusiasm as she responds, intertwining her words with mine as we delve into a spirited conversation about the book. "How about I get you another cup of coffee, and we can continue our discussion? It's my treat, of course," I offer gently, mindful of her skittish nature. I must foster trust without pushing too hard and risk being labeled a creep.

Gratitude and curiosity mingle in her sparkling eyes as she accepts my offer. "That's very kind of you," she replies, her voice tinged with appreciation. "I'd love another cup. Thank you. By the way, we got so engrossed in our conversation that we forgot to exchange names," she chuckles.

Rising from my seat, I extend my hand for a handshake. "The name is August Steele. And yours?" I inquire, as if I don't know when her last fucking period was.

"Layla Lexington," she responds hesitantly, her gaze shifting away, perhaps fearing that I would recognize the influence her family holds and demand undue favors. But I won't be swayed by her or her family, fuck them.

I nod, offering a forced smile before leaning in to kiss her hand. "Pleasure to meet you, love," I rasp, suppressing the anger that simmers within me. Her girlish giggle fails to charm me; it merely makes me angrier.

"How about a caramel macchiato?" I suggest, well aware that it is her preferred drink at this café. Her excited squeal confirms my knowledge. "That's my favorite! How did you know?" she exclaims.

"I couldn't say for certain. I just had a hunch that you'd enjoy something sweet, just like you," I reply, injecting charm into my voice. With that, I make my way to the counter, noting the faint blush on her cheeks. Anticipation courses through me as I order our drinks—a caramel macchiato for her and an espresso for myself. If we are to continue discussing the book, I will require caffeine.

Returning to the table, I balance two steaming cups of coffee in hand. The

rich aroma permeates the air, slightly elevating my shitty mood. Carefully placing her cup down, I take my seat, watching as steam swirls between us. Our conversation flows effortlessly, each sip of the warm beverage fueling our exchange. A twisted sense of excitement surges within me as I witness the walls crumbling, forging a connection between us. It is easier than I initially surmised. Watching the ice break between us so fast only confirms to me that she is just as easy as her pathetic cousin.

"So, what do you do, August Steele?" she asks with a warm smile on her face, a smile reminiscent of her father's when he managed to get that monster out of a jail sentence—a memory that sours my facial expression momentarily, I quickly mask it by blaming the hot coffee. She can't get suspicious. I won't allow it.

"I run a security company, love," I say, softening my voice as much as possible. I watch as recognition passes over her delicate features. "You're the owner of Steele Security? My father-Arthur Lexington, employs most of our security guards from your company!" she says, shocked.

"Does he now? What do you think of them?" I ask, feigning nonchalance. All the guards in that mansion report back to me. I know exactly what its residents do. I have access to all their security cameras. I need to know if there has ever been any suspicion.

"They do their job too well," she says, scowling, a response I don't miss.

"And why don't you seem too happy about that?" I ask, with a practiced chuckle. I need to keep the conversation light-hearted, so my little dove won't be scared.

"Um, well, we can't really sneak out and such," she says, with a slight laugh. "Once, my friend threw a birthday party, and my father didn't want me to go. So, I decided to sneak out, but I was carried back to the house within minutes. Safe to say, you have a good company," she says, with humor in her voice. But I don't find it funny at all. Being carried? Why were they so comfortable touching her? Something dark and unwanted claws at my chest.

"Carried?" I ask, trying to keep my voice light-hearted. "Well, I wasn't willing to go back to the house, so they did what they had to do," she says, with a slight laugh. But again, I don't find it amusing, and I hate knowing they touched her and I blame that on the months of fixating on every detail about her. I'll have a talk with them later. I suppress the possessiveness I feel, reminding myself that she's just a project, someone I don't want anyone interfering with. I won't feel anything for this spoiled little princess. Ever.

Forcing a chuckle, I glance at the time. We have spent two hours in this shitty café, and the uncomfortable chair digs into my back. "It seems I'm running late for a meeting, love. I must take my leave. Would you mind sharing your number?" I inquire gently, maintaining the illusion of the

gentleman.

"Um, sure," she replies nervously, her eyes avoiding mine as she recites her number. I confirm its authenticity, assuring myself it's not some disposable burner number.

"Allow me to walk you out," I say, a practiced smile on my lips. She stands up, and we make our way towards the exit. It continues to rain outside, and I drape my coat over her head, ensuring she remains dry. A good first impression is crucial.

We stroll together towards her car, where I notice one of the bodyguards I assigned to her sitting in the driver's seat. His face reveals no recognition of me, a testament to the competence of the guards I handpicked. They are among the finest in my company. After bidding her farewell, I assist her into the backseat, watching as the car drives off. I have executed my plan well. Her infatuation with me is evident, this was far simpler than I thought.

2

Layla

I sit cross-legged on my ridiculous king-sized bed, the object of much ridicule when compared to my petite frame. Insomnia plagues me, and I've tried everything to ease my sleeplessness. If a comically large bed can offer even a fraction of relief, then I'll endure the snickers. Lily, my cousin, sits next to me, engrossed in her phone as we have a conversation.

Raindrops gently tap against the windowpane, providing a soothing rhythm to our chat. Both of us wear face masks, indulging in a much-needed pampering session.

Lily's voice carries excitement as she recounts the romantic date her fiancé meticulously planned for her. I listen intently, the mask cooling and nourishing my skin as my eyes sparkle with genuine happiness for her. Even if I'm not the biggest fan of her fiancé, I still love seeing her so happy.

"He took me to this exquisite restaurant overlooking the city lights," Lily gushes, her eyes glowing with joy. "The ambiance was enchanting, and the food was absolutely divine. And guess what? He surprised me with tickets to the theater, front-row seats for the play I've been dying to see!"

A smile plays upon my lips and I relish in her delight. Despite all his faults, like forgetting to check up on her sometimes, responding to her texts a week late, and his wandering eyes, I have to give it to him. He seems to have a knack for creating romantic moments that take her breath away, perhaps as a way to compensate for his flaws.

Listening to Lily's stories of romance, my mind wanders to my own recent encounter, one that unexpectedly made my cheeks warm and my heart flutter. I hesitate for a moment, contemplating whether to share my experience with Lily. As cousins and best friends, we've always confided in each other. I know all her secrets, and she knows all of mine.

Taking a deep breath, I lean closer to Lily, lowering my voice. "Lily, something happened today," I begin, my eyes meeting hers, and she stares back at me with interest. "I met a man, and... there was something different about him."

Her eyes widen with curiosity, her attention fully captured by my words. I take a moment to gather my thoughts, savoring the anticipation of revealing the details of my unexpected encounter.

"His name is August Steele. He's so tall and muscular," I continue, my voice soft and tinged with a sense of wonder. "And he has the bluest eyes I've ever seen. I was also literally fighting myself not to ask for his hair routine."

Lily bursts into laughter before leaning closer, her face mirroring a mix of intrigue and surprise. "Are you sure he really was tall? Or did he just seem that way to you because, you know, you're so small," she says with humor, and I playfully throw a pillow her way. "Shut up! He was huge. And I'm not that small, Lily!"

"Layla... you're literally five foot two," she says mischievously. "Well, your fiancé is literally five foot three, so you shouldn't be talking," I retort, and she lets out a banshee screech before playfully attacking me.

After our silly banter, she nudges me. "Go on, Layla. I'm dying to know more," she encourages, her voice filled with anticipation.

"Lily, he literally looked like he escaped a James Bond movie. He had the most well-groomed mustache and stubble... I mean, who the fuck can pull off a mustache these days? And he does!" I describe, my words painting a vivid picture of the man who unknowingly captured my attention. "But it wasn't just his physical appearance. It was the way he spoke, how effortlessly he engaged me in conversation."

My heart quickens as I recount the details of our conversation, how he's the first man I've ever clicked with. "We even discussed 'Sense and

Sensibility.' It's his favorite book," I share, a mix of excitement and vulnerability filling my voice. "He knows Austen's works so well, and our conversation flows effortlessly. I feel like I've known him for an eternity, not just a couple of hours."

Lily gasps, her eyes widening in surprise. "Layla, this is incredible! I've never seen you this enamored with anyone before," she exclaims, her voice filled with excitement.

"And here's something even more fascinating: He owns a security company, the same one father employs our guards from. Isn't that remarkable? It's as if the universe organized this meeting. I've never felt like this before," I say with vulnerability in my voice.

Her eyes suddenly fill with mischief, and she looks at me with even more excitement. "Do you know what this means, Layla? If you get close to him, we can finally sneak out of the house! He can just tell his guards to let us go. We can go to all those clubs we were talking about," she says enthusiastically, nearly vibrating with happiness.

"You mean all those clubs you were talking about, but you know I won't let you go alone. Besides, he hasn't texted me since our meet-up in the morning," I say with a twinge of sadness in my voice.

"Layla, relax. You literally just talked this morning, and he owns his own company, so he must be a busy man. He'll probably text you tonight," she

says calmly, soothing my self-doubt a little. After all, she has much more experience than me.

"You think? I haven't really done this before, Lily," I admit with insecurity.

"I'm sure, honey. Besides, I know about your lack of experience. For the longest time, I thought you were a lesbian. I would have even thought you were asexual if I hadn't walked in on you once with Mr. Pinky," she chuckles, referring to my vibrator. My cheeks burn, and I immediately grab a nearby pillow before pouncing on Lily. "I'm going to fucking kill you," I screech as I playfully try to choke her with the pillow. She melts into the bed, laughing so hard that she's fighting for breath. "I'll be sure to tell Mr. Tall and Handsome that you like it rough," she scoffs before I jump at her again, really going to kill her this time.

3

Layla 

August didn't end up texting me last night, and I'm honestly incredibly disappointed. I thought our little meet-up went great; we were both interested

in the same things, and I felt like sparks flew between us. I wanted to talk to him some more.

I didn't get my fill of that handsome man; I want more of him. I've never felt like this for anyone before, so I'm battling feelings I don't understand. I could just ask Lily, but I don't want to seem desperate in front of her. She can get any man she wants with just a wink of her pretty green eyes. I'll never understand why she settled for Oliver Davis.

That man looks like my big toe. He's balding, short, and has a beer gut. He's also fifteen years older than her; she's twenty-five years old while he's forty. Oliver doesn't even appreciate the fact that he has such a beautiful and strong young woman by his side, but Lily always speaks highly of him and the dates he takes her on. I'm convinced that there's something in him that I just don't see because she's not with him for money like many of our acquaintances assume. We already come from money. I shrug off my thoughts; Lily has a big head on her shoulders, and she knows what's best for her more than me.

I hop out of bed, my bare feet landing on the soft carpet, and make my way to the bathroom. As I stand before the mirror, I style my mess of waves into place and splash cool water on my face, attempting to stop sleep from sneaking back in. I haven't slept much, and when I did, my dreams were filled with August Steele. After I finish my morning routine, I dress myself in a

pair of fitted jeans and a fluffy sweatshirt. I forgo makeup simply because I'm going to be spending a long time in the lab today, and I'm sure I'll end up looking like a hot mess with it on by the end of the day.

As I leave my bedroom, I notice that Lily is nowhere to be seen. I check my texts and notice that she informed me that she has a big exam coming up and has been studying at the library since early morning. Lily and I are inseparable. Her parents both died when she was young, and my father took her in considering that she was a reminder of his brother, a man he loved dearly. She was eleven when she moved in, and I was nine. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't jealous of her at first. My father would constantly want to hang out with her alone, and often times I would be left out. When Lily noticed, she sat me down and told me it's because he felt bad for her and wanted to give her comfort after her parents' death, and that I would always be his special girl. It's ironic how a child had enough sense to have this talk with me, but a full-grown adult did not. But my Lily has always been smart.

As we grew, my dad's favoritism for her did as well. He would constantly take her on dinners and to the movies without me, and she would always be the person he was most proud of, often introducing her to his business partners as his daughter, while he preferred to keep me in the shadows. I can understand why, though. Lily is tall, while I'm short. She's fun, while I'm boring. She's stunning, while I'm cute. She's social, while I'm introverted.

She has always been the stunner, the perfect one, and the one people were captivated by. After that conversation she had with me, though, I stopped minding. I could tell that she wasn't in any competition with me; she was just being herself. Also, she was enough for me. She always made sure to hang out with me, helped me with school work, and was my shoulder to cry on. She took on the roles of my mother, sister, and best friend, which is why I always clap at her success instead of feeling threatened by it, because she deserved it.

I leap down the stairs of the mansion, not forgetting to take my coat with me. As I bend down to put on my shoes, I hear one of the mansion's servants clear his throat behind me. "Your father is coming today from his trip to Spain. He told us to prepare dinner today at six for him and you girls," he mutters with a gentle voice.

"Thank you for informing me, Charles. I'll be there," I say, but my voice lacks enthusiasm. I'm not really that close with my father. Lily and I were thinking of ordering takeout tonight, and with him coming over, those plans are definitely canceled. He would have an aneurysm if he saw us eating pizza, as he's always conscious about our weight.

I sigh as I leave the house and tell John, my bodyguard and driver, to take me to the university. I get into the backseat of the car and lay my head on the window while I watch as the rain falls freely. I love the rain, but even it can't

cheer me up at the news of my father's arrival. I notice John staring at me from his rearview mirror before he asks, "Is everything okay, Layla? Is your thesis going alright?"

"Yes, John, don't worry. I'll have another publication soon, hopefully," I say, trying to inject enthusiasm into my voice.

"That's my girl! Soon you'll have a Master's degree in Cancer Biology! I can't wait to tell Linda!" he says excitedly, and I can't help but smile widely. John is in his fifties, but he's very well-built and a perfect bodyguard. I just know that he would take a bullet for me. He started to notice how I lacked parental figures in my life almost as soon as he started working and made it his and his wife's mission to fill that role. Linda, his wife, always invites me over for home-cooked meals, and even though we have professional cooks at the mansion, her food always tastes better, like the home I never had.

"We'll throw a dinner party in your honor! This is so exciting, my Layla!" he continues with enthusiasm, and I laugh.

"I can't wait for that, John! I miss Linda's cooking," I say, and he stops the car near my university before turning around and giving me a container of food.

"You're in luck then! She made lasagna yesterday and made sure to leave you some. She knows it's your favorite," he tells me, and I snatch the container from his hand and run to my class while he laughs.

4

Layla

Sitting in my cozy corner of the lab, my eyes fixate on the microscope, a rush of excitement courses through my veins. Cancer biology is my passion, hence why I am currently pursuing a master's degree in it. The journey has been tedious, but my love for the field keeps me going.

My thesis work is one of the hardest things I have ever done in my life, but the sense of accomplishment is what keeps me going. As I delve into my own research within the lab, I revel in the opportunity to contribute to the fight against cancer. Every cell I study, every experiment I conduct, brings me closer to unraveling the mysteries of this relentless disease. The lab becomes my sanctuary, where I put all my pent-up energy, much like how some people go to the gym to de-stress, I go to my lab.

In the midst of my research, my stomach grumbles, reminding me that it is already one pm and I still haven't had breakfast. I take off my gloves, hang up my lab coat, wash my hands, and sit on one of the benches outside the lab. I grab the container of food John gave me and eat the cold lasagna. It is still absolutely delicious despite being cold, and Linda truly is an amazing cook. The sound of a message vibrating my phone catches my attention, and I reach

for it.

I almost choke on the piece of lasagna in my mouth when I see that the text is from August, quickly reaching for my bottle of water to wash it down. After my little embarrassing fit, I take a deep breath and open the text.

"Hey love, how are you?" - August

I wait a couple of minutes before replying, not wanting to seem too hasty to answer. With shaky fingers, I type out,

"Fine, how are you?" - Me

"Good, missed me?" - August

"Hahaha no offense, but not really. I don't know you enough to miss you," I type, knowing fully well that I am lying.

"You wound me. How about we rectify that?" - August

"What do you mean?" - Me

"Can I take you out on a date tonight? It's a sushi restaurant on a beautiful rooftop. I know you would love it." - August

I contemplate the idea. If I am being true to myself, there is nothing I want more. But I have dinner tonight with my father, and he would be pissed if I don't attend. I seem to take a long time contemplating because he texts,

"I promise I am not a serial killer, love" - August

I can't help but laugh that bubbles from inside of me before I respond jokingly,

"And how can I know that for sure?" - Me

"Believe me, the only screams I want coming out of you are that of pleasure" - August

My mouth goes slack as I look at the message, my heart beating fast, and my face bright red. I can't believe he just texted me that. If it were any other guy but August, I would have immediately blocked him. But this man, I want him to do things to me I never thought of before. I want him inside of me, on top of me, his lips on mine, and his breath in my ear.

I am nothing if not a good reflector of my emotions, and what I see in me scares me. I am ecstatic that he sees me in a sexual way and that he is attracted to me. All my life, I have never been the one with those thoughts directed towards, and my body is going haywire with just the mere idea that a man like August wants me to scream for him.

"Do you think you would be able to do that?" I tease, although I know fully well that he could probably make me orgasm in minutes.

"Go out with me tonight and let me show you just what I can do" - August

I take a shaky breath, already deciding what I am going to do. Well, something other than my brain decided for me. I mean, isn't it time to live my life already? Isn't it time that I finally feel a man's touch?

Besides, my father always does whatever he wants without worrying about my feelings. He didn't stay for my birthday last year because he preferred

going to an exclusive yacht party in Greece. He also shuts me up every time I talk about my research because his head hurts from "all that stupid science shit." He does whatever he wants if it means he can be happy, no matter how selfish it seems. So why can't I do the same?

"I will get back to you in a minute," I text, deciding to get Lily's opinion first.

I call her and immediately get to the point, knowing that she is busy with her psychology classes. "Lily, you won't believe it! August just invited me for a sushi date, but dad is coming home tonight and expects us for dinner. What should I do? Help!"

Lily, being my rock as always, quickly replies, "Bitch! Are you even asking that question? A six-foot-three man with muscles like that of John Cena asked you out on a sushi date, and you're considering blowing him off for that old man!" Her voice increases in pitch as she talks, and I have to move the phone away from my ear so that her screeching doesn't burst my eardrums.

Feeling overwhelmed, I reply, "I'm not sure. It's been so long since we've spent time together. I don't want to disappoint him, but I also don't want to miss out on this date."

Lily quickly responds, "Layla, I can see how transfixed you are with this man. You are literally always glued to your phone in the hopes that he texts!

Go on that date and forget about your old man. I can cover for you, don't worry. You deserve to have some fun, honey!"

Relief floods over me as I consider Lily's suggestion. She is right. I deserve to have a little fun! "Thank you, Lily. You're the best!" I tell her with affection in my voice. I truly love her more than life itself.

"I know I am the best. That's why I am going to remind you not to forget to shave, yes, that little Amazon forest too, Layla! I swear if you don't, I will do it myself... Oh, and don't forget to wear matching underwear." She singsongs teasingly, and I immediately hang up on her, changing my mind. I hate her.

I text August back, telling him that I will be able to come, and he immediately messages me the time and location of our meet-up. With a smile on my face, I call John to take me back to the mansion because, even though I hate to admit it, Lily is right. I need to shave.

August



After Layla agrees to have a dinner date with me, I immediately postpone all my meetings to another day so that I can ensure everything goes perfectly. Everything needs to go perfectly for my plan to work—I won't let my parents down. Leaving my office, I tell Stacy, my secretary, to book the entire rooftop of the sushi restaurant. I want Layla all to myself, with no interruptions and no chance of something going wrong.

I'm an observant man, and I can't help but notice the slight dissatisfaction in Stacy's eyes following my request. However, I believe that Stacy is intelligent enough not to mess anything up. She knows I would absolutely destroy her if she even dared to overstep her boundaries.

I get into the car and instruct the driver to take me home. I need to freshen up. I need Layla to be attracted to me. She seems like the type of person who

would tell me her life story during pillow talk if she's pleased properly, and pleasuring her properly is exactly what I intend to do.

From a distance, I can see my house standing tall and proud, nestled amidst meticulously landscaped gardens. Its architecture drips with modern sophistication. The creamy white exterior exudes a sense of timeless beauty, while the expansive windows invite natural light to flood the interior, giving it a serene feel. I love this house.

I designed everything from scratch, intending it to be perfect for my future wife and children—a haven for them. It kills me that I have to bring Layla over someday. I don't want my house to be sullied by the likes of her. But I know I have to bring her over to give her a sense of knowing me. The more she feels like she knows me, the more likely she is to open up to me.

Entering through the double doors, I'm greeted by the beautiful familiar sights and sounds that greet me every day, yet I never tire of them. The foyer, with its modern flooring and simple, comfortable interior, has a homely feel, not like a hotel. But the most beautiful sight of all is the large birdhouse nestled in the living room—a sanctuary for avian life. The birdhouse itself is a work of art, adorned with intricate carvings and exquisite detailing that echo the elegance of the surrounding space, giving the living room a majestic, mythical feel.

A gate-like structure with a mesmerizing design ensures the safety of the

beautiful birds, preventing any accidental escape. The gate, crafted with a delicate touch and adorned with small metal structures of different birds, allows for a clear view of the inhabitants while maintaining a barrier of protection. It blends seamlessly with the overall aesthetic, enhancing the charm of the living room.

The walls surrounding the birdhouse are a breathtaking sight—transparent panes of glass stretching from floor to ceiling, immersing the room in natural light. The vibrant plumage of the birds dazzles against the backdrop, their movements creating a ballet of grace and color. The glass walls provide an uninterrupted view into their home.

Inside the spacious room, a chorus of melodic chirps and trills fills the air, creating a symphony of bird songs. Each unique note harmonizes with the others, their collective voices weaving a beautiful symphony that reverberates throughout the house. The variety of bird species that call this aviary home is truly remarkable. Colorful parrots, innocent little white doves, elegant finches, and majestic cockatoos coexist in perfect harmony. The room is thoughtfully designed to accommodate their needs, with perches and branches strategically placed to provide a natural environment for them to explore and perch upon. It will always be my favorite part of coming home every day.

I force myself to move away from the enclosure and head up the stairs to

my bedroom. Once I reach it, I immediately strip off the suit I'm wearing and head to the bathroom to take a shower. Under the streams of hot water, I can't stop my thoughts from straying towards Layla. I'll never understand how such a horrendous monster can have such an innocent face. Her eyes hold so much innocence, you could never tell she comes from a family of power-hungry, disgusting monsters.

The way she looked at me in the café is still burned in my memory—how she looked at me with so much trust. She has no idea that I'm the last person she should look at like that. I'm going to ruin her and her family, leaving nothing of them unscathed.

My theory is that this is how she lures men in. Her father is infamous for using seductresses to get what he wants, and he definitely molded her to be every man's wet dream so he could use her for his horrendous deeds. My rational side is well aware that this is all a persona—her innocent looks and pouty lips are a facade she uses to lure men she likes.

A woman like her, with her blood, wouldn't know innocence even if it hit her in the face. But my dick refuses to believe it, always standing erect at the mere thought of her. God, she's good. I feel nothing but anger towards both her and myself as my hand slips to my dick, stroking it to thoughts of that dirty girl.

I imagine her on her knees, looking up at me with those eyes filled with

trust. Her pouty lips wrapped around my cock. I won't be gentle with her. She doesn't deserve gentleness. I'll fucking destroy her, fuck her face into oblivion. By the time I'm done with her, tears will be streaming down her pretty face, her lips bruised, and her throat sore. I cum at the images I conjure in my head, ropes of thick cum flowing down the shower drain. I'm still shaking from the force of the orgasm. I've never come so hard in my life, and it infuriates me that it's to the thought of that nasty woman. I'll never allow myself to get lost in her again. It messes with my head, making me feel things I'm not allowed to feel—feelings she'll never deserve in a million years.

Layla



I apply dark red lipstick as the final touch to my preparation and study my reflection. I'm dressed in a long black dress with a high slit, a synched waist, and a slightly revealing V-neck that may show more cleavage than I initially intended.

Adorning my collarbone is a diamond necklace that Lily had to practically force me to wear. It was a gift from my father to her, and I didn't want to impose by wearing it. But she insisted, brushing off my doubts as nonsense, and now I understand her vision—it looks stunning. Lily also took the time to straighten my typically wavy hair, despite having an upcoming psychology final, she is truly a sweetheart. My minimal makeup is enhanced by the dark red lipstick, which I must say suits me well.

"Goddamn! He's going to be all over you as soon as he lays eyes on you, mark my words," Lily exclaims, twirling me around and making me laugh.

"Really? Should I add more blush? Is there anything missing from my look?" I ask anxiously, bombarding her with questions fueled by my nervousness. She quickly shushes me.

"You look fantastic. You don't need to add or change anything. Just relax," she reassures me with a gentle tone, giving me a tight hug.

"John will be with you, but please call me if you feel uncomfortable," she

whispers in my ear. I hug her tightly and kiss her cheek.

"I will, Lily. Thank you for convincing Father," I express my gratitude.

"Don't thank me. You know I'd do anything for you. Just remember, if he asks, it's just dinner with a friend, not a date," she advises, her voice briefly trembling with what seems like fear. But it vanishes as quickly as it appeared, leaving me wondering if I imagined it.

Brushing off the thought, I nod to Lily and bend down to put on my heels. I take a few steps to test walking in them, enduring the discomfort, and confident that I won't stumble. Giving Lily a final kiss on her cheek, I grab my handbag and coat before leaving the house.

I provide John with the restaurant's location. He seems a bit nervous, fidgeting with his wedding ring and looking around the garden.

"Did you get permission from Mr. Lexington?" he asks, concerned. I assure him that I did, understanding his unease as my father was not someone to be messed with.

He nods before getting into the driver's seat and entering the location in his GPS. I settle into the passenger seat and double-check my appearance using my phone's camera. I'm incredibly nervous, my mind filled with thoughts of August. Will he like how I look? Will he think my red lipstick is too much? Am I overdressed?

I silence the barrage of questions as I notice my chest heaving and my

hands shaking. Recalling our time at the café, where we hit it off effortlessly, I assure myself that our conversation will flow just as smoothly this time. I start playing with my hair, a nervous habit.

After some time, John parks the car in front of a tall, luxurious building and informs me that we have arrived. I step out, gazing at the beautiful structure as my heart races even faster. My hands are shaking uncontrollably now, and I feel like I might faint. This is my first official date ever, and it's with a man who looks like he stepped out of a Calvin Klein photo-shoot. I scold myself for the inappropriate image of August that pops into my head, this is not the time for such images. My heart feels like it's about to explode.

Sensing my nervousness, John gently nudges me toward the building. "I'll be waiting for you here, Layla. Call me if you need anything," he says softly. I'm left surprised but grateful that he won't be babysitting me during my date. I am sure John won't tell father either way, he always covers for me.

I nod to him and squeeze his hands before walking toward the building. As I enter, I'm momentarily stunned by its beauty. Taking cautious steps, I approach the receptionist to ask about the sushi restaurant. She appears flustered by my question, perhaps it's her first day.

"Are you with Mr. Steele?" she nervously asks, smoothing down her slightly wrinkled dress after standing up. I nod, and she immediately guides me to the elevator, where she accompanies me to the rooftop. My nerves

intensify as I notice the elevator's glass walls, providing a view of the city below. The receptionist seems to sense my anxiety and reassures me about the elevator's safety. I express my gratitude for her attempt to comfort me.

As the elevator doors open, I'm greeted by a stunning white flower path leading to the restaurant. The receptionist instructs me to follow the path, indicating that the restaurant is just ahead. I thank her before she departs.

Stepping onto the path, I'm captivated by the beauty of the flowers, momentarily forgetting my nerves. Kneeling down, I inhale their fragrance, and a smile naturally spreads across my face. Suddenly, I'm startled by the sound of someone clearing their throat. I turn around to see August, looking absolutely dashing.

August wears a navy blue suit that complements his perfect complexion and brings out his blue eyes. His hair is stylishly swept to the side, and his stubble is now a slightly overgrown beard which gives him an alluringly intimidating look. He takes steps toward me until he's dangerously close to my kneeling form. His eyes hold a mysterious darkness as he offers me his hand to help me up.

I accept his hand, and he pulls me up a little too forcefully, causing me to stumble in my heels and fall directly onto his chest. His intoxicating scent overwhelms me, and I instinctively nuzzle closer to his chest to savor it.

His chest rumbles with barely contained laughter, and I playfully slap it,

my face burning bright red from embarrassment.

"Stop! I wouldn't have fallen if you helped me up more gently," I tell him, pouting, and he laughs even more.

"Did you mistake me for the flowers, baby?" he teases, causing my face to match the shade of my dark red lipstick, a mix of embarrassment and the thrill of being called "baby."

"I-I mean... your scent is just... really good," I manage to stutter, my eyes welling up with tears from the overwhelming embarrassment tightening in my chest.

Panic flashes across his face, and he immediately pulls me into a tight hug, whispering in my ear, "Hey, baby, it's okay. I was just joking." Goosebumps ripple across my skin, and he seems to notice, as he starts rubbing my arms soothingly.

"I'm sorry, August. I've just never done this before," I whisper, my hands gesturing awkwardly between us, and my voice barely audible if I weren't so close to him.

He creates some distance between us to examine my face, his expression one of intense confusion. "What do you mean by that?" he rasps, and I look away, unable to conceal my shame.

"If you want to stop, I understand. It's strange for a twenty-three-year-old to have as little experience as me. If it's a deal-breaker for you, it's okay," I

mumble, my eyes once again welling up with tears, fueled by the overwhelming shame I feel.

He quickly wipes away my tears and embraces me tightly before whispering in my ear, "It's not a deal-breaker for me, love. You're perfect just the way you are. There's nothing wrong with you."

I break away from his embrace to study his face, trying to comprehend his reaction. "Are you sure? I mean, you'd have to teach me so much," I say, my face burning with embarrassment. Instantly, I notice a flicker of desire clouding his eyes as he replies, "I would thoroughly enjoy that, my little dove."

7

August



I like to think that I am a good judge of people, that I can easily tell lies from truth. I have always been outstandingly good at reading people, knowing their true intentions just from my eyes flicking over their face and body language. But Layla is an enigma, and I can't figure out if what is coming out of her red-tinted lips is the truth.

Her body language and facial expressions show no sign of deceit, but I know her character better than to assume the truth in her words. I push my thoughts to the back of my mind and focus on being a perfect gentleman. I won't blow the opportunity of getting information out of her.

My hand reaches out to caress her hair, and a furrow immediately forms between my eyebrows when I feel how silky the strands are. I create some space between us to take a proper look at her, and I cannot deny the fact that she is a beautiful woman. Her pale skin has a hint of pink, and I'm not sure if it's from her makeup or from me making her blush. Her big eyes are framed with long lashes, enhanced by mascara, and her face is framed by pin-straight hair that reaches all the way down to her ass. I can't help but feel displeased that her unruly waves are nowhere in sight, and she immediately notices, her eyes searching my face.

"What's wrong?" she mumbles gently, and I wrap a fist around her hair, allowing the long strands to curl around my hand as I bring her face dangerously close to mine.

"I like your hair the way it usually is, what did you do to it?" I grumble, unable to stop my eyes from straying to her lips. I immediately notice how her breath becomes unsteady, her cheeks redder, and a slight tremble in her hands resting on my shoulders. Interesting, seductresses usually do not have this reaction to the touch of a man... Unless this is what she is trained to do – trick men into thinking she's innocent for the thrill of it. The thought causes something dangerous to eat away at my chest.

"My best friend straightened it for me. We thought it would suit the dress more," she tells me, looking deeply into my eyes, as if sensing a shift in me.

"Don't straighten it again. Your waves suit everything just fine," I growl in her ear, still irritated by the images of her luring men in with the innocent virgin act plaguing my mind.

I can't stop the question that escapes my mouth, "Layla, have you shown those innocent eyes to a man other than me? Did you whisper in their ears like you did mine?"

She flusters, her chest heaving with uneven breaths, and her eyes looking everywhere but at mine. I use my hold on her hair to guide her to look at me, my grasp firm enough to command her attention but not harsh enough to cause pain.

"No, August. I told you I never did this before. I have never even been attracted to any man before you," she whispers shyly. I don't care if this is a

lie; I need anything that can soothe the unwanted burn in my chest at this point.

"Yeah?" I ask as I kiss the side of her mouth gently, and she starts to blabber nervously, but I fight the urge to laugh.

"Yeah, I promise. My best friend says that she used to think I am a lesbian, even asexual if she didn't..." She stops suddenly, her face redder than a tomato, and she starts to backtrack, "Nothing, forget I said anything, please," she says desperately, squeezing one of my hands, and suspicion starts to rear its ugly head.

"Didn't what?" I say, my voice leaking venom due to the unexpected jealousy I feel. She is just a project, as well as my enemy, I remind myself, but for some reason, the thought of anyone touching her, man or woman, makes me feel murderous.

"I promise it isn't anything. I beg you to forget about it," she raises her voice, shifting on her feet.

"Tell me, little dove. I promise you are safe with me, I won't judge you," I spit out the words, fully aware of how untrue they are. She isn't safe with me. I will get the information I need out of her, then dispose of her just like she means nothing, because she actually doesn't mean anything.

She avoids my eyes completely before shouting out, "She walked in on me using a vibrator, okay! Are you happy now?" She huffs and puffs, and I

struggle to stop the laughter bubbling in my chest, this wouldn't have been my reaction if it was anybody other than her cousin though.

"I promise that with me, you won't need any toy. I won't allow it. Only my hands, tongue, and cock bring you pleasure," I say, and she immediately melts into me, her eyes glazing over with desire.

I continue playing with her hair and lean down to give her a kiss on her red lips. Immediately, she releases a little moan that makes me hard as a rock, but her lips remain closed, not giving me entry.

"Give me your mouth," I rasp, and she looks at me confused and responds, "I am, August." I nearly cum on the spot from her little innocent act. I don't even care if it's fake at this moment; I am just loving it.

I bite her lip harshly, and she gasps. I take this as an opportunity to push my tongue into her mouth, and her knees wobble. I wrap an arm around her waist, steadying her as our tongues dance. She clearly isn't an expert, or pretends not to be, choosing to mimic my movements, but damn if it isn't the best kiss I have ever had.

I break the kiss and look into her dazed eyes before whispering, "Come on, let's go eat."

I don't fail to notice the slight disappointment on her face that she tries to hide, and I stifle a laugh as I lead her towards our designated table with my hand on her lower back.

8

August



I guide her to the elegant table, her delicate features lighting up with amazement. The table is adorned with a stunning arrangement of red roses, and the breathtaking view from the rooftop captures every nook and cranny of Seattle. As I assist her in settling into her chair, she gazes at me with joyful admiration, and I take a seat across from her.

"This is the most beautiful restaurant I've ever been to, August. The view is simply incredible, I can't believe you booked the entire restaurant!" she gushes, and I can't help but feel perplexed. Given that her father is one of the wealthiest individuals in the area, she should be accustomed to such extravagance.

Curiosity gets the better of me, and I decide to inquire further. "Don't flatter

me. While it may be fancy, I'm sure it doesn't compare to the restaurants you've been to before," I remark with a chuckle, and she scowls slightly while fiddling with her painted fingernails.

Reaching across the table, I hold her hand in mine, soothing her nervous fidgeting. As she takes a deep breath, seemingly trying to steady herself, she finally speaks. "Well, I don't really go out that much. So, this truly is one of the most incredible restaurants I've ever experienced."

Recognizing the opportune moment to delve into my investigation, I patiently wait for the waiter to place an expensive bottle of wine and two ice-filled glasses on the table before stepping away. With the waiter gone, I resume our conversation.

"You don't go out often? Why is that?" I inquire gently while pouring the wine, hoping that a slight intoxication might make it easier to extract information from her.

Nervously eyeing my hands as I pour the drinks, she mumbles, "My father has always been excessively protective, and I'm also quite introverted."

I nod in understanding before handing her a glass. She eyes it with curiosity before hesitantly asking, "This is wine, right?" Her question elicits an incredulous look from me, and she quickly becomes defensive. "Hey! Don't look at me like that. I don't drink," she asserts with a shrill tone, furrowing my eyebrows in response.

"What do you mean you don't drink? Don't you attend your father's business parties?" I inquire, attempting to mask the disbelief in my voice.

Her father's business parties are known for their indulgence in drinks, drugs, and strippers. While I've never personally witnessed her presence at these gatherings, I've often seen her cousin Lily there. I had assumed she was engaged in private activities with one of the men.

Observing a hint of discomfort on her face, she reveals, "No, my father always takes my cousin, Lily, with him." She swirls her cup slightly before taking a sip of the red liquid. Her face scrunches up, and she hastily places the cup down.

"You don't like it?" I ask, trying to stifle my laughter. She responds quickly, seemingly afraid to offend me. "It's okay. I'm just not accustomed to it."

"So, this is your first time trying alcohol?" I inquire, unable to hide my shock. She shakes her head and explains, "Yes, I've always wanted to, but alcohol isn't allowed in the house. And Lily has always warned me against it."

As I process this information, I find it perplexing. Why would a sex addict and heavy drinker like Lily discourage her cousin from consuming alcohol? Why would an alcoholic with no interest in recovery ban alcohol from his own home? My head begins to spin, and I hastily gulp down my glass of wine.

"So, Layla," I began, my voice laced with calculated curiosity. "Do you often

hear about your father's business dealings?"

"Oh, absolutely. My dad's work is quite fascinating. He's always traveling and attending meetings with important people." She says.

I lean in slightly, my interest piqued. "Traveling, you say? Any specific destinations he frequents for his business?"

Her eyes light up as she shares, unaware of my ulterior motive. "Definitely. He often goes to Europe for his meetings. Countries like France, Italy, Spain, and Greece are common for him. He spends more time in Europe than in America."

As she speaks, I mentally take note, filing away the information. Layla is unwittingly providing me with key details about her father's travel patterns and connections.

"That sounds quite impressive," I say, injecting enthusiasm into my tone.

Layla nods, a small smile gracing her lips. "Definitely. It's a world I don't understand, my expertise is in the lab."

Our conversation proceeds, with me guiding her towards sharing more about her father's activities without raising any alarms. "Does he ever mention any challenges he faces in his line of work?"

Her expression becomes slightly more guarded, but she continues. "Yes, of course. I have seen him Livid due to his work more than once, I never ask the

details though, he and Lily tend to not like to talk much about their work."

I maintain a sympathetic look, as if I truly care. "It sounds like a complex world."

"Definitely. He and Lily seem to be always working." She tells me.

A victorious feeling surges within me. Her casual admissions provided the confirmation I need—her father's criminal activities has a layer of complexity that involves international connections. I keep my expression neutral, masking my triumph.

I store away every piece of information, every subtle hint. Layla was unknowingly helping me piece together the puzzle of her father's criminal empire.

"What is your relationship like with Lily?" I ask, even though I am aware of their incredibly close bond. However, sometimes things are not as they seem. A smile instantly lights up her face, and she warmly replies, "She's more than just my cousin; she's my best friend and sister." I nod in response, forcing a smile to mask my true thoughts.

"Do you have someone like that in your life, August?" she inquires, and it takes me a moment to consider my response. While I should probably fabricate a person to create a sense of shared experience, something within

me compels me to be truthful with her, despite the potential risks.

"No, I've always preferred solitude," I confess, and she looks at me with a hint of worry. Gently, she asks, "Why?" I contemplate her question, realizing that this is the opportune moment to gauge her knowledge about the incident involving my father.

"Well, both my parents passed away when I was young. So, I grew up alone, and old habits die hard. It made me value solitude," I reveal, closely studying her facial expression for any signs of recognition. However, none surface. Instead, a stray tear escapes her eye, which she hastily wipes away.

"I'm so sorry, August. That must have been incredibly difficult for you. May I ask how they passed away?" she cautiously inquires. Just as I prepare to answer her, three waiters approach, each carrying platters of sushi. They place the dishes on the table, interrupting our personal conversation. Observing her quick composure, as though she doesn't want anyone to overhear, I clear my throat and express gratitude before they depart.

I watch as she eats hesitantly, waiting for me intently as if her next breaths hinge upon my words. Joining her, I eat a few pieces of sushi before resuming our conversation, keenly observing her expressions for any signs of recognition or malice.

"Well, my father died in a car accident. A drunk driver crashed into his car, and my mother took her own life a few years later," I reveal. Her face

contorts with immense sorrow, her eyes filling with tears that soon cascade down her cheeks.

This marks the second time she has cried during our date—an unwanted turn of events. Just as I prepare to console her and bring her emotions under control so we can continue our conversation, she rises from her chair and walks toward me. Shocked, I watch as she wraps her arms around me in a tight embrace, murmuring, "I'm so sorry, August. You're incredibly strong to have endured that and still emerge as the strong man I see before me."

Awkwardly, I pat her back, feeling her tears dampen my suit. Is she crying out of guilt? Does she know that her family was responsible for the death of mine? I create some distance between us, focusing on her face. There are no signs of guilt or recognition, only empathy. I'm unsure of what to think; she couldn't possibly be that skilled at deception. Pushing my thoughts aside, I wipe away her tears, thanking her and instructing her to return to her seat so we can continue with dinner. She nods, gracefully resuming her place, and once again holds her chopsticks, toying with her food.

"Eat," I instruct, noticing that she's merely moving the sushi around on her plate. She glances at me, nodding, and begins to eat. However, I'm still dissatisfied with the amount she consumes. Taking my favorite type of sushi with the chopsticks, I feed it to her. She chews with a flushed face, avoiding eye contact. As soon as she swallows, I offer her another piece, which

surprises her. This playful exchange continues until she raises both hands in surrender, laughing, and insists that I stop.

"Don't you enjoy the food?" I inquire, and she quickly shakes her head. "It's delicious, but I had a heavy lunch, so I got full quickly," she explains, and I acknowledge her response.

Indulging my curiosity, I ask the question that has been gnawing at me since our conversation began. "Earlier, you mentioned that your father only takes Lily to his parties. Why is that?"

I observe a tinge of shame in her eyes as she glances around the room before admitting, "To be honest, she has always been the perfect one. He loves showcasing her to his business partners, and I always get sidelined. It's alright, though. I'm not bothered by it; that's just the way it is."

The gears in my mind start turning as I process this newfound information. Layla appears to perceive these parties as regular networking events, oblivious to their true nature. It's as if she has no idea what truly transpires at those gatherings, and that makes no sense. She assumes someone needs to be perfect to attend these events, which isn't the case at all.

"What have you heard about your father's parties?" I ask cautiously, and she ponders for a moment before responding, "Well, I haven't inquired about them in a long time. But when I was younger and asked Lily, she'd tell me it was just dull, balding men discussing land and business."

I nod, assuring her that it's precisely as she described, despite it being the farthest thing from the truth. Her lack of awareness might prove advantageous to me. I rub my temples, feeling a headache coming on from all the confusing information. This is not how I expected our encounter to unfold.

I gaze at her, my source of confusion, before suggesting, "Would you like to try different types of alcohol? I can introduce you to them if you're interested." Layla being slightly tipsy would make it easier to loosen her tongue, which is precisely what I need.

She appears somewhat nervous but nods in agreement. I signal the waiter to come over so I can order the drinks. This is about to become even more interesting.

9

August



I proceed to introduce her to a variety of alcoholic beverages, including champagne, gin and tonic, vodka, martinis, and many more. However, it becomes apparent that Layla only enjoys the martinis, as she grimaces at the taste of everything else. Her palate seems unaccustomed to the intensity of the other alcoholic beverages. It solidifies her earlier claim of never having consumed alcohol before. Surprisingly, even a few sips and a single glass of Martini leave her visibly intoxicated. Her face takes on a

permanent flush, and she finds everything utterly amusing. She is completely and undeniably inebriated.

"How are you feeling?" I inquire, observing her closely. She looks at me, her eyes sparkling with mirth, before dissolving into a fit of giggles. Her words slur as she responds, "Good, better than I've felt in a long time."

Furrowing my eyebrows, I decide to delve deeper, determined to extract as much information as possible from her unguarded state. "Why is that, little dove?" I probe, my curiosity piqued. She gazes deeply into my eyes, her drunkenness making her inhibitions crumble, before sputtering, "Well, for starters, this date saved me from having dinner with my father. Thank God for that. And you gave me my first kiss today. I am no longer a twenty-three-year-old who has never been kissed—yippee. Also, this is the first time someone other than Lily has shown genuine interest in me."

My brain struggles to process this flood of information. Layla's revelation throws my previous assumptions into disarray. She doesn't enjoy spending time with her father? I was her first kiss? No one takes an interest in her? None of this aligns with the image I had constructed of her. I thought she was closely connected to her father, a seductress like Lily who aided him in his business endeavors.

The woman in front of me, in her intoxicated state, is dismantling every preconceived notion I had. I realize that I no longer truly know her, and that

realization is both intriguing and dangerous. The blabbering mess before me bears no resemblance to the cunning and calculated woman I believed her to be.

"Why don't you like spending time with Arthur?" I ask gently, my voice laced with concern. Fearing she may shut down or evade the question, I observe her closely as she looks away, rubbing her arm as if seeking comfort. Finally, she speaks, her words slightly slurred by the effects of alcohol, "Um, it's just that he never seems interested in spending time with me either. I always get pushed aside for Lily. He despises hearing about my research, loathes my eating habits and lack of exercise, and is perpetually dissatisfied with my accomplishments. Also, he frequently misses significant event in my life, including twenty of my twenty-three birthdays, as well as both my high school and university graduations."

A seemingly permanent furrow takes hold of my brow as I process this startling revelation. Layla's words stir within me a mix of sympathy and anger. However, one particular aspect stands out—the fact that her father detests seeing her eat. A surge of rage unlike anything I've experienced before settles in my chest. Growing up, I never knew when my next meal would come, and the idea of Layla starving herself to please that despicable man, even though she is my enemy's daughter, fills me with intense disdain. Does he wish to see her waste away? She is already incredibly slim.

Unable to contain my fury any longer, I growl, my voice filled with a mixture of protectiveness and indignation, "On my lap, now."

Layla looks at me with confusion in her eyes, momentarily taken aback by my command. Yet, she quickly realizes the seriousness of my tone and stands on unsteady legs, making her way towards me. As she approaches, I wrap my arm around her waist, pulling her down onto my lap. The proximity heightens the tension between us, and I observe desire cloud her eyes. Satisfaction washes over me, knowing that she wants me.

In a gravelly voice, my words tinged with a blend of concern and possessiveness, I inquire, "Earlier, when you mentioned feeling full from a heavy lunch, was that true? Or are you limiting your food intake to please that man?"

She immediately turns to face me, her hands resting on my shoulders for balance, her eyes meeting mine with sincerity. With a hint of vulnerability, she assures me, "Don't worry, August. I have never starved myself for his approval. I have a healthy relationship with food."

Yet, despite her reassurance, the fire in my chest continues to burn. I am supposed to despise this woman, to feel nothing but hatred for her. However, the thought of her discomfort or pain weakens me. I am not content with these conflicting emotions.

I need to see her eat and I do not shy away from telling her just that "Layla, I

don't care if you are full, I am going to feed you now and you just sit pretty on my lap and eat."

I think she can tell how much I need to see her eat after studying my face because she just nods and opens her mouth for the bite of sushi I am holding next to her face. After a couple pieces, she holds my hand to stop it from picking up anymore sushi and tell me "I promise I am full, I can't have no more." I only stop because I notice the discomfort on her face and she kisses my cheek in gratefulness. I feel my heart skip a beat and I hate that it does that.

I should be resolute in my enmity, especially considering her identity as my enemy's daughter. That fact alone makes her my enemy as well, I remind myself. But even as I reiterate this to myself, there's a tug within me, a longing that defies logic. It is an unwelcome sensation, an inexplicable softening of my heart. Since the untimely death of my parents, my heart has been a hardened shell, devoid of any capacity for affection. I had assumed it had died along with them. Yet, this woman, sitting weak and vulnerable on my lap, stirs emotions within me that I neither understand nor welcome. It is disconcerting, especially considering her that she is the daughter of my sworn enemy.

10
August 

It soon becomes apparent that I cannot allow Layla to return back home in the state she is in. If alcohol is truly banned from her father's house, returning to it this drunk will get her into trouble. Moreover, I do not want anything to stop her from going out on other dates with me, as I still need a lot more information.

“You’re coming home with me, little dove,” I demand, leading her staggering form to the restaurant's bathroom to wash her face before we leave. She sings different tunes all the way.

She stops singing after hearing what I said and laughs before slurring, “August, I know that I am irresistible, but if I go home with you, there is a one hundred percent chance that my father will shoot me.”

“I would kill him before he does that, little dove,” I growl in her ear. Yes, she is my enemy’s daughter, but there is no way in hell am I letting him lay a hand on her. I try to justify my protectiveness with the excuse that I can’t let him do anything to her until I get all the information I need, but deep down, I know that there is something else behind this feeling, and I refuse to look into it.

She laughs wholeheartedly, even wiping a few tears from her eyes, before telling me, “Sorry, August, I really want to kiss you again, but I am not allowed to sleep outside of the house.”

I ignore the feeling of my chest warming and just focus on the fact that she isn’t allowed to sleep outside. She is twenty-three, for God’s sake, and yet

she still takes orders from her father like a child. I decide to knock some sense into her. “Layla, how do you think Arthur will react if you show up on his doorstep drunk?” I tell her, and watch as her face drains of all color, as if she didn’t think of that till now.

As I watch how quickly her skin pales, I can’t help but feel thankful that we reached the bathroom. I push open the door and go to the sink to wash her face with cold water.

She lets out a sigh of relief before something seems to register in her head, “You’re not supposed to be here, this is the women’s bathroom,” she says in concern, and my chest rumbles in laughter that I try to contain. She appears to be a confused drunk.

“But there is nobody here but us, little dove,” I tell her, and she processes that for a second before uttering, “Yeah, you’re right.”

As I finish washing her face, I notice how she keeps shifting from leg to leg, as if she can’t handle holding her own weight anymore.

“What is wrong? Your feet hurt?” I ask her gently, and she nods slightly. I

bend down and put my arms on her knees before carrying her out of the bathroom. Her body feels like heaven against mine, and I can feel myself starting to harden. However, I won't touch her. Not once in my life have I touched an intoxicated woman, and it won't start now.

Her face has regained back its redness and she buries her head in my neck. I disturb her peace again but it was necessary. "Hey, you're going to have to call your father or something, because you're staying with me."

She quickly removes her head from my neck, and her eyes fill with worry. She starts trying to get out of my arms, but I only hold her tighter. "August, please, seat me in the chair so I can call Lily," she sputters out in frustration.

I put her down on one of the restaurant chairs and notice how she slightly shivers and appears cold. Immediately, I take my jacket off and put it on her, and she smiles up gratefully at me. I see her fumbling with her purse to get her phone, and when she finally gets it, it takes her about five whole minutes to put her password in. She successfully calls Lily after a while, and I notice how she bites her lip from the nerves. Lily immediately answers after the first ring, and I see Layla release a breath of relief.

“Lily, I am in trouble,” I hear her say nervously, and she has to move the phone away from her ear from the sounds of Lily’s worried squeals.

I signal for her to put the phone on speaker, and she does. Lily’s worried questions permeate the air. “Are you hurt? Is he a creep? Layla, please tell me what’s wrong.”

I notice Lily trying to control her voice so she appears less drunk as she says, “No, Lily, he’s a perfect gentleman. But…” but she fails, her slurring very obvious. She then pauses for a few seconds, trying to think of ways to tell her that she is intoxicated, but she comes up short.

“But? But what, Layla?” Lily screams in frustration and in worry, and I take the phone from Layla’s hand to explain the situation to Lily.

“Hey, don’t worry, everything is okay, but Layla tried alcohol for the first time, and I do not think it is wise for her to go back to the house in such a state, as she told me that Arthur doesn’t allow her to have alcohol,” I tell her, trying to keep the animosity I feel towards her from appearing in my voice.

“Oh god, Lord help me,” she whispers to herself, and I immediately remove

the phone from speaker and put it to my ear. Fear is evident in her voice, and I hear the sounds of her loud, unlabored breathing, as if she is hyperventilating.

“Listen to me, I will convince Arthur for her to sleep outside. I will tell him it’s a girl’s night, and you take her with you tonight. But this can’t happen again. Don’t let her return home drunk; it won’t be good at all,” she says hurriedly, and I hear what seems to be shuffling of clothes in the background.

“What do you mean by that?” I growl out, and she snarls out, “It means that if you give a fuck about her, you won’t let her return home, or...”

“Or what?” I bark out, but she just hangs up in my face, and I fight the urge to throw the phone at the wall.

I take a deep breath to calm myself, and I turn around to face Layla, only to see her head against the table and soft snores coming out of her mouth. I bend down and carry her all the way to my car, where I adjust the front seat so it will be more comfortable for her to sleep in.

I see John shuffling behind me, clearly uncomfortable seeing me taking her. I

know that he has grown fond of her over time, and I cannot help but reassure him that she will be okay. “John, I am taking her with me for her safety; she can’t return back like this.” And he nods.

I contemplate something before getting in the driver seat of my car. I look over to her and see slight smudges of mascara under her eyes and smudges of red near her lips. “John, please buy makeup remover and a pair of pajamas that are her size.”

He looks panicked for a minute, but then he nods and gets into his car as I get into mine, and we drive off. I look over to her, sleeping peacefully in my car, and I cannot fight the possessive urge that tells me to put my hand on her exposed thigh. I allow my finger to run small circles on her skin.

She is an enigma to me. Everything I thought I knew about her crumbled down in a matter of a few days, and I am honestly scared of her truly being an innocent little dove, because that still won’t stop me from getting my revenge.

The drive back home is calm, still, my heartbeats won’t quite down at being in such close proximity to her. My days in foster care taught me just how

much trust it requires to sleep in the presence of someone else. Seeing her sleep so peacefully in my presence, as if she trusts me fully to not only protect her but to not hurt her as well, does something to my heart that I am not fond of.

I park in front of my home and exit the car before heading to her car door, opening it, and carrying her inside. I see the things I asked John for on my doorstep, and I bend down to get the bag before struggling slightly to open the door.

Once inside, I hear some chirps from the birds in the enclosure, and I can't help the smile that draws itself on my face at the welcoming sound. I carry her up the stairs before I put her on the bed in the guest bedroom.

There is no one in the house but me, so I change her out of her dress myself. Making sure I don't look or touch more than necessary, I was a scarred man, yes, but a rapist I was not. I get the cotton pads from the bag and douse them in the makeup remover John brought.

I gently wipe her face of the makeup and marvel at her beautiful features. She moans slightly before opening her eyes; she studies me, so much warmth in her eyes that it scares me. "Thank you," she mumbles before falling asleep again, nuzzling my hand on her face that is still removing her mascara, and I

pretend like that didn't set off a fire in my chest as I walk out of the room and go to mine.

11

Layla 

I wake up with a pounding headache, sitting up on the soft bed sheets. I look around, and I realize I'm not in my room. Panic floods me momentarily before bits and pieces of memories from last night come flooding into my head. I groan, burying my head in the fluffy pillow below

me and letting out a quiet scream. I literally made a fool of myself in front of August; the poor man had to carry me home.

I get up from the bed and notice that my dress is folded neatly on the vanity with my purse on top of it. Immediately, I look down at myself and see that I am dressed in satin pajamas. I feel my face warm at the fact that August, or the housekeeper if he has one, undressed me, but I am still grateful for the consideration, though. But I would rather die than bring this up; I am just going to avoid the awkwardness.

I take steps to the in-room bathroom and head to the sink. I expect to see a hot mess of melted makeup on my skin, but to my surprise, my face has been cleaned. I see a brand new toothbrush on the counter and take it out of the packaging, proceeding to brush my teeth. I truly do not know how I am going to be a functional person today; I feel like death.

I finish my morning routine as best as I could in an unfamiliar space and go to fetch my phone. I need to call Lily and apologize. I put her through so much stress. I fetch my phone from my purse, and I see a lot of messages from Lily that I didn't answer due to me being asleep. I can tell that I worried her shitless, and I feel guilt plague me.

I call her, and she answers immediately on the first ring, “Please tell me you’re okay, Layla.” Her worried voice, seemingly on the verge of tears, carries across the line.

“I’m so sorry, Lily. I just wanted to try something new.” I tell her, hoping that she would feel my guilt over the phone.

“Don’t apologize, I know. Just please tell me you’re okay.” She says softly, and I quickly reassure her, “I am okay, Lily, I promise. I just have a stifling headache, but I’ll live.”

“I will have John send you Ibuprofen and a change of clothes so you can go to the university from August’s house and won’t be late. He should be there in fifteen minutes tops. Bless that man for all he covers for us.” She says, and I do not fail to notice how her voice sounds...empty.

“Thank you. Lily, I am sorry for putting you in an uncomfortable situation with father. I truly did not intend for this to happen.” I tell her, trying to explain the situation, but she cuts me off quickly, “It’s okay, Layla. I resolved the issue, and we will talk when you get back to the house.” She says, and I

feel my heart breaking. Why does her voice sound so empty? I push my worries aside and bid her goodbye as she hangs up the phone.

I sit on the bed and put my head between my hands. I know that she isn't angry, but I am worried for her. She sounded soulless, not the usual lively Lily I know. The worry makes my headache so much worse, and I groan as I massage it.

Suddenly, I hear someone clear his throat, and I look at the doorway to see August. Good Lord, he looks so good. He is only wearing pajama pants and he is shirtless, his body lined with pure muscles covered by a dusting of hair, and I can't help but stare. The man is huge, a wall of nothing but solid muscles. His pants are hanging low on his hips, showing his V-line, and I have to swallow repeatedly from how much I am salivating. Lord have mercy.

"How are you feeling?" He asks me, and I tell him that I am okay and just struggling with a headache. He nods with sympathy before taking a couple of steps towards me and saying, "I made breakfast, come on, have some food so that you can take ibuprofen."

“You made breakfast?” I ask him, confused. I thought he had chefs who cooked for him like we did. He doesn’t look like the type to cook. He must have noticed the confused look on my face because something in his expression hardened.

“Yes, I like my privacy. If there is something that I have the time to do myself, I do myself.” He tells me, his voice devoid of its previous softness. “Oh no, I just meant that you didn’t look like the type to cook.” I quickly reassure him. Great, now he probably thinks that I am a spoilt little brat that expects help to be in every corner of the house.

“Why do you think that I am not the type to cook?” He asks, his brows furrowed. I feel my cheeks heat before I respond, “Well, you’re handsome, successful, and also a gentleman. It doesn’t feel right that you can also cook. Nobody can be that perfect.”

He throws his head back and laughs wholeheartedly, and I watch, transfixed. There is something about this man that pulls me in; he makes me feel safe and happy. I am not going to deny that I am falling hard for him. I always thought that I would never find love; I never even had a crush on anyone before him, but it feels like all those emotions that have been unfelt for years

are now manifesting in him.

“Come on, let's eat.” He tells me and starts taking steps out of the room. I follow him, studying the interior of his home. It is gorgeous, even more than our own house that our father spent millions on. This man just has good taste. We take the stairs to the kitchen where August has put an array of different plates on the table. The smell is delicious, and each plate looks better than the other, but what really draws my attention is the singular red rose placed in the middle of the table, and a smile instantly draws itself on my face. August puts effort into everything he does, and everything he does, he does it perfectly.

He moves the chair for me before we sit down to eat, and I smile graciously at him. Throughout our meal, I keep hearing beautiful bird sounds, but I just thought they came from the garden. But with every passing bite of the delicious pancakes, the noises get louder and louder.

“Beautiful, isn't it?” August asks when he sees me completely transfixed by the noise, and I nod, fearing to speak and interrupt the melody.

“I will show you where it comes from after you finish your food.” He tells me, and I immediately drop the fork I had been using to eat on the plate and

signal to him that I am done eating.

He shakes his head with a smile before feeding me a couple of bites of eggs. He seems to have an obsession with making sure that I eat well, and I am positive that I will gain so much weight if he keeps feeding me more every time I say that I am full.

I hold his hand when he tries to feed me one more bite, and he grunts displeased but tilts his head for me to get out of the chair and follow him, and I do so gladly.

We walk through the house, passing through a beautiful living room with glass walls all around, showing the view of the garden and the pool outside, and I stand against one of the glasses just staring at the beautiful garden and the serenity of it all. I don't fail to notice that the noises of the birds are much stronger here, and when I tilt my head to search for the source, I see a huge white enclosure gated with crafted metal, with lots of different birds flying around in the large space. Glass makes up the walls of the birdhouse, giving it a mythical hue. I gasp, taking rushed steps towards the enclosure, sure that my eyes are as round as saucers as I watch the birds interacting together. He stands next to me, his face seemingly searching my features for my reaction

before smiling, clearly liking what is written on my face.

“August, this is beautiful.” I whisper, struggling to take my eyes off the enclosure. This is the most beautiful thing I have seen in my life. August is so lucky that he gets to see this every single day.

“You like it?” He says, and I almost break my neck from how quickly I turn to look at him. “Like it? This is the most mystical thing I have ever seen in my life.” I exclaim, then quickly put my hand over my mouth when I notice how loud I spoke. We both look at each other shocked before dissolving in fits of giggles.

“I can see that now.” He says through laughter, and I open my mouth to respond but am cut off by the sound of the bell ringing.

“That is probably John; he told me that Lily instructed him to get you a change of clothes.” He says, and I nod. He walks over to the door to open it and later comes in with my bag of clothes and ibuprofen.

“How about you get dressed, and I drive you to your university instead of John? He can just follow behind.” He says, and I nod excitedly. He gives me

the bag, and I rush to the bedroom to dress myself, excited about the idea of my hopefully future boyfriend driving me to the place I spend most of my time in.

12

Layla

After I finish getting dressed, I rush down the stairs to see August already ready to go. He looks handsome as always with his dark grey suit, white button-up, and thick hair parted to the side. I skip steps until I stand in front of him directly, bringing his attention away from his phone and onto my smiling face.

"Come on, please, I can't be late," I tell him while grabbing his hand and pushing him to follow me out the door. He shakes his head with a smile on his face, and we walk hand in hand out of the house. He walks while still grasping my hand to the back of his house, where there is a line of luxurious cars that I do not even know the names of most of them.

"Which one would you like to be driven in, little dove?" He asks me, and I shrug, cars never really meant much to me.

"You can choose; it doesn't really matter," I tell him with a smile, and he nods to me before heading towards a Bugatti Chiron. I follow him and sit in the passenger seat.

He informs me that John will be following us to the university, as I can never really exist without bodyguards being in my vicinity at all times. I know that father employs them as babysitters, so they can report back to him my every move and not much for protection.

I just got incredibly lucky that John was assigned to be my bodyguard; he was more of a father to me than a guard and allowed me to live life. There have been countless occasions where he would let me do things my father prohibited and did not say a word about them to him. I love that man.

August puts his and my seatbelt on before putting my university's name into his GPS, I am sure he got it from John. He reverses out of the parked position and heads out the gates of the house. I had been completely drunk when he took me to his house and was just knocked out the entire drive, so I couldn't appreciate the breathtaking scenery.

I open the window and let the cool air make contact with my face; I smell the earthy scent of nature after rain and feel a smile draw itself on my lips. I close my eyes and savor the weather; I adore winter, and it is my favorite season. I

just love huddling up next to the fireplace with a cup of hot coffee and a book in my hands.

Despite my love for winter, I cannot help but feel a shiver rack through me at the cool air. August seems to notice and immediately closes the window. I turn to him with a pout on my lips and a small smile dances on his own.

"I am sorry, little dove, but you will get a cold," he says with his still scruffy morning face, and I nod. He turns up the heater in the car, and I feel it warm up my heart before it does my body. I do not have that many people in my life that dote over me, and I can't help but feel emotional anytime someone does.

My body moves on its own, leaning over the console to press a kiss to his cheek. I see momentary shock display on his handsome features before he leans slightly to my lips that are still pressed against his cheek. I move away, and notice how his body slightly moves with me, as if chasing after the kiss, and I feel a giggle escape my chest.

I see August for the first time ever look a little embarrassed; he clears his throat before asking me, "What was that for, little dove?"

I shrug my shoulders slightly before replying, "You are just sweet, Auggie."

I see his face scrunch up with confusion before he mumbles, "Auggie?" I can't stop the fits of laughter that escape me as I study his expression; he appears violated by such a cute nickname.

"Well, your nickname for me is little dove. So, it is only fair for me to give you a nickname as well, and I choose Auggie," I tell him with a bright smile on my face. He grunts displeased but chooses to let it go as he changes the subject.

He asks me with his deep voice, "What are you doing in university today?" and I feel happiness and insecurity dance together in my chest. I am happy that he appears interested in my research, but I am also scared of boring him to death with all the scientific talk.

"Well, I have lab work to do for my thesis," I tell him vaguely, choosing to test the waters.

"What work exactly?" He asks with interest, and I feel overjoyed that he is interested in my field of study, my passion.

"I have been working with my supervisors on growing a breast cancer organoid for about two years now; it appears to have high similarity with the actual breast cancer tissue, which is amazing! But more tests and research need to be done before seeing if the growth is successful," I tell him, my voice brimming with the excitement I feel towards explaining a topic I dedicated so many years of my life towards.

"After we make sure that it is successful, we are going to test multiple chemotherapy drugs on it to see which it responds to best. These types of works relating to cancer organoids are crucial for personalized therapy; they

make treatment of cancer patients harbor better results since it is individual-oriented and not a one-size-fits-all type of treatment," I continue, and I have to physically stop myself from spewing more information out about my research.

I physically have to put a hand up to my mouth to stop myself; I also notice that we have become very close to my university, which is a good excuse for me to stop yapping his ear off about my research without him having to explicitly tell me like my father usually does.

I look at him and see him studying me, what seems like anger painted on his face. Shit. I literally talked so much about a topic he has no interest in that it angered him.

I rush to apologize to him, used to people getting annoyed at me yapping about things they do not understand. I just wish that someone would want to understand what I am talking about just to feel closer to me, to want to know the details about the thing that gets me to get out of bed every day. But it seems like I am asking for too much; even a gentleman like August did not have it in him to do that.

"I am so sorry, August, I didn't mean to bore you..." I couldn't get out more words before he swerves and parks in a secluded area, opening the window enough to signal something to John that gets him to continue on his way to my university and not stop to wait for us.

He turns to look at me, rage brimming in his eyes before he raises the car console to free up more space and pins me to the car seat. As I look at his features, I can see that he is having a hard time controlling his annoyance. I am fucked.

13

August



I feel my anger clouding my mind as I glance over at her, observing

her with her hand over her mouth. I'm horrified by the fact that she feels the need to apologize for speaking about a topic she's passionate about.

Her eyes betray insecurity that shouldn't be there. This woman is truly astounding, incredibly smart, despite how her father portrays her. Initially, I believed his cruel words, as did everyone who heard him talk about her.

But now, sitting beside her and witnessing her enthusiasm as she discusses her research, I know in my heart that her accomplishments are undoubtedly hers. He has a purpose behind portraying her as stupid, probably thinks intelligent women intimidate men.

As she starts apologizing for supposedly boring me, I realize she did no such thing. Unable to contain my frustration, I swerve the car and swiftly park in a secluded area, just enough to signal John to wait for us at her university before closing the tinted windows.

I adjust the car console to give myself more space, my scowl deepening as I see her curling up on the expensive leather seats, as if trying to shrink away. Her eyes search mine with wild uncertainty, as if fearing she's done something to annoy me. Despite her being the daughter of my enemy, I can't help but feel sympathy. I'm not an animal.

What influences from the people in her life led to such insecurity about something she should rightfully be proud of? I quickly dismiss the thought from my mind, so that I won't feel murderous. Instead, I roughly take her hand and place it on my hard bulge, causing her to gasp softly.

Hearing her talk about something she was so passionate about, seeing how her face lit up with excitement over her interest was enough to get me to harden up. I am not proud that I got aroused while she spoke of cancer research, but her being so smart, my little dove being such a genius, made me hard as fucking rock.

"Does it seem like I am bored to you?" I ask roughly and watch how her face blushes so hard, it now matched the color of her crimson coat.

"N-No..." She stutters out, her chest heaving with unlabored breaths and her lip caught between her teeth. I see her eyes divert from my face and go to my hard cock constrained by my grey pants.

"Do you like what you see?" I ask her, effectively breaking her out of her trance, she raises her brown eyes up to look into mine, lust visible in them. She releases a shaky sigh before breathing out "Yes August, I do... Please," She doesn't find the words to continue, as if she doesn't know what she is begging for.

I let go of her hand but it remains in its place, I let out a slight chuckle before leaning in, putting a hand behind her head and moving her face closer to

mine. I kiss her, tasting her for the second time, and she tastes just as delicious.

This time, she grants my tongue access without me having to tell her, her tongue plays with mine, teasing me and I bite her lip.

She lets out a small yelp and I break the kiss, moving on to scenting her neck. God, she smells amazing, I place kisses all over her neck before reaching her ear and whispering “Do not ever apologize for talking to me about something you love. Okay?”

I see a shiver rack through her body before she nods to me. Quickly, I grab her face gently with my hands and look into her eyes, letting her see how serious I am.

“Say it, little dove.” I feel a ragged breath move through her chest before she looks straight into my eyes and whispers “I will always talk to you about the things I love without the fear of boring you, August.”

A smile draws itself on my lips as I lean in to kiss her once more, telling her what a good girl she is against her lips.

“You deserve a reward for being so smart,” I growl on the corners of her lips as my hand caresses her hair, moving down to squeeze her small breasts before passing over her flat stomach until my hand reaches her clothed core and cups it gently.

She jolts as if electrocuted and holds onto my arm as she looks down at my

hand cupping her sex. “No one touched this before me?” I ask roughly in her ear, my hand cupping her core a bit harder. She moans slightly before whispering “No one but you, August.”

I hum my approval as I work on taking off her pants, what I see there has me letting a groan. Her cunt is covered by white lace panties, and a little wet spot is showing clearly through the material.

Immediately I position her so that her back is against the door and her legs are spread out, giving me a clear unobstructed view of her little cunt. I hear her embarrassed squeal as she tries to stop me while saying” August, what if someone sees us?”

I see red just at the idea of anyone seeing her in this state and I bark out” The windows are tinted, do you think I would let anyone see you, little dove? No one sees you naked but me.”

She seems to relax, just a fraction, before she puts her head against the glass and closes her eyes. “Look at me, See who is pleasuring you.” I command and she appears to have an internal struggle before opening her eyes, staring into mine with embarrassment.

“Good girl,” I tell her softly, my fingers running all over her covered core, just teasing her a little. She moans slightly, her eyebrows creasing as she focuses on the pleasure. I start to pull her panties down and she jerks from her position, attempting to sit awkwardly and put a stop to my hands.

I gently hold hers down before telling her with a soft tone “Little dove, don’t worry. I promise I just want to make you feel good.” After a moment, I see her resolve waiver, she takes a deep breath as if trying to steady herself before lying back down.

I kiss her hands to stop them from fidgeting together before I pull down her panties. I come face to face with the prettiest pussy I have ever seen in my life.

Clean shaven, pink all over, and with the prettiest little crescent moon of a hymen. This confirms what I knew all along deep in my heart yet tried to deny, her father did not use her as a seductress for his deals. While this makes things more complicated, I cannot help the sigh of relief that I let out.

I start by peppering kisses all over her pussy and I hear her breaths become unlabored and heavy. I lick her pussy from top to bottom, giving extra attention to her little pearl, sucking in into my mouth and hearing her whimper and moan as I do so.

I let my tongue lather her little hymen, letting it know who fucking owns it, who is going to take it. I push my tongue into her small opening and she lets out a loud squeal that turns into a scream as I use my thumb to play with her clit while tongue fucking her.

My eyes are trained on her as I devour her sweet little cunt, I see her eyes roll to the back of her head as my tongue leaves her opening in the favor of

sucking her little pearl.

My neck hurts from this position, but I am determined to bring her pleasure, to make her see stars. After a couple minutes of sucking her clit while teasing her opening with my thumb, she grabs my hair with both of her hands and lets out a scream as she cums. Her pussy walls clenching and unclenching around my thumb.

“Auggie...” She whimpers as she rides her orgasm and immediately, I throw a gentle slap against her wet pussy lips. She screeches, a tear rolling down her face and I wrap my hand around her little neck.

I place a couple kisses on her pretty pink pussy and trail my kisses all the way up her body until I reach her face. My grip on her neck is not hard enough to hurt but enough to show her who is in control.

I kiss her lips, letting her taste and smell herself on my facial hair and I hear her moan again, her voice hoarse from all the screaming she did. After I kiss her breathless, I trail my kisses all the way to her ear, biting it before growling “When we do this, little dove, you call me August, none of that Auggie shit when I am pleasuring you.”

She looks at me, still in a haze from the pleasure but she nods. My hand wraps tighter around her pretty neck, “I want to hear you say it.” I whisper in her ear and she purrs” Thank you for pleasuring me, August.”

I let out a dark chuckle and kiss her lips, smiling against them as I tell her

what a good girl she is.

14

Layla



I am still flushed as I fix my working space in the lab. I cannot believe

that I just got my first orgasm given to me by another person half an hour ago, in a car of all places. My hands shake as I ready my pipettes and beakers, and my heart races. I cannot seem to forget how good August made me feel; I want more of him.

Getting my first taste of the pleasure he can give me made me desperate for the next fix; this man is going to make me addicted to him. I feel a shiver run through my body as I recall the memory of what we did, and I find myself having a hard time focusing on my work.

He dropped me off at my university with a kiss and a promise of another date. My head is still plagued with thoughts of him. He makes me feel desired, something I have rarely felt since birth.

The way his eyes roam over my figure makes me feel so sexy; it makes me undeniably hot. I sigh as I notice my hands trembling as I pipette the solution into my beaker, and I attempt to regain my focus.

I cannot mess this up. Watching the liquid swirl and mix, my mind starts to drift away from distractions like thoughts of August. With each precise movement, my focus intensifies, and the lab becomes my sanctuary yet again.

The hum of the equipment and the gentle clinking of glassware seem to cocoon me in my own world. My work persists for hours, and I grow more focused with each passing second. But, in the end, my aching back and growling stomach force me to put an end to my experiments.

Despite my discomfort, a sense of accomplishment washes over me. I gently place the last test tube back on the rack. As I clean up the lab bench, I can't help but smile, feeling like everything is slowly falling into place in my life. The late hours spent tirelessly pipetting, meticulously analyzing data, and troubleshooting any challenges were all worth it for me. The lab had become a second home to me, witnessing my triumphs and frustrations, and it is where I thrive. So, any work I put in this lab, I put in happily.

I wipe down the bench, a mixture of emotions welling up within me.

There is a sense of relief, knowing that the experiments seem to be successful, and that my thesis work will come to an end soon, but also a touch of nostalgia for the countless hours I had spent here, working my ass off to make something of myself. It is bittersweet to have almost neared the end of the journey, but it also marks the beginning of a new chapter.

With a deep breath, I turn off the equipment and admire the tidy lab space. I feel pride in knowing that my hard work is paying off.

My mother died from breast cancer, and while I have no recollection of her as she died when I was very young, I always imagine how different it could be if she were still around, if maybe my father would have been a little kinder to me or if I could have had more people in my support system. This is primarily why my passion lies in this field. I shrug the thought off so I won't

cry as I walk out of the laboratory.

The sun is starting to set, painting a beautiful orange hue across the sky as I make my way to the campus gate.

There, I know that John will be waiting for me. I see him leaning against the parked car a couple of feet away from the gate, and he immediately rushes to me once he sees my tired form.

He holds my purse for me and wraps an arm around my shoulder, guiding me to the car and taking some weight off my tired feet. Gosh, I feel so tired. I need a massage, desperately. John gently helps me settle into the passenger seat before getting behind the wheel and heading to the house. I start to doze off during the car ride and am awakened by John after we arrive.

Subtly, I try to wipe the drool that has come out of my mouth during my nap as I head to the house after thanking John. I step inside and take the stairs fast to see Lily. I have missed her dearly and owe her an apology. I head to my bedroom first, where I wash up and change into my pajamas, and then go to her bedroom. She usually would be waiting for my arrival in my room, but she isn't this time, making me feel even more nervous about the possibility of her being angry at me.

I take cautious steps to her room and knock gently at her door. We never knock, but I feel awkward this time. I do not know what reaction to expect; I just hope that she isn't sad with me.

I hear no answer from her room, and worry eats away at me. So, I open the door and enter, my eyes searching for her everywhere. She isn't in the bedroom but the sound of water permeates the air from the indoor bathroom; she must be taking a shower.

I sit on her bed, playing with my fingers as I wait for her to finish up. Finally, after about fifteen minutes, I hear the water turn off and wet footsteps padding across the floor.

The door opens, and I see her standing in the doorway with nothing but her robe on, her tall figure slightly slouched, her eyes tired and swollen, and her face bruised.

Immediately, my heart falls, and my eyes water. "Oh god, what happened, Lily?" I scream as I hurry out of the bed and rush to her side. My eyes dart all over her face, and I feel my chest pound at the possibility of this being because of me, my heart breaks for her.

"Who did this to you, Lily? Please tell me," I beg her, my voice desperate even to my own ears. I see her let out a little giggle, and I am left completely bewildered; who laughs in this state?

"I just fell down the stairs and landed on my face, silly," she tells me, her voice comforting as she strokes my hair to calm me down. I look into her eyes for any signs of deceit, but there seem to be none.

I am still not convinced, though, so I ask, "Did father do this to you? Did

Oliver? Please tell me, Lily."

I hold her hands in my own and squeeze, desperate to know who hurt her. I may not be the strongest, but I will make them regret it, I will sacrifice my entire life just to see them hurt, and it doesn't matter if it is my own father. She raises my hands up to her mouth and kisses them before she whispers gently,

"I promise I just fell." She releases my hands and goes to her closet, giving me time to process her words. I see her picking out fancy nightgowns, and my eyebrows crease with confusion.

"Where are you going?" I ask, and she turns to me with a bright smile on her face, which is an extreme contrast to the purple and yellow bruises coloring her skin.

"Arthur has a business event today that I have to attend," she says to me, and I feel myself get a little sad. I just wanted to have quality time with her and talk about life, but as always, my dad has to hog her with business events the moment he is in town.

She seems to notice my frown and walks over to me, giving me a warm hug. I smile against her neck as I feel her comforting embrace, and she nuzzles her face into my hair.

"The moment the event is done, we will organize a girl's night, just you and me," she promises me, and I nod, trying to conceal my disappointment.

I break the hug and lean back to look up at her beautiful face, marred with the dark bruises, and my frown deepens. "You really just fell down the stairs?" I ask, and she nods, I feel slightly better now.

Still, I continue on to apologize to her for the trouble I caused, but she just hushes me down, telling me that the most important thing is that I enjoyed myself.

I say my thanks as I watch her grabbing her dress and belongings and heading out the door, going to get her hair and makeup done by her stylist. She kisses me goodbye, and I watch her make her way out the door.

She pauses on the doorway before she turns to look at me and mumbles with a hint of something I can't place, "Layla, please refrain from sleeping outside the house again, though." I nod to her, and she thanks me, blowing me a kiss and exiting the room, closing the door behind her.

15

August



I drive to the restaurant where Arthur Lexington is throwing his

business party. My hands on the steering wheel are rough, veins popping out of my arm. I despise going to these events, surrounded by disgusting perverts. But I am willing to do anything to get my revenge, even if it means cozying up to the monsters in that room.

Arthur is a master of secrecy and takes meticulous safety measures to shield himself from potential incrimination. The restaurant he chose for the party is located in a secluded area, far from the prying eyes of civilization. Its remote location ensures that the attendees can indulge in their illicit activities without fear of exposure.

To further ensure confidentiality, Arthur demands that all guests surrender their phones to the reception upon arrival and be checked for recording devices before entering. This tactic prevents any potential leaks or recordings that could compromise his nefarious dealings.

The absence of digital evidence makes it nearly impossible for any incriminating information to be traced back to him. In this tightly controlled environment, Arthur operates with a sense of invincibility, knowing that he is safe.

I pull up to the entrance of the luxurious restaurant in my sleek black car, exuding an air of power and authority. The valet quickly approaches me, without a word.

I hand him the keys, a silent understanding passing between us. As he takes

charge of the car, I step out. My eyes scan the surroundings, assessing the atmosphere with a discerning gaze. I know that I am stepping into a den of shadows and secrets, but as always, I am ready to face whatever lies ahead.

My powerful aura exudes confidence and control. I can feel the eyes of those around me fixated on my presence, acknowledging the authority I hold. The dim lighting and opulent decor add an air of mystery to the place, but I know better than to be swayed by the façade.

When I step inside, I can sense the unsettling energy that permeates the room. Powerful men with twisted intentions and perverse desires surround me. The air is thick with a mixture of arrogance, greed, and depravity.

I lean in close to the receptionist, our secret deal already agreed upon. "Remember, my phone stays with me," I whisper. My voice carries a mix of authority and threat. "And as discussed prior, you'll be rewarded handsomely for your cooperation." The receptionist nervously nods. Beads of sweat form on his forehead and he fumbles to conceal his fear. We both know the stakes are high. With my phone discreetly tucked away, I continue my confident strides into the restaurant.

Some men are lying on the dark-colored velvet couches, getting pleased by women who look suspiciously young. The sound of sex permeates the room, and the smell of it is strong.

It's accentuated by the scent of cigarette smoke. Their twisted pleasures are

on display for all to see as they openly indulge in their vices without a care for the consequences. The air is also tainted with the acrid smell of substances being consumed, and their glazed eyes and erratic behavior intensify my distaste.

It is a gathering of the dark and corrupt, but I remain composed. My expression is stoic and unreadable. I have entered this place with the purpose of collecting enough incriminating information to expose this disgusting motherfucker.

Gaining an invitation to this exclusive party required a delicate dance of deception and strategic manipulation. To infiltrate the ranks of those I seek to bring down, I had to create an illusion of being just like them. I built a reputation for myself with these people that I have illegal business dealings and dark maneuvers. It wasn't difficult to convince them of my alleged darker side, they tend to think that the world is as dark as their souls.

I subtly dropped hints of engaging in questionable activities, carefully weaving stories that pique their interest. I skillfully played the part, never indulging too much or too little, maintaining a balance that kept them intrigued yet cautious. My supposed participation in illegal dealings garnered their trust, and soon enough, I received the coveted invitations. I became a regular at these events.

As I navigate the sea of monstrous individuals at the party, I bump into Lily

as expected. A sly grin plays across her face as she looks me over. I can see interest in her eyes as she studies my face, moving on to my body. She sucks in a breath as she seems to like what she is seeing.

Her hands roam over my chest as she leans in, letting her breasts brush flat against my arm. She whispers in my ear, "Would you like to have some fun, handsome?" Her reputation as a sex addict is well-known among the crowd; she is a seductress after all and one of Arthur's "gifts" for the men here. I can never understand how Arthur isn't disgusted with the idea of using his niece as a fuck doll for these men.

She sees an opportunity to indulge in her desires, using her charm to her advantage. However, as I look into her features, I cannot deny that she is an attractive woman. But she doesn't hold a candle to Layla's beauty. Her face holds no innocence like my little dove's. I find myself repulsed by her presence.

She sneaks a hand down to my dick and scowls when she finds it soft, not affected by her presence. I grab her hand roughly and remove it from my pants, shoving her away from me. She looks at me, shocked. Used to every man being wrapped around her finger.

On one hand, I know that using her advances to my advantage could potentially yield valuable information. It could help me in my mission. But for some reason, I physically cannot be intimate with her. I cannot desire her

like I desire Layla, and that is dangerous.

An unexpected inner battle rages within me. Lily, with her seductive advances, should be someone I am attracted to. But my body refuses to respond. My mind is preoccupied with thoughts of Layla, the girl I am only supposed to be manipulating and using for revenge.

I am pissed off by the growing attraction I feel towards Layla. I'm frustrated by my inability to be swayed by Lily's allure. This isn't part of the plan.

I'm supposed to hate Layla and only use her as a pawn in my pursuit of vengeance against Arthur. This conflict is a dangerous distraction. It threatens to derail my carefully laid plans. I know I have to suppress these feelings and focus on my mission. I cannot afford to let emotions cloud my judgment in this high-stakes game of revenge.

Lily still has a look of disbelief across her face. She scoffs at my rejection. With a toss of her hair, she moves away from me. Seeking solace in the arms of another man who seems more than willing to indulge in her flirtations.

I can feel her gaze linger on me. A mixture of frustration and wounded pride is evident in her eyes. I ignore her gaze and move further into the restaurant where the main attraction is starting.

I stand with my fists clenched with rage as the vile scene unfolds before me. The room is filled with these heartless monsters, bidding on an innocent sobbing child as if she were nothing more than a mere commodity. My blood

boils with anger. Every fiber of my being screams to tear the place down and put an end to this despicable display. But I know that I can't act on my emotions alone.

With iron clad composure, I conceal my disgust. I focus on my plan to rescue the child from this wretched fate. As the bidding escalates, I feel my heart pounding in my chest. I'm determined to outbid the others and save the child from a life of horror.

Finally, the moment arrives when I manage to secure the winning bid. Relief washes over me. However, I have to suppress any signs of triumph. I collect the innocent child from the stage. I fight back the urge to kill every one of these individuals and I clutch her small hand in mine.

The perverts in the room, oblivious to my true intentions, congratulate me on my successful bid. They praise me for getting the child. I want to murder them all. But I have to pretend to enjoy their approval. All the while, I feel the weight of the child's life in my hands.

As the other men continue their praises, I hold back a forced smile. I conceal the weight of my true intentions. Little do they know that from the very start, I have been secretly recording every moment of their heinous acts and depraved discussions.

The evidence I have gathered will expose them all for the monsters they truly are when the time is right. With the innocent child now safely in my care, I

know that I hold the power to bring their dark empire crashing down.

I swallow my rage at the fact that Arthur is not engaging in this party. Meaning I cannot have evidence of his involvement. I have to attend more of these vile events. As I walk away from that nightmarish gathering, clutching the child tightly to my chest, my mind races with thoughts of avenging her.

I will not rest until these men face the consequences of their actions. I will use every ounce of my cunning and resources to ensure that the truth is revealed to the world.

I place the child in the passenger seat. She is fast asleep, probably drugged to become more passive. After ensuring she is in a comfortable sleeping position, I can't shake the thoughts gnawing at me to check if Layla is truly not in the party.

Despite John's reassurance that she is at home, I can't resist the urge to check for myself. I drive to Arthur's house, my heart pounding as I approach. I catch a peek of her through her bedroom's open window, asleep.

After proving to myself that she isn't involved in the party, I dial a number I have committed to memory. The call connects, and a familiar voice answers on the other end. It is an acquaintance, a dedicated individual who rescues children from such horrifying situations.

I quickly inform him about the child I have rescued from the party and describe the ordeal she has endured. I know she will be in safe hands with

him. I make arrangements to pass her on to his care.

"I'm sending her to you," I say firmly. "She deserves a chance at a better life. I trust you to protect her."

He assures me that the child will be safe with him. I feel a weight lift from my shoulders knowing that she will find a haven in his care.

After driving back home, I gently carry the sleeping child to one of my most trusted bodyguards. I instruct him to take her to my acquaintance. With a reassuring nod from the bodyguard, I know she is in capable hands.

Exhaustion weighs heavily upon me as I step into my home. Even the melody of the birds doesn't uplift my heavy mood.

I settle into bed, but my mind remains restless. Dreams of darkness creep into my sleep, swirling with images of the night's events, the faces of those monstrous men, and the innocent child caught in their web. My mind replays the scenes of the auction, the heartless bidding, and the child's terrified eyes. It is a nightmarish dance of darkness that haunts me even in slumber.

August



I'm in the car with my dad, just like that night. We're talking, and everything seems normal. But then, out of nowhere, this loud, crushing sound! The car starts shaking violently, and I'm thrown around like a ragdoll. Panic rushes through me, and I can't even catch my breath.

I look over at my dad, and his face is twisted in terror. His hands are desperately gripping the steering wheel, but the car is spinning out of control. I can hear his voice, shouting my name, but it's muffled, distant. I want to reach out, to tell him everything will be alright, but my body feels numb.

The other car comes crashing into us, its headlights blinding and piercing. I can't move, can't look away. The impact is brutal, metal crunching and glass shattering. The world flips upside down, and I feel weightless and disoriented. Something's pinning me down, and I can't move my arms.

I see him, my dad, and blood trickling down from a wound on his neck. His eyes are open, but they're empty, lifeless. I scream, "No, no, dad!" I try to reach out for him, but I'm stuck, unable to break free. I can see the horror on his face, and I know something is terribly wrong. Why can't I move? Why

can't I save him?

Everything is chaos around us, and I hear sirens wailing in the distance. But I can't focus on anything except my dad. I have to help him, to do something, but I'm paralyzed. It's like I'm trapped in a nightmare, unable to change what's happening. The desperation builds up inside me, and I'm crying out for him.

And then, a jolt runs through me, and I'm suddenly awake, gasping for air. I sit up in bed, sweat-soaked and trembling. It takes me a moment to realize that it was just a nightmare—a terrifying flashback to that awful night. My heart is racing, and I'm gripping the sheets, trying to ground myself.

As I take deep breaths, I wipe away the sweat that resulted from the nightmare. The images are still vivid, the fear still fresh. I press a hand to my chest, feeling the rapid thudding of my heart start to slow down. It's over now, I remind myself. The nightmare can't hurt me anymore.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed and rest my head in my hands. The memories of that night are haunting me, even in my dreams. I wish I could escape them, find some respite from the pain and fear.

My mind is still haunted by the nightmare. I slip out of bed and make my way down the dimly lit hallway to the kitchen. The cold tiles under my feet a good distraction.

I reach the kitchen and switch on the soft overhead light. The room is bathed in a gentle glow. I open one of the cupboards and grab a glass, filling it with water from the tap. As I bring the glass to my lips, I catch a glimpse of the living room through the open doorway.

My eyes settle on the aviary, it's supposed to be calming, a soothing presence in my home. But right now, it's not enough to quiet the storm in my mind.

I take a sip of water, the cool liquid doing little to ease my restlessness. I set the glass down and step into the living room.

I remember that night—the screeching tires, the blinding lights. My father was driving, and I was in the front seat. The collision was brutal, the impact jarring. The world turned into chaos in an instant. I could hear my dad's panicked screams, feel the car being crushed around us.

I saw it—the life fading from his eyes. I called out for him, for help, for anything. But there was nothing I could do. The pain and the fear were overwhelming.

The car that hit us was being driven by Lily's mother, drunk and high. It was her recklessness that took my dad away from me. The rage I felt, the injustice—it consumed me and my mom. We wanted justice, we wanted her to pay for what she did. But that never happened.

Layla's father, with their powerful and corrupt family, managed to sweep the

situation under the rug. Lily's mother got off with just a slap on the wrist. Our pain and loss meant nothing to them. The system failed us, and our cries for justice went unanswered.

My mom couldn't move on from the pain, the anger, the emptiness. Two years later, she couldn't bear it anymore. She took her own life, leaving me alone, lost, and broken. I was thrust into the foster care system, where I was abused and mistreated by those who were supposed to protect me.

In those dark moments, as I endured pain and suffering, a fire ignited within me. A burning desire for revenge against the Lexingtons, against their wealth and power that shielded them from the consequences of their actions. I vowed that I would make them pay for what they did to my family, to my mother.

But karma hit Lily's parents before I could, they died due to a bad combination of alcohol and drugs. Considering that they ran a drug business, one would think that they would know what types of drugs should not be combined with alcohol. A part of me feels happy that they died that awful death, but the much larger part is angry that I could not make their life a living hell, there are many fates worse than death and I was planning to show them all those fates. They died without being exposed, without their truth being revealed. I was going to do that, show the world what monsters they were, and make people spit on their graves.

I stare at the aviary, its serene presence contrasting with the turmoil inside

me. The memories are a heavy weight on my shoulders, a constant reminder of the injustice that plagues our world. The glass of water in my hand trembles slightly, and I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself.

I know that revenge won't bring my dad or my mom back. But it's the only way I can find some semblance of closure, of justice. I won't rest until I've torn down their empire, until they feel the pain they caused me and my family. And maybe, just maybe, in that act of vengeance, I'll find the peace I've been searching for all these years.

Layla



I reluctantly open my eyes to the sound of heavy rain. My heart sinks as I remember that today I will have to see my father after such a long time of his absence. The thought of seeing him fills me with fear as well as dread, our relationship has never been easy, and I've learned to be guarded around him.

With a heavy sigh, I force myself to get out of bed, dreading the moment I will hear his voice. The idea of breakfast with him makes my stomach churn, but I know I can't avoid him forever. I head to the bathroom, contemplating ways to make myself look presentable, because he will be sure to let me know if my appearance was not up to his standard.

As I step into the shower, the warm water cascades over me and I feel a shiver run through my body. For just a moment, I close my eyes and imagine that I am anywhere but here, I imagine I am in my lab from the early morning or having breakfast with August; I imagine I am in places that truly appreciate me and not somewhere where my presence is just considered a nuisance. But I must come to reality once again, I open my eyes and finish

washing up before stepping out of the shower.

After my hair has dried, I curl my messy waves, trying to tame them into something more put-together, and I give myself a reassuring pep talk in the mirror. I remind myself to stay strong and not let his words or actions get to me. But deep down, a part of me longs for his approval and affection, even though I know he may never truly offer it.

As I walk downstairs, I take a deep breath, steeling myself for whatever awaits me at the breakfast table. I wish things could be different, that we could have a loving relationship like other families do. But unfortunately, I do not think that it is going to happen anytime soon.

I make my way down to the kitchen, my heart fluttering with a mix of anxiety and dread as I see Layla sitting there, looking gorgeous as ever, next to my father. Her bruises are nowhere in sight, covered perfectly with foundation. My anxiety worsens quickly when I realize that he hasn't even acknowledged my presence.

"Hi, father," I say, trying to sound cheerful despite my nerves.

He looks me over with a disapproving frown. "Look at you, gaining too much weight again. You really need to take care of yourself."

"I've been busy with the lab and all," I try to explain.

He scoffs, not interested in my excuses. "And what's with your hair? It's a mess. Can't you at least make an effort to look presentable?"

Tears well up in my eyes as I fight the overwhelming feeling of heartbreak. It hurts that he didn't even say hello or ask about me before hitting me with his harsh remarks. It's as if my existence doesn't matter to him, and all he cares about is finding fault in me.

"I'll try to do better," I manage to say, my voice trembling.

His disapproval only intensifies. "You better."

I glance at Lily, hoping for some support, but she avoids my gaze and remains silent, I can see her expression is solemn though.

"I'm doing my best," I say, my voice shaking.

"Well, your best clearly isn't good enough," he retorts.

I force a smile and take a seat at the table, attempting to push aside the hurt and act as if his words don't affect me. But the pain lingers, and I can't help but feel my heart breaking. Deep down, all I ever wanted was his love and approval, but it seems like that's something I'll never truly have.

We sit at the breakfast table, the atmosphere stifling with tension. Lily appears visibly uncomfortable, fidgeting with her fork, while I try to finish my breakfast as quickly as possible, hoping to escape this suffocating environment. But my father doesn't make it easy; he continues to make disparaging remarks about me, even comparing me to Lily, praising her at my expense.

"You should learn something from Lily," he says, a hint of smugness in his

voice. "She's always so put together, unlike you."

I bite my lip, fighting back tears and the urge to defend myself. I can feel the weight of his expectations crushing me, and it's becoming harder to bear with each passing moment.

When I finally manage to finish my breakfast, I stand up abruptly, not wanting to subject myself to any more of his hurtful comments. "I have to work on my thesis," I tell him, my voice strained.

He looks at me disapprovingly. "Always buried in your books, no wonder you're so awkward."

I nod weakly, apologizing to him, not wanting to prolong this painful conversation. I quickly leave the house, feeling the tears threatening to spill over. As I step outside, John is waiting for me, concern evident in his eyes. Without a word, he pulls me into a comforting embrace, and I break down, sobbing into his chest.

He holds me gently, offering silent support, knowing that sometimes words aren't enough. As my tears subside, he takes my hand and leads me to the car, reassuring me that everything will be okay.

During the drive to the university, John does his best to raise my spirits, cracking jokes and sharing funny stories to distract me from the pain. By the time we arrive, I manage to offer a faint smile, grateful for his presence, he has been more of a father to me than my own.

I head to the lab, determined to escape the pain by burying myself in my work. I turn off my phone, shutting out the world, and immerse myself in my research. I continue to work until the winter sun sets outside, casting long shadows through the window.

As I finish my work in the lab, I tidy up everything, put on my coat, and step outside. The winter wind immediately sends a shiver down my spine as I make my way through the cold campus towards John's car. As I approach, I notice him fidgeting and appearing unusually nervous. Without saying a word, he urgently gestures for me to turn on my phone. Curiosity mixed with concern, I quickly unlock my phone, wondering what could be so urgent.

As I unlock my phone, I'm greeted by a flood of messages from August. The first ones are filled with genuine concern, asking how I am and why I haven't been answering my phone. As I scroll down, I see his worry turning into frustration, questioning why I turned off my phone and put him in a position where he couldn't reach me. The messages become more and more urgent, and I feel a pang of guilt and anxiety rising within me. It's clear that he's been trying to get in touch with me for a while, and my heart sinks as I read through his words. I feel so bad that my decision to turn off my phone has caused him stress and worry.

I take a deep breath and dial his number, my heart pounding with anxiety. As the call connects, I start to apologize for worrying him, but he cuts me off

sharply, his tone full of rough authority and dominance.

"John will take you to my house," he commands firmly.

"But I can't sleep outside the house," I protest.

"John will return you home after we are done," he retorts. "He has already told your father that you'll be working late in the lab as an excuse. There's no turning back now."

My voice trembles as I try to speak up, "But I have other things to take care of." He interrupts me again, his voice even rougher and more stern, "I said, you will stay for a couple of hours. There's something important we need to discuss, and I won't take no for an answer."

With a sigh, I reluctantly agree to follow his orders, getting into the car for John to take me to him

18

August



I sit in my office, my frustration grows with each unsuccessful attempt to contact Layla. Her phone remains stubbornly turned off, leaving me feeling livid. How dare she put me in a position where I can't reach her when I need to? I can't help but seethe with anger.

I decide to call John to see what's going on. When he informs me about Layla's breakfast with her father and her decision to isolate herself in the lab,

my anger intensifies. The thought of Arthur Lexington causing her distress fuels the rage inside me. Despite her being someone I am supposed to hate, I seethe at the idea of anyone hurting her.

The thought that she could block me out, even temporarily, grates on my nerves. She's mine, and I need to have constant access to her. Her actions, though justified in her mind, infuriate me, making me want to rush to her side and demand she follows my rules.

In this moment, I feel a mix of possessiveness and protectiveness towards her. The idea of not being able to reach her whenever I want ignites a fire within me. I need her to understand that I am in control and that she can't shut me out like this.

As I move through the company, my employees lower their gazes and cower slightly, recognizing my authority. Stacy, my secretary, tries to catch my attention as I pass by, subtly twirling her hair and biting her lip, but I pay her little mind, focused on my purpose.

Once outside, I stride purposefully to my car. The engine roars to life as I speed towards my destination, impatient to arrive.

I call her, my tone firm and demanding, as we discuss her coming to my house and John taking her back later. There is no room for negotiation; my orders are clear, and I expect them to be obeyed without question.

Arriving at my house, I enter with a forceful presence, the weight of my

anger palpable in the air. The serene sound of the birds fails to calm my nerves as I await her arrival. I am seething with fury at the thought of anyone hurting her, especially her own father, and I am equally furious that she thinks she can just shut me out.

As half an hour passes, I hear a soft knock on the door, and my heart quickens with anticipation. I rush over to open it, and there she stands, looking tired and wary. I pull her inside the house, my anger still simmering beneath the surface.

"What's going on, August? Why are you so angry?" she asks, her voice tinged with concern.

My jaw clenches as I try to control my rage. "You turned off your phone, Layla. You left me with no way to reach you. Do you have any idea how that made me feel?" I growl, pinning her against the wall with an intense gaze.

Her eyes meet mine, and she tries to push back. "I had a bad morning. I needed some space, and I turned off my phone to focus on my work."

I shake my head, my voice low and demanding. "No excuses. You're with me now, and I need to have access to you at all times. You can't just shut me out whenever you feel like it."

She frowns, her resistance evident, but a single look from me and a low growl is enough to get her to relent reluctantly. "Fine, August. But this is not fair. You can't just dictate my every move."

"I can and I will," I reply firmly. "You belong to me, Layla, and I need to know where you are and how to reach you at all times. I won't tolerate being left in the dark like that again."

She sighs, her shoulders slumping in defeat. "Okay, fine. But you have to trust me too, August. You can't control everything."

My grip on her tightens, my voice stern. "Trust goes both ways, Layla. You have to trust me enough to know that I will help you feel better when you're down, your burdens are mine."

She looks up at me, her expression softening slightly. "I do trust you, August. But you have to give me some space too."

I lean in, my face inches from hers, my voice a low whisper. "I'll give you space when I know you're safe and when you understand that you're mine, and you can't escape me."

She swallows hard, her resistance waning. "Fine, August. I understand. Just... be gentle with me, okay?"

I nod, my anger beginning to subside as concern for her takes over. "Always," I say, before pulling her into a tight embrace, holding her close.

She slumps in my embrace, sobbing, and I hold her tighter, gently caressing her hair to soothe her. "Shh, it's okay, Layla. You can tell me what happened," I say in a calming voice.

She takes a deep breath and begins to share everything her father said, about

her weight, her hair, and how he made her feel small and inadequate. Her words break my heart, and I can feel my anger resurfacing, but I push it aside for now, focusing on comforting her.

"Listen to me, Layla," I say softly, lifting her chin to meet my gaze. "You are absolutely beautiful, inside and out. Your father doesn't see the amazing woman you are, but I do. You are gorgeous, intelligent, and kind, and nothing he says can change that."

I lean in and kiss her gently, because for reasons I do not understand, my heart is begging me to make her feel better and for once, I decide to listen to it. "You are perfect just the way you are, and I adore every part of you. Your hair, your body, everything about you is stunning. Don't ever let anyone make you doubt your worth, especially not your father."

She looks up at me with tearful eyes, her vulnerability touching my soul.

"Thank you, August. It's just hard sometimes, you know?"

"I know, sweetheart," I say, brushing a thumb across her cheek. As I look at her delicate features, her small nose, big eyes, and pouty red lips; I cannot stop myself from leaning in and kissing her. She melts into my body with a sigh, granting my tongue access to her hot mouth. My tongue explores every crevice of her mouth as it mingles with her. She moans loudly but then the sound of her stomach growling disrupts our make out session.

"I'm sorry," she murmurs, looking away. "I haven't eaten since breakfast."

"What?" I snap, my anger flaring. "You haven't eaten all day? Are you kidding me?"

"I was just caught up with everything that happened earlier, and I guess I forgot," she replies, looking down.

"That's not an excuse," I retort, my frustration evident in my voice. "You can't just neglect your own well-being like that."

She looks up at me, startled by my anger. "I know, I just... I wasn't thinking," she admits.

"Well, start thinking," I growl, my patience wearing thin. "You need to take care of yourself, Layla. Skipping meals is not an option."

Her eyes widen, and I can see surprise in her expression. I can tell that she is not used to people caring for her this much.

As I carry her in my arms to the kitchen, Layla remains quiet, seemingly taken aback by my anger. As I start preparing the ingredients, I can feel her gaze on me, but I don't soften my stance.

"You know, you don't have to do this," she says softly. "I can make something for myself."

"No, you can't," I reply firmly. "You need to eat, and I'm going to make sure you do."

Her eyes widen even further, and I can tell she's taken aback by my intensity. But I can't back down now. I'm too angry at the thought of her neglecting

herself.

When I start to cook, the intensity of my anger begins to wane. I take a deep breath, trying to ease the tension that filled the room. "I'm sorry for snapping at you," I say, my voice softening. "I just don't like seeing you neglect yourself like that."

Layla watches me cautiously, her eyes still reflecting surprise at my outburst. "It's okay," she replies softly. "I understand, and I appreciate your concern."

As the aroma of the Spaghetti Alla Carbonara fills the kitchen, Layla's stomach grumbles again, but this time, she smiles sheepishly. "It smells amazing," she admits.

I return her smile, feeling a sense of satisfaction at her reaction. "I hope it tastes just as good," I say, trying to lighten the mood. "I own a restaurant in Italy, so I know my way around the kitchen."

Her eyes widen in surprise. "Really? You own a restaurant in Italy?" she asks.

"Yes," I reply, "and not just that. I also have a spa here, among other businesses in Europe. Running a security company is just one of my many ventures."

Layla seems genuinely intrigued, and I can see her curiosity sparking. "Wow, you're quite the entrepreneur," she remarks.

I chuckle, glad to see her mood lightening up as well. "I guess you could say

that," I reply. "But enough about me. Let's focus on eating. You need to replenish your energy."

As we sit down to eat, Layla takes a bite of the dish I prepared, and a pleased expression crosses her face. "This is delicious," she says between bites. "You really are a master in the kitchen."

I grin, pleased with her compliment. "Thank you," I say. "I'm glad you like it."

As we continue to enjoy the meal, Layla looks at me thoughtfully and says, "You know, since you mentioned replenishing energy, I've been thinking about trying out your spa for a massage."

I pause for a moment, the idea of someone else touching her making me feel uneasy. "Hmm, I'm not so sure about that," I say, trying to mask my growing irritation.

Layla raises an eyebrow, sensing my change in demeanor. "Why not?" she asks, genuinely curious.

"I don't like the thought of anyone else putting their hands on you," I admit, my voice tinged with possessiveness. "You're mine, Layla, and I don't want anyone else touching you."

She looks at me, her eyes softening. "I understand, but it's just a massage," she says. "I promise I'll choose a female masseuse if that makes you feel better."

I shake my head, feeling frustrated by the whole idea. "It doesn't matter if it's a man or a woman," I say firmly. "You are mine, and that means my hands are the only ones that touch you."

Layla looks surprised by my words, but there's also a hint of something else in her expression. "Your hands?" she repeats softly.

"Yes, my hands," I reply, my tone laced with intensity. "I want to be the one to take care of you, to make you feel good, to touch you."

She blushes slightly, clearly affected by my words. "Okay," she whispers. "If that's what you want."

"It is," I say firmly. "You're important to me, Layla, and I want to protect and care for you in every way I can."

She reaches out and takes my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Thank you," she says softly. "That means a lot to me."

I smile, feeling a sense of relief that she understands where I'm coming from.

"You're welcome," I reply. "Now, let's finish eating. Maybe I can show you around the spa myself some time."

Layla smiles back at me, and I can see the trust and affection in her eyes. "I'd like that," she says. "I'd like that very much."

Layla



After spending time with August, I feel conflicted as John drives me back home. On one hand, I cherish the moments we shared, but on the other hand, I dread returning to the suffocating atmosphere of my father's house.

I enter the house, and my heart sinks when I see my father waiting for me. His eyes are bloodshot, and veins pop on his forehead. I can sense his anger from afar. I take a deep breath, putting on a brave front to face him, though I feel a knot of fear in my stomach.

"Out late with men, huh?" he sneers. "I thought I told you to stay away from them."

I lie straight through my teeth as I say, "Father, I wasn't out with a man. I was working late in the lab, you can ask John. He can confirm it."

He grits his teeth at my response, and his anger worsens. "John? He's the only reason why I'm not tearing you apart right now," he barks.

I feel relief and gratitude for John's intervention. "He's just doing his job, Father," I say softly. "But you have to trust me. I'm not doing anything wrong."

He stares at me for a moment, then turns away, clearly still upset and making

no effort to hold back his anger. "You better be telling the truth," he warns.

I muster my courage and reply, "There's no one in my life, Father, but even if there were, it's my choice, not yours. You can't control me forever."

He laughs mockingly. "You think you're so smart, don't you? I'll make sure no boy dares to come near you."

In that moment, I feel anger and defiance. "You can't stop me from living my life," I retort, trying to stand tall even as my hands tremble.

His face contorts with rage, and suddenly, he raises his hand and slaps me. The impact is sharp, and I stumble back, shocked and hurt. He leaves me there, and I feel the sting of tears in my eyes. But I refuse to let him see me cry.

As I climb up to the top floor, I hope to find comfort in Lily's company. "Lily, are you here?" I call out, my voice shaky.

But there's no response, and a sinking feeling settles in my heart. I feel even more alone and broken. Curling up on my bed, I let the tears flow freely, feeling overwhelmed by the weight of my life. I yearn for a way out, a chance to break free from the chains that bind me to my father's expectations. But for now, I have to endure this suffocating life.

I lie on my bed, lost in my thoughts and tears. I suddenly feel the mattress shift as Lily crawls in beside me. She gently wraps her arms around me, pulling me into a comforting hug. "I'm here, Layla," she whispers, her voice

filled with love and empathy. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

I turn to look at her, my tear-stained cheeks meeting her soft gaze. "It's just so suffocating, Lily," I admit, my voice trembling. "I feel like I'm trapped, and I don't know how to break free."

Lily brushes a strand of hair away from my face, gently kissing my injured cheek. "We'll find a way out, Layla," she says firmly. "We'll find a way to finally live our lives the way we want to, without being controlled by anyone."

I sniffle, wiping away the tears that still linger on my cheeks. "I don't know how much longer I can endure this," I admit, my voice trembling.

Lily holds my hand tightly. "I know it's tough, but we have to stay strong," she says softly. "We can't let him break us. We have dreams and aspirations, and we can't let anyone take that away from us, especially him."

She places a series of kisses on my red cheek again, and I feel a mix of pain and comfort. "I promise you, Layla, we'll find a way out of this situation," she vows. "We'll find a way to live our lives on our terms, free from his control."

I sigh, leaning into her comforting presence. "I want that so much," I whisper. "I want to be free, to make my own choices, and to be with someone I love."

Lily hugs me tighter, her voice filled with determination. "And you will, Layla," she promises.

As I wake up in the morning, I realize that Lily is still wrapped around me in

a protective embrace and I feel grateful. I want nothing more than to spend the day with her eating junk food and doing nothing, but I understand that we both have responsibilities. After she leaves to get ready, I take a shower, trying to wash away the heaviness in my heart.

When I step out of the bathroom, Lily is already in the room again, waiting to check in on me before she leaves to attend her classes. She notices me looking at the mirror, and her eyes meet mine with concern. "Layla, are you okay?" she asks softly.

I hesitate for a moment before replying, "I will be. It's just... seeing the bruise reminds me of everything."

Lily comes over and holds me in a warm, protective hug. "I'm so sorry," she says, her voice filled with empathy. "You don't deserve any of it."

I swallow hard, feeling a lump forming in my throat. "I know," I whisper, tears welling up in my eyes. "But I won't let him affect me."

I stand in front of the mirror, looking at the bruise that formed from my father's hard slap. For a moment, I contemplate covering it up, hiding the evidence of his actions. But then I make a decision – I will not hide his wrongdoings. I never did in the past, and I won't start now.

"Layla?" Lily's voice breaks my thoughtful trance.

"I won't cover it," I say firmly, meeting her gaze with determination. "I won't let him make me feel ashamed of what he did."

Lily smiles softly, her eyes filled with admiration. "I will support whatever decision you make, Layla," she says.

I nod, feeling a sense of relief wash over me. "Thank you, Lily," I say, my voice trembling. "I don't know what I would do without you."

"You'll never have to find out," Lily replies with a small smile. "We'll face everything together, and we'll find a way to break free from all of this."

Layla



I gather my belongings and prepare to leave the suffocating confines of the house. A familiar presence catches my attention through the window, John is waiting for me outside, ready to accompany me to university. I grab my coat, determined to face the day despite how jarred I am feeling.

Just as I am about to step out, a rough hand grabs my arm, and I turn to face my father. His demand is clear and forceful. "Layla, cover that bruise," he orders, his tone brooking no argument.

I feel a surge of defiance rise within me, and I lock eyes with him. "No," I state firmly, my voice steady despite the anger that simmers beneath the surface.

Before the tension between us can escalate further, Lily rushes over with a weird sway in her hips I have never seen before. She leans in, whispering something into his ear. My father's expression shifts with something that I can't quite decipher.

A strange transformation comes over father's features as he looks at Lily. There is a hint of something dark in his black eyes. I watch in disbelief as he

seems almost entranced by her. A sense of unease settles in the pit of my stomach. What is Lily saying to him?

Lily's whispered words seem to snap him out of his mood, and his grip on my arm loosens. I pull away, taking a step back, my mind racing with confusion. Did I just imagine that? Could Lily really have that kind of influence over him?

I make my way out of the house, the feeling of disgust mingles with my confusion. I can't believe what I think I saw, but I am left grappling with the unsettling thought that Lily might be using her charm to manipulate my father, her uncle. Yet, I force myself to shake off those doubts. There's no way Lily could do that, I reassure myself, heading out to meet John.

John and I walk to the car, and I notice a certain tension in his demeanor. His usual calm and composed exterior seems slightly strained, and I can't shake off the feeling that he is angry. The bruise on my cheek must have caught his attention, and I can almost sense his protective instincts flaring up.

I glance at him from the corner of my eye, observing the clench of his jaw and the intensity in his gaze. It is as if he is struggling to contain rage, rage that I suspect is directed at the person responsible for the mark on my face – my own father.

We get into the car, and the silence between us feels heavy with unspoken words. I know that John is fiercely loyal and cares deeply for my well-being.

His reaction is understandable, yet he maintains his restraint, refusing to let his anger show.

He starts the car and we pull away from the house and I finally speak up. "John," I begin tentatively, "you don't have to hold back. I know you're angry."

He glances at me briefly, his expression filled with anguish that makes my heart hurt. "Layla, I..." he pauses, searching for the right words. "I want to make sure you're safe and protected. It kills me that the person who is hurting you the most is the one I can't protect you from."

The crack in his voice and his hands that are clenched on the steering wheel are a clear indication of his struggle to balance his feelings with his professionalism. I appreciate everything he does for me and don't want to burden him further.

"Thank you, John," I say softly, reaching over to rest my hand on his arm briefly. "I promise I will be fine."

He gives me a small, reassuring smile before focusing back on the road. The rest of the journey passes in a comfortable silence.

When John pulls up to the university, I grab my bag and open the car door. Before I step out, I turn to him. "I'll see you later, John." I say warmly and he nods his head.

I hurry through the hallways of the university, my head is bowed, my steps

quick and purposeful. I can't shake off the sudden loss of courage I feel about showcasing my bruised cheek. My courage is long forgotten, now replaced with anxiety. I have now realized that the last thing I want is for anyone to see me in this state; I wish that I wasn't so stubborn and just covered it with makeup. The thought of their pitying glances or questioning stares makes my heart race, and I can't bear the idea of exposing my vulnerability to the world. Finally, I reach the familiar doors of my lab, and as I enter, a sense of relief washes over me. Hours pass by in a blur as I immerse myself in my research, the rhythmic hum of the equipment providing a comforting backdrop.

Suddenly, a hand on my shoulder startles me, and I let out an involuntary squeak. I turn to find my professor standing there, concern etched on his handsome features. His gaze flickers to my bruised cheek, and I see a flash of pity in his eyes that he quickly conceals.

"Layla, you've been working for hours," he says, his voice gentle. "You need to take a break."

I nod, feeling a mix of awkwardness and gratitude. "I just wanted to make some progress," I mumble, not meeting his eyes.

He gives me a knowing look, then offers, "How about I walk you out of campus? It's late, and you shouldn't be walking alone."

His gesture touches me, and I manage a small smile. "Thank you, Professor George."

We tidy up the lab, then he helps me take off my lab coat and holds my coat out for me. He gently fixes my scarf, and I blush slightly. Together, we walk out of the lab and onto the campus, the cold wind biting at our skin.

"You know, Layla," he begins, his voice thoughtful, "if you ever need someone to talk to or rely on, I'm here. No matter how personal the matter."

I understand his subtle implication, and my eyes well up with tears. He is offering his support without directly mentioning my bruise, and I am grateful for his consideration. "Thank you," I whisper, my voice wavering slightly. He must have noticed the tears, but he tactfully looks away to give me a moment. I wipe my eyes discreetly, not wanting to reveal my vulnerability.

We continue walking to where John usually parks the car and something unusual catches my eye. Leaning casually against his expensive car, is August, John isn't anywhere in sight. His gaze is focused on my professor with a subtle clench in his jaw. My heart skips a beat as I meet his intense gaze, surprise washing over me.

"Layla," he greets coolly, his voice a stark contrast to his usual gentle tone.

"August," I reply, my tone wary yet tinged with curiosity.

We approach him and August's arm slips around my waist, pulling me close to him. Before I can fully react, his lips capture mine in a kiss that is both possessive and demanding. It is as if he is staking his claim right there, in front of my professor.

As the kiss ends and August releases me, I turn to face my professor, my cheeks flushed and my heart racing. His expression holds a mix of surprise and discomfort, and I quickly look away, unable to hold his gaze.

"Take care, Layla," he says, his voice a bit strained.

I nod, feeling bewildered. "Thank you, Professor."

August guides me toward his car, his touch feels insanely possessive. He opens the door for me and helps me settle into the seat. I watch as he leans over to fasten my seatbelt. Suddenly, his grip on the seatbelt tightens, and I follow his gaze to see his eyes fixed on the bruise on my cheek.

"Who did this to you?" His voice is laced with fury, and I can see the muscles in his jaw tense again. I hesitate, not wanting to reveal the truth. But the anger in his eyes is burning like an inferno, and I know he won't let it go easily.

"It's nothing, just a misunderstanding," I reply, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Layla, I swear to God, if someone laid a fucking hand on you—" He growls.

"It's not important," I interrupt, my voice shaking. "Please, August, just drop it."

His reaction is instantaneous. His hand slams against the steering wheel, and his eyes burn with an intensity that sends shivers down my spine. "Don't you dare tell me it's not important," he spits, his voice dripping with rage.

The car roars to life as he shifts gears and accelerates, his anger manifesting in the speed at which he drives. I feel trapped, caught in the whirlwind of his fury, unable to escape the storm that rages both outside and within the car.

"August, stop," I plead, my voice barely audible over the engine's roar.

"Please, it's not worth it."

His grip on the steering wheel is unrelenting, his gaze fixed on the road ahead. "Nothing is more important than this," he declares, his voice a dangerous whisper.

As the car screeches to a stop, I look at him, tears blurring my vision.

"August, please," I beg, my voice breaking. "Let it go."

He turns toward me, his eyes wild with a mix of anger and desperation. "Tell me who did this to you," he demands, his voice shaking with an intensity that matches the storm within him.

I meet his gaze, embarrassment eating away at my heart. "It was my father," I confess, my voice barely audible.

The car is silent, the weight of his anger pressing down on us. Then, in a moment of sheer madness, his expression twists into something unrecognizable. He grips the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turn white, and a raw, guttural sound escapes his throat. It is a sound of pure rage, a sound that reverberates through the car and sends shivers down my spine.

"August—" I begin, but he cuts me off, his voice a low, feral snarl. "No one

touches you," he hisses, his eyes blazing with a possessive fire. "No one lays a hand on you and gets away with it."

The intensity of his emotions overwhelms me, and I shrink back in my seat, feeling the power of his anger. The air is charged with tension, the car a pressure cooker of emotions ready to explode.

"Little dove," he murmurs, his voice laced with tenderness and fury. "No one hurts you and goes unpunished. Remember that."

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August 

As I take glances at Layla's bruised cheek, I feel my breath coming out harsher and uneven. The anger within me is a roaring storm, threatening to consume me whole. How dare someone lay their hand on her? Even if I'm supposed to despise her, I can't bear the thought of anyone hurting her. But I can't admit to myself that this visceral rage is anything more than my sense of duty to protect a woman in a vulnerable situation.

I continue to drive, my mind is a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. I clench my jaw, trying to delude myself into thinking that the murderous rage

coursing through me isn't because of how much I care about her. No, it's simply the result of a man laying his hands on a woman.

"Where are we going?" she asks, her voice soft and trembling.

My response is curt, my words laced with an edge of harshness. "We're going to my home. You won't be staying under the same roof as someone who dared to lay his hands on you."

Her expression turns from confusion to alarm. "Your home? But my father —"

I cut her off, my tone unforgiving. "I don't care. If he so much as touches you, little dove, I will make sure he never sees the light of day again."

Her eyes widen with fear, and she shakes her head vehemently. "You don't understand. My father... he won't hesitate to—"

"He won't lay a finger on you again," I interrupt, my voice a dangerous growl.

She hesitates, her fear evident. "You don't get it, August. If I don't go back, he'll... he'll truly kill me."

I feel my grip tighten on the steering wheel, my knuckles turning white. "I won't let that happen."

She looks at me, desperation in her eyes. "Please, August, just take me back to my house. I'll be fine. I promise."

My anger surges anew, fueled by my determination to keep her safe. "No," I

snap, my tone final. "You're not going back there."

Tears well up in her eyes, and her voice quivers. "You don't understand. It's not that simple. He'll—"

"He won't touch you again," I declare, my voice ironclad. "I won't allow it."

Her gaze drops, defeated, and I can sense her reluctance to argue further. But she is anxious, and I know that even though she's yielding, she's far from convinced.

We drive in tense silence, both of us not uttering a word. I can't let her stay in that house, not when the threat to her safety is so evident. And deep down, I know that my reasons for wanting her close go beyond the excuses I give to myself. But for now, I'll push those feelings aside, focusing solely on ensuring her safety—no matter the cost.

We arrive at my house, and I take fast strides to open Layla's car door. I swiftly lift her from the car, ignoring her protests that she can walk. The need to protect her, to keep her close and safe, is an instinct that overwhelms any logic or reason. She's small, fragile in my arms, and the idea that she might endure any kind of abuse is suffocating.

Once inside, I gently set her down, my eyes never leaving her. She looks up at me, her expression a mix of irritation and exasperation, yet I can see the hint of vulnerability lurking beneath the surface.

I can't help but study the discoloration on her cheek more, a stark contrast

against her supple pale skin. The fire in my chest burns like an inferno, but I rein it in, focusing on the need to comfort her. Leaning in, I brush my lips against the bruise on her cheek, a gentle kiss. She sighs as she leans in to my lips and slightly chases after them as they leave her cheek.

"Feel free to change into something more comfortable and take a shower," I suggest to Layla, my tone softer than before. She looks weary, and my concern for her hasn't lessened. Her well-being is my priority now, and I want her to feel safe and at ease in my home.

"I don't have any pajamas here," she replies, her voice uncertain. I remember that she stayed over after our sushi date, and a small smile tugs at the corner of my lips. "John bought some for you last time," I remind her, watching her reaction closely.

Her cheeks tinge pink as she shyly nods, her gaze dropping to the floor. When she begins to move toward the guest bedroom, I act on an impulse and catch her by the arm gently. "Wait," I say, my eyes darkening slightly. "Instead of pajamas, how about wearing one of my shirts?"

Her eyes widen, surprise evident in her expression. She opens her mouth to protest, but I'm not about to let her get away. With a firm grip on her hand, I lead her to my bedroom. She looks at me with embarrassment as I hand her one of my oversized sweatshirts.

"It's more comfortable than pajamas, trust me," I reassure her, my voice a low

murmur. "And I'd like you to see you in something that's mine."

Crimson colors her cheeks, but she takes the sweatshirt from my hand. Her fingers brush against mine, sending a jolt of electricity through me. "I... I guess," she stammers, her voice barely audible.

"Good," I say with a satisfied grin. "Now go get changed." She squeals softly, the sound music to my ears, and practically dashes to the bathroom in the guest bedroom. I chuckle to myself, unable to hide my amusement at her reaction. As she disappears from view, I can't help but feel a warmth spreading through me—I ignore it; this is nothing.

After about fifteen minutes, Layla emerges from the bathroom, her hair still damp from the shower, and I can't help but notice her struggling to comb through the tangles. Without thinking, I move closer and gently take the brush and towel from her hand. She looks at me with surprise and an inkling of lust as I start to work through her long, wavy locks.

"Nobody but Lily has ever done this for me," she admits softly, her eyes fixed on me as I comb through her hair. Her vulnerability tugs at something inside me.

I continue to brush her hair, my touch gentle as I untangle the knots. "Well, you're not alone anymore," I reply, my voice softer than usual. "And you have quite beautiful hair."

A faint blush colors her cheeks, and she offers me a small smile. "Thank you," she murmurs.

Pausing for a moment, my fingers lingering in her hair. There's something about this moment, something intimate and tender that I hadn't expected. Before I can second-guess myself, I decide to take a step further. "Would you like me to braid it for you?" I ask, my tone casual.

Her eyes brighten, and she nods eagerly. "Yes, please!"

I carefully divide her hair into three sections and begin to weave them together into a simple braid. As I work, I feel a strange sense of contentment; this feels really intimate, and I can't say that I hate it. Once I finish the braid, I secure it with a hair tie that she hands to me and admire my handiwork.

"There you go," I say, my voice laced with a touch of satisfaction. "All done."

She touches the braid with a smile, her fingers grazing the hair tie. "Thank you, August. It's perfect."

I watch her for a moment, my heart beating a little faster at the sight of her smile. "You're welcome, Layla," I reply, my own smile matching hers.

Layla glances at me with a hopeful look in her eyes. "Do you happen to have any tea?" she asks softly.

I nod, offering her a reassuring smile. "Of course. Let me go make some for us."

As I head to the kitchen to prepare the tea, I can't help but feel a sense of contentment, and that shakes me to my core. I can't believe how quickly Layla is warming her way into my heart.

When I return with the tea, she has already taken a seat at the small table in my living room. We sip our tea and engage in conversation, I find myself opening up more than I do with anyone else.

However, the tranquility is shattered when Layla suddenly pales as her phone rings then stops, her eyes widening in realization. She scrambles for her phone, her hands shaking as she unlocks it. I watch her, concerned, as she scrolls through her messages.

Layla's breath hitches, and her eyes fill with panic. Without hesitation, she dials a number and brings the phone to her ear. But as soon as the call connects, I can hear Lily's shouts on the other end, her words laced with desperation and fear.

Without a second thought, I move closer and gently take the phone from Layla's hand. "Lily, watch how you speak to my woman," I warn in a low voice. Layla stares at me in shock as I continue, "Tell Arthur Lexington that I'll be seeing him tomorrow for dinner. We have some matters to discuss."

Lily's voice is trembling, and I can sense her panic even through the phone.

"August, you don't understand. If Layla doesn't come home, Arthur will—"

"He won't touch her," I interrupt firmly, my voice resolute. "Tell him to

expect me."

Lily's frantic breathing is audible over the line, and she seems to be on the brink of a panic attack. "August, please, I'm begging you. If anything happens to Layla—"

"I would love to see anyone try to hurt her with me standing behind her, it will be the last day they have on earth." I growl into the phone and that seems to shut her up, the only sound heard on the phone is her heavy breathing.

I hang up the phone and turn my attention back to Layla, who is staring at me with fear evident in her delicate features. "You don't have to worry," I say, my voice softer. "I'll make sure nothing happens to you."

Layla's eyes glisten with unshed tears, and she nods slowly. "Thank you, August," she whispers.

I gently hug her in my arms and watch as her tense demeanor gradually eases, I hold her close, my hand rubbing soothing circles on her back. Her breathing begins to steady, and I can't help but feel a sense of protectiveness wash over me. The weight of her vulnerability stirs something within me, something that both infuriates and saddens me. But as she succumbs to exhaustion, a soft, rhythmic sound fills the air – small snores escaping her lips.

Suppressing a chuckle, I marvel at how quickly she has fallen asleep in my embrace. Gently, I lift her, carrying her with care to the guest bedroom, placing her gently on the bed. Yet, as I stand in the doorway, an unexpected

hesitation overcomes me.

An unspoken desire gnaws at me, urging me to keep her close. Without overthinking it, I change my course and return to her side.

The sight of her sleeping form tugs at my resolve. In that moment, the boundaries I have carefully constructed seem to blur. I lift her again and take her to my own bedroom. Setting her down on the bed, I cover her with the blankets.

I watch her, my thoughts race. There's a connection between us that defies reason, and I find myself drawn to her in ways I can't easily dismiss. Slipping into bed beside her, I bring her into my arms, allowing her warmth to seep into my very core.

Her presence beside me is supposed to anger me, disgust me even. That is why I do not understand why her presence feels like an anchor, grounding me in ways I hadn't anticipated. As sleep overcomes me, I can't shake the awareness that something significant is changing between Layla and I.

Layla



I wake up to find myself sleeping in the same bed as August, his arms wrapped around me as if he's afraid I might vanish. Being held so tightly, I can't help but let out a soft giggle at the thought of him holding onto me like I might escape.

His peaceful sleeping face is a sight to behold. The morning light filters through the curtains, casting a gentle glow on his features. His strong jawline, accented by a hint of stubble, gives him a rugged yet handsome look. Long eyelashes brush against his cheeks as he sleeps, and I find myself studying every detail, in disbelief that I'm in the arms of a man this handsome.

There's something so alluring about the vulnerability he displays in his sleep, contrasting with the authoritative demeanor he usually projects.

I shift slightly as I feel the urge to relieve my bladder grow more insistent. I try to extricate myself from August's firm embrace, but his hold on me tightens, and a low, possessive growl rumbles in his chest.

"Stay," he murmurs in a voice that's both commanding and slightly muffled

from sleep. The sound sends shivers down my spine and makes my cheeks heat up.

I hesitate, torn between my pressing need and his firm grip. With a nervous swallow, I say softly, my voice barely more than a whisper, "August, I really need to use the bathroom."

His grip reluctantly loosens, and he releases me with a grumble, his displeasure evident in his expression. I carefully slip out of his arms and manage to sit up on the edge of the bed, my face flushing even more as I realize how intimate our previous position had been.

"Go," he mutters, his gaze following me as I stand up, a mixture of irritation and something else I can't quite decipher in his eyes.

I offer him an apologetic smile, feeling embarrassed at the situation. "I won't be long," I assure him before making my way to the bathroom, my steps quickened by the pressing need in my bladder.

As I close the bathroom door behind me, I can't help but laugh softly to myself. Who would have thought that August was so clingy in the mornings? After tending to my needs and returning to the bed, I find August waiting, his arms ready to envelop me once again. I get back into the bed, my back against his front, and his arms securely wrapped around my body. The heat of his back against me is making me feel a little dizzy. He's shirtless, and his abs, covered with a dusting of hair, are pressed hard against me.

My voice takes on a slightly nervous tone as I feel desire course through my veins. "August, you know, this is the first time we've slept together," I admit. I can feel his gaze bore into the back of my head, and a sudden tension seems to hang in the air between us, charged with hot lust. In response to my statement, something hard presses against my backside, leaving me flustered and my heart racing.

His lips brush against my ear, his voice a low, heated whisper. "No, it's not," he murmurs, the words laced with a tantalizing promise, "but trust me, when it is, your voice will be too hoarse to utter those words."

I feel my cheeks flame as I quickly correct myself and tell him that I meant sharing the bed, but my explanation seemingly falls on deaf ears. His arms, cradling my flat stomach, move upwards, dangerously close to my aching breasts.

He moves one hand upwards, passing gently over my breasts, like a whisper, before he wraps it around my neck and uses it as leverage to pull me even closer to his sculpted body. "Do you feel me, little dove?" He whispers in my ear, his morning voice enough to make my eyes roll to the back of my head without a single touch.

I know he's referring to his hardness that is pressing on my backside. I push myself back more into his hips, trapping his member between our bodies, and he lets out a hum in my ear. I nod in answer to him as I feverishly rock my

hips, dying to feel a friction only he can provide.

Immediately, his hand on my throat tightens, and his arm is removed from my torso and is instead used to hold my hips roughly. The bite of pain makes a moan escape my throat, and I feel his smile on my hair.

“Words, little dove,” He orders roughly, and I wet my dry lips before mumbling, “Yes, I feel it, August.”

I feel his lips kiss my neck before his teeth sink into it, soothing it with his tongue after the rough bite. His breath tickling my ear is making me lose my mind.

“Do you like how it’s pressed against you, Layla?” He coos sultrily, and I force myself to speak and not just nod, fighting my shyness. “I love it, but please—” I begin before hesitancy takes control and makes the words I was about to say lodge in my throat.

In an instant, August uses his powerful strength to trap me under his solid body, pinning my arms above my head, placing his knee against my aching pussy, and his face inches away from mine. Anger and arousal are mixed on his face as he roughly tells me, “Every inch of my body is yours, just like every inch of yours is mine. I am the only man who will ever satisfy you, so if you want something from me, it is your right to ask for it.”

I look up at his beautiful features and take a deep breath to steady myself before uttering, “Please, August, I want more. I want to cum.” My eyes never

meet his as I tell him of my darkest desires, and he leans in to kiss me.

His lips bite my own, and his tongue sucks mine. I do my best to match his pace, and he hums approvingly.

He hastily removes his shirt that I am wearing, leaving me entirely naked underneath. His eyes roam all over my body, and insecurity eats away at me.

I would have covered myself with my hands if he didn't have them pinned.

“No panties, little dove? Are you trying to make it easy for your man?” He asks with a laugh, and I do not think it is physically possible for me to get any redder. I look away from him, my breaths coming out in short, and uneven pants, heavily affected by my embarrassment and mingled desire, by him.

“No need to be embarrassed, I love every single part of you,” He says, and he holds my arms up with one hand and sneaks the other down to caress my body. “I love these perky tits,” he whispers as his hand squeezes my small flesh, I arch my back and let out a moan, the desire becoming too much to handle.

“These rosy nipples,” He says as he tugs on them in turn, I suck in a breath as I feel a jolt straight to my clit every time he tugs on them. He leans down and takes each one in his mouth after a particularly rough pinch, as if soothing them.

His hand reaches my pale stomach, and he moves his fingers gently all

around it, making me feel ticklish and try to squirm away. He chuckles slightly, and not being able to touch him starts to grate on my nerves.

“Please, August. Let go of my hands, I want to touch you.” I beg, and he slowly lets go of my arms, whispering with his lips pressed to my stomach, “The day that I won’t yield to these pleas will never come, little dove.”

I melt, my hands immediately starting to play with his hair as he kisses all over my stomach, even dipping his tongue into my belly button, startling me slightly.

He trails his kisses all the way down to the top of my mound, placing gentle kisses on my shaven skin before dipping lower, and making out with my pussy lips. His tongue licks my slit, rolling around my opening and flicking my clit quickly. I cannot stop the scream that comes out of my mouth as he puts his mouth around my entire cunt and sucks hard. My eyes roll to the back of my head, and I hold his hair tighter; he moans, enjoying my reaction.

As I cum, he licks me gently, helping me ride the orgasm that got me cross-eyed. He isn’t done with me yet though; he climbs back up my body, and I sigh dreamily as I feel his weight press me down on the bed again.

He positions his dick, which is still covered by the gray sweatpants he's wearing, on my wet pussy and starts humping. His hard, big cock, covered in the fabric of his pants, rubs against my wet flesh, and his moan in my ears immediately pushes me to another orgasm. He follows right after me, letting

out a guttural groan in my ear as he cums.

We lay in each other's arms, trying to catch our breath. He leans in to me and whispers, "I'm taking it easy on you because you're a virgin, but when I finally fuck you... I can't promise to go easy."

23

Layla 

The moments that follow our intimacy are filled with contentment and a little bit of shyness on my part. August's movements are purposeful as he rises from the bed, his gaze fixed on me. He suggests we freshen up, and I nod in agreement, my cheeks flushed.

The bathroom is inviting, and August extends his hand towards me, and I put my hand in his, feeling it engulf my smaller one. The water starts, and I join him, the sensation of the warm water against my skin both soothing and invigorating. His nearness is a reminder of what we did a few moments ago, and I can't help but feel a touch of nervousness, even as excitement buzzes within me.

The water envelops us and August's touch is gentle yet possessive, lighting my body on fire.

The vulnerability of the moment makes my heart race, and I find comfort in his hands washing my body.

His hands on my skin, fingers tracing lines and curves, ignite my desire again, but I keep quiet. The combination of steam and water blurs the world around us, leaving only the two of us in our own bubble. With every caress, my shyness slowly lessens, but my desire does not. I can never be immune to this man.

After we wash up, August and I emerge from the bathroom, wrapped in plush towels that absorb the moisture from our skin. His touch as he towel-dries me is both tender and electrifying, making my heart race. I dress in my clothes from the previous day, while August puts on a crisp white button-up shirt that clings to his well-defined physique, the top buttons left undone to reveal a glimpse of his strong chest, paired with casual jeans.

The scent of breakfast wafts from the kitchen as August bustles around, preparing a delicious meal for us. He moves with practiced ease, the clinking of utensils and the sizzle of food filling the space between us. Breakfast is a feast of flavors, a blend of eggs, vegetables, and savory ingredients.

After we finish our breakfast, I ask August if I can see the bird enclosure again. He readily agrees, his lips curving into a faint smile as he leads me to the living room. As we stand there, watching the graceful creatures in their space, my gaze fixes on a dove with bandaged wings. It stirs something within me, a feeling of empathy that I can't quite explain. The bird's struggle seem to mirror my own —hurt, caged, and powerless.

A shiver runs down my spine, and I turn to find August observing me closely, his eyes perceptive as ever. "Are you alright?" he asks, his voice gentle.

I hesitate, unsure of how to put my emotions into words. "It's just... that dove," I begin, my voice trailing off as I gesture toward the wounded creature. "It's like... it's trapped, and I can't help but feel like I understand how it feels."

August's expression softens as he takes in my words. "You won't be trapped for very long," he says quietly, his gaze locked on mine. "I promise."

His words send warmth over me, and I believe him. We sit in silence for a few moments before his next words take me by surprise. "How about we head to my spa?" he suggests, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

I blink in astonishment, my mind racing to comprehend his change of stance. "Your spa? But... you said no one could touch me, not even a female masseuse," I stammer.

His smirk is both playful and enticing. "Rest assured, little dove, I'll be the only one touching you," he replies, his words laced with a seductive edge that sends a flush creeping up my cheeks.

The implication of his words isn't lost on me, and my heart skips a beat at the thought.

His gaze remains unwavering, and he chuckles softly at my flustered state. "It's not what you're thinking, Layla," he says, amusement dancing in his eyes.

"I meant a massage, one that will help you relax and unwind."

I exhale a nervous laugh, feeling a mixture of embarrassment and relief wash over me. "Oh," I manage to utter, my cheeks still flushed.

He reaches out to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear, his touch gentle and reassuring. "But if you ever do want something more, you know I'm here to fulfill your desires," he whispers, his eyes glossed over with lust, which I believe mirrors my own, and I hit his arm gently, embarrassment filling me for my dirty thoughts.

As we drive to the spa, I can't shake off the mix of excitement and curiosity that churns within me. The drive is filled with comfortable silence, the

scenery outside passing by like a blur as my thoughts center on what awaits us.

Upon arrival, I am utterly taken aback by the beauty of the place. The spa resembles a fantastical retreat, as if plucked right out of a fairytale. Vibrant gardens, serene ponds, and charming stone pathways adorn the surroundings, creating an enchanting atmosphere that is hard to resist.

August leads me on a leisurely tour, his hand lightly resting on the small of my back as he guides me through the various sections of the spa. He explains the features of each area—the serene pool area, the tranquil sauna, the well-equipped gym—and it becomes clear that this place is a true oasis of relaxation and luxury.

As we admire the pool area, an employee approaches, her polite smile directed at August, and if it weren't for her greying hair and slightly hunched back, I would have been jealous. "Boss, should I arrange a couple massage for you and your guest?" she inquires.

The possessive edge in August's voice is unmistakable as he growls out a firm "No, just prepare room number one for us." His tone leaves no room for argument, and I watch as the employee's smile turns sly, a knowing glint in her eyes. "Of course, boss," she responds.

She walks away, August's gaze remains fixed on her retreating figure, his expression both irritated and amused. He turns to me, a wry smile tugging at

the corners of his lips. "It seems my employee is quite eager to play matchmaker," he remarks in exasperation.

I can't help but chuckle at the interaction, finding it adorable. August has a certain warmth in his eyes when he looks at her, but it isn't the same warmth he has when he looks at me; it is more like he views her as family, and my heart melts.

"We should head to the massage room," August suggests, his eyes holding a hint of mischief. "I promise you, it's going to be a one-of-a-kind experience." He says, and I nod with excitement, dying to see what he has planned for me.

24

August 

We walk towards the massage room, I feel a sense of anticipation. I glance at Layla, and the look of awe on her face is endearing. I swing the door of the room open and lead Layla to the room with a hand on the small of

her back.

A spacious massage bed dominates the room, adorned with plush cushions and draped in luxurious fabrics. A Jacuzzi is positioned nearby, invitingly bubbling with warm water.

The room is adorned with a lush array of roses and flowers, their vibrant colors filling the air with a delicate fragrance. Soft candlelight flickers, casting a warm and inviting glow; the air is also fragrant with the soothing aroma of essential oils and the delicate scent of gardenia.

I glance at Layla again, and her eyes are wide with wonder, her lips slightly parted in amazement. I can't help but feel a swell of satisfaction at her reaction. She steps further into the room, taking in the elegant decor with wide eyes.

Turning towards me, Layla's eyes meet mine, and her lips curve into a smile. I can see the excitement and appreciation in her gaze.

With a subtle nod, I motion towards the room. "What do you think?"

"It's... lovely," Layla replies softly, her voice filled with awe.

I feel a sense of pride swell within me. "I'm glad you like it."

This Spa means a lot to me. It is the first business venture I took after my

security firm got off the ground. I had started with nothing, a poor foster kid who nobody believed in. Now, here I am, standing amidst an empire I have built for myself.

I watch as Layla moves further into the room, her fingers lightly grazing the soft fabric of the massage bed. I unbutton my shirt and slide off my pants, revealing my muscles and well-defined physique.

I notice Layla's cheeks turn a deep shade of crimson. Her eyes widen slightly, taking me in with hunger in her eyes. Yet, she is still shy, and I cannot comprehend how she can still be after all we've done, but I love it. I can't help but chuckle at her reaction.

"Don't worry, Little Dove," I reassure her, my voice low and soothing, "it's just so the oils don't ruin my clothes."

Her voice trembles slightly as she replies, "Oh, I-I see. That makes sense."

Stepping closer, my gaze locked with hers, I detect a mix of shyness and amazement in her eyes. "You're blushing," I tease playfully.

Layla bites her lower lip, her embarrassment evident as she averts her gaze.

"Sorry, it's just..." The words appear to be lodged in her throat, and she fidgets with her fingers.

With a gentle touch, I lift her chin, guiding her eyes back to mine. "Relax, Layla. We're here to unwind and enjoy. Nothing to be embarrassed about."

Her gaze meets mine, and a small smile tugs at her lips. "Okay, I'll try."

"That's all I ask," I reply, giving her a reassuring squeeze.

"Undress so we can start the massage, little dove," I tell her, and I see her close her eyes before mustering her courage up with a sigh and nodding.

She starts with her pants, leaving her simple white cotton panties on. Then, she takes off her top but leaves her bra on as well. She shifts nervously in her underwear and starts to climb up to the high massage table, but I stop her with a grip on her arm.

"This is an all-body massage, Layla," I whisper in her ear before holding one of her bra straps upwards and allowing it to snap back into her skin, leaving a subtle red mark on her milky complexion.

She flinches slightly and looks deep into my eyes, as if searching for something. She seems to find it as she takes off her bra and panties with shaking hands.

I admire her gorgeous body. She is short, barely coming up to my chin, and for some reason, that turns me on. I would love to fuck her while I carry her, show her my strength, but I put that idea aside for the near future. Despite her shortness, her legs are long and strong. I want them wrapped around my ass as I fuck her hard. Her stomach is flat, her breasts small and perky, and topped off with rosy nipples that I am dying to suck red.

"Beautiful..." I tell her as she scrambles to get on the massage bed. She sits nervously, waiting for my instructions, and my dick is painful from how hard

that made me.

“Lie on your back, little dove,” I command, and she does so instantly. Staring at the roof as if transfixed, too shy to look at my face. I take a couple of steps towards her before squirting some oil onto my hands from the container on the nearby table. I rub my hands together, warming up the oil, all while my eyes are devouring her whole.

After I am done warming up the oil, I place a hand on each of her thighs before I start deep massaging the tissue there. My knuckles rub her perfect skin in circular motions. Any remaining tension drains from her body as my hands work on her muscles.

My hands move down her thighs, all the way down to her feet. I grab one perfectly arched little foot and start to massage it, the look on her face is one of pure bliss, and a smile draws itself on my face.

From this angle, I can see her pussy clearly and notice how it glistens with wetness. I grab the other foot, giving it the same attention as the other one before kissing her ankle gently and allowing my hands to move up again.

This time settling on her inner thighs. She sucks in a breath as I massage her there, my fingers nudging her pretty little cunt on some strokes. I make sure that I do not nudge her clit though, wanting her desperate by the time I play

with her pussy.

She tries to shift her hips to get my fingers to touch her, but I completely abandon her inner thighs at that. She lets out a disappointed sound, and I grab her face roughly before whispering in her ear “You only take what I give you, little dove, clear?”

She nods feverishly before remembering how I like her to say the words and mumbles to me that it is clear.

I kiss her lips gently as a reward, and she tries to deepen the kiss, but I pull away, she pouts, and I ignore it. My fingers trace the contours of Layla's shoulders, feeling the knots and tightness beneath my touch.

The softness of her skin under my hands is a sensation I relish, and I focus on easing her tension. After I work on each knot I find, my hands ease down to her tits, squeezing them hard and massaging the tissue, all while I avoid her pebbled nipples.

She arches her back with a moan, and I chuckle. At her frustrated expression, I take pity on her and play with her nipples, tugging on them and rolling them between my fingers.

I lean in and start sucking them hard, my tongue flicking the peaks. She squeals and roughly grabs the fabric of the massage table, pushing her head back and exposing her elegant neck.

I move away from her pretty tits and trace my hands down to the top of her mound. I grab each one of her legs and let them dangle on the sides of the massage bed, opening her legs wide and giving me a perfect view of her gorgeous cunt.

I grab the oil and drip it on the top of her mound, watching as it runs down her pussy, making it look even more appetizing. I just massage the top of her mound, not touching anything that can bring her significant pleasure. I see her struggling not to move her hips to put her clit on my fingers, and I do not miss the singular tear that slips from one of her eyes.

“I will give you what you crave for, only if you beg, little dove.” I growl out, wanting her to face her desire. To break out of her shyness and voice out what she wants me to do to her.

She contemplates doing it, remaining silent for a while, probably trying to gauge out if I will take pity on her and touch her without her asking for it.

When a couple of minutes have passed, and I was still only massaging the top of her mound, the words tumble out of her mouth without reserve, “Please touch me, August, please,”

I chuckle darkly before I ask her, “What do you want me to touch, Layla?”

She flushes even more, giving me a deadly glare as she mumbles, “My pussy.”

“Good girl,” I tell her as my fingers slip down, lubricated by both the oil and

her wetness. I run my fingers all over her pussy before I take my thumb and my forefinger and pinch her clit slightly. Her position gives me easy access to it. She startles but a moan escapes her throat as I massage it between my fingers, rolling it back and forth and in circular motions.

“Oh God,” She screams, and I lean down to whisper in her ear, “Not God, little dove... August.” Her eyes roll to the back of her head, and I watch, transfixed.

My fingers make my way down to her opening, but she grabs my hand, trying to stop me.

“Do not ever try to stop my hands from touching you. Everything you have is mine. Whether it is your pussy or your mouth or your tits; they are all mine.” I bark, my hand that isn’t busy with her little cunt makes its way to her throat, choking her gently.

She moans again as my finger tickles her opening but doesn’t go in, just gauging her reaction.

She turns crimson as she mutters, “I never had anything go in there, August.” I can see how embarrassed she is, and I furrow my brows in confusion.

“Not even your own fingers?” I ask her, and she shakes her head. I kiss her lips, our tongues mingling together, trying to put her at ease. I break the kiss and question her why.

“I was always scared.” She says, averting my gaze.

“Of what?” I ask, and she mutters something that I cannot hear.

“Louder, little dove,” I demand, and she says more clearly, “Of not enjoying it, or of it hurting.”

I allow my finger to enter her opening slightly; I do not put all my finger in, just insert a bit of it. She moans loudly, and I ask her, “Do you like the way that feels?”

“Yes,” She purrs, and I put the rest of my finger inside of her, watching her face closely for any sign of discomfort. She humps her hips on my finger, and I take that as a sign to move it inside her, fucking her with it. Her moans get louder, and when I insert a second finger inside her and start to scissor it, she squeals loudly.

I remove my hand from around her neck and use it to rub her clit in figure eights. This pushes her over the edge, and she screams loudly as she cums, her juices dripping all over my hands.

I suck my fingers as she watches before taking my boxer briefs off. My cock stands proud, and she appears entranced by it. “Can I touch it?” She asks as she looks at me with so much innocence that pre-cum comes out from my tip.

I nod, and she sits up before cautiously wrapping a hand around it. She moves it up and down and licks her lips as she sees the drops of pre-cum. She uses them to help her hand slide up and down my dick, and I groan.

“It’s huge,” She mumbles, and I laugh.

I am aware that my package is much larger than average, but seeing her marvel at it is amusing. She leans in and kisses my tip before licking the pre-cum from the head of my cock, moaning slightly.

I grab her hair and pull her away from my cock with it. She pouts, looking at me disappointed.

“Today is all about you, Layla,” I tell her as I push her to lay on her stomach. She grumbles but listens. I focus my attention on her back, my skilled fingers tracing the contours of her muscles with precision.

I then trail my hands down to her perky little ass, massaging it with just the right amount of pressure. She tenses when I dip my fingers into her back hole every now and again.

“August—” She starts to say, but I cut her off. “I am going to fill every hole you have, little dove. All your holes are mine.” She forces herself to quiet down and nods.

I allow my thumb to rub her pink back hole; I insert it slightly into her before taking it out, deciding to give her a break from all the new things she experienced today. I move on to massage the back of her thighs and calves, as I kneaded and pressed, I felt the muscles yield beneath my touch, her sighs of relief music to my ears.

I put my hands under her hips and position her so her knees are on the bed, her ass out, and her elbows anchored on the bed enabling her to stay in her

position. Then, I proceed to put my cock between her thighs and move it in and out.

My cock rubs flat against her pussy lips and clit with each stroke, and we both moan. My hard cock moves in and out of the pocket between her thighs, creating friction on her little clit.

Her moans turn me on greatly, and I fuck harder. She cums hard, and I take my cock out from in between her thighs and jerk it off to the view of her ass and pussy on display for me, her juices run down her leg and lubricate my strokes. I cum with a groan, painting her ass with my cum. She collapses onto the bed, lowering herself from her position and laying down.

I cannot help but rub my cum all over her ass, staking my claim. "Mine," I growl against her ear as I lay down on top of her, both of us processing the amazing orgasms we just had.

25

Layla 

August cleans both of us up after our intimate session, then carries me over to the Jacuzzi on the other side of the room. His strong arms envelop me, grounding me. He lowers us both into the Jacuzzi, my back resting against his chest, skin to skin. His fingers trace delicate patterns through my damp hair, soothing and calming me without the need for words. For a while, we sit in silence, but then his voice breaks through it.

"Perhaps it's time we start getting ready to head to your father's house," he murmurs softly.

His words send a jolt of panic through me, and suddenly, the walls seem to close in. Memories of my father's anger, his control over me, rush back with an overwhelming force.

My breathing quickens, and I feel my chest tighten as the panic threatens to consume me.

August must sense my distress, as his arms tighten around me, grounding me in the present moment. "Breathe, Little Dove," he coaxes, his voice anchoring me. "You're safe here, with me. No one will hurt you."

His soothing words and comforting touch gradually pull me back from the brink of panic. I focus on his presence, on the rise and fall of his chest against my back, matching my breaths to his.

"Better?" he asks gently, his fingers still tracing patterns on my scalp. I nod against his chest, unable to form words yet.

August's words are gentle, his voice a soothing balm as he speaks. "Layla, this is necessary for your safety. I won't let anything happen to you."

I can't shake off the sense of dread that has settled in my chest. My hands tremble, and I shake my head at the idea of going to my father with a man by my side. "Please, August, I... I don't think I can do it," I stammer, my voice betraying fear. I feel ashamed that I fear him, ashamed that I am not able to face him with courage, but at the same time, I do not think that I am ready to face him just yet.

He reaches out, his fingers brushing against my cheek, his touch warm and reassuring. "Listen to me, Little Dove," he says softly, his eyes locked onto mine. "I won't let anything happen to you. I promise. But you need to trust me."

Tears well up in my eyes, and I nod, my heart warring between fear and the trust I have in him. "I do trust you," I whisper, my voice barely audible.

With a small smile, he leans in, his lips capturing mine in a gentle kiss, pulling back, he murmurs against my lips, "Let's get ready then."

He helps me out of the Jacuzzi, his touch gentle yet firm. He reaches for a towel and begins to dry both of us off. Once wrapped in a cozy robe, he makes a call on the landline phone on the nearby table, speaking a few words before the same kind-looking older woman as before enters the room. She smiles warmly at me, her eyes filled with warmth and affection.

"¡Hermosa!" she exclaims before she introduces herself as Teresa and I tell her my name while we shake hands, her voice dripping with admiration.

"I will get you ready in no time." Her hands are deft and caring as she guides me to a comfortable spot, and I can't help but feel soothed by her presence. August tells me that he will get dressed and finish up some work until I am done, and I nod before he leaves the room.

"Mr. Steele tiene un gusto increíble," she says, giving me a knowing smile as she touches my wet hair. "Let me dry your hair before you catch a cold."

Come, I will style it beautifully for you," she continues, switching to English, aware that I am not fluent in Spanish.

Her presence helps anchor me even more, and she carefully dries and styles my hair, a warm smile draws itself on my lips despite my worry. She then carries a conversation that draws my attention away from my nerves.

"You know, you are the first woman Mr. Steele has ever brought here for leisure," she mentions with a twinkle in her eye, her accent endearing. "And I can tell he cares for you deeply."

I blink, feeling surprised by her words. "The first woman?" I repeat, my shock evident.

She nods, her smile warm. "Yes, my dear. I've known him since he was young, and I've never seen him look at someone the way he looks at you. His eyes sparkle every time he sees you."

"Are you related to him?" I ask, wanting to satisfy my curiosity.

Her eyes soften with reminiscence. "No, I used to own a flower shop nearby," she begins, her voice carrying a hint of nostalgia.

"August would run away from foster care often and come to me, asking for flowers to put on his parents' graves. He was just a lost boy trying to honor his parents' memory."

"He seemed to be just as sweet when he was young as he is now," I remark, trying to not look at how sad the situation is to avoid crying in front of her.

Thirty two year old August still had the same kindness of a child, despite his gruff exterior.

"Oh, he was," she replies with a chuckle. "Stubborn, actually. I used to try and give him the flowers without taking any payment, but he never agreed. No matter how much I insisted, he would clean up my store or carry heavy boxes for me as payment. He had this sense of pride, even in those tough times."

She continues with a smile, "You know, when my flower shop started facing tough times about two years ago, August found out. At first, he offered me money directly, but I refused. I told him I couldn't accept money without doing something in return. And that's when he offered me a position here at the spa. He understood best that I would feel better about accepting his support if I were working for it."

"He's quite the man, isn't he?" She remarks, appearing slightly distracted.

I nod, finding it hard to disagree. "Yes, he's accomplished so much and built an amazing life."

She smiles knowingly. "And have you seen him? Muscles and charisma, the whole package."

I blush, her words catching me off guard. "I mean, he's handsome, yes."

She chuckles, giving me a playful look. "Don't be shy, dear. It's clear he's taken an interest in you."

I fumble over my words, feeling both flattered and embarrassed. "Well, thank you."

She smiles and hands me a mirror, and as I look at my reflection, I can't believe my eyes. She has styled my messy, untamable waves into an incredibly sophisticated bun and I'm not sure how she did it. I thank her warmly, but she just brushes me off, her beautiful smile still persistent on her face before she exclaims, "Oh, dear, you look stunning!" Her eyes twinkle with delight.

Before I can thank her for the third time, there's a knock on the door, and an employee enters, holding a garment bag.

Teresa takes it from her, revealing a beautiful white pant suit with a matching blazer and a crisp white top. Along with it are a pair of elegant heels and delicate gold earrings.

"Mr. Steele instructed us to get this for you," Teresa explains.

I'm in awe of the ensemble, and she encourages me to get dressed and assures me that she will help with my makeup. She warns me to be mindful of my hair before exiting the room and tells me to notify her when I'm done, and I nod.

After carefully donning the elegant white pant suit and securing the delicate gold earrings, I take a deep breath and admire my reflection in the mirror. I can't believe how transformed I look—sophisticated yet comfortable, a far

cry from my usual lab attire.

After I finish, I poke my head out of the door and find Teresa waiting for me. She gasps in delight, her eyes widening as she spins me around to get a full view of the outfit.

"Oh, mi niña, it really suits you!" she exclaims, her words a soft murmur of amazement.

I blush, feeling a mixture of embarrassment and gratitude at her kind words. She says something in Spanish under her breath, and even though I can't catch all the words, I hear the term "pajarito," which I remember means "little bird."

She swiftly switches back to English and gently guides me to a chair. "Sit, my dear. Let me work my magic," she says with a warm smile.

As she expertly applies makeup to enhance my features, the nerves kick back in, and I start to fidget with my hands. She notices my habit and gently slaps my hands away, chuckling softly.

"Hermosa, fidgeting is not good," she chides playfully, and I smile at her before wiping the sweat on my hands with my pants, trying to calm myself.

When Teresa finally finishes with my makeup, she hands me the mirror, and I admire the soft and natural look she has given me. A genuine smile creeps onto my lips, and I turn to thank her, genuinely grateful for her skill and kindness. "Thank you so much," I say, my voice filled with appreciation.

She hugs me warmly, and I reciprocate the gesture, feeling a sense of connection with her despite our brief interaction. As she holds me, she whispers in my ear, her words carrying a mix of emotion.

"Please, take care of August. His heart has been alone for far too long." Her concern touches me, and I nod, feeling a deep sense of responsibility. "I promise," I whisper back, vowing to protect and cherish the man who has come into my life and made it all the better.

26

August



As I engage in a business conversation with my secretary on speaker, my gaze involuntarily drifts towards Layla's approach. She moves with captivating grace; her beauty always catches my attention, no matter what I seem to be doing.

Despite my efforts to maintain composure, a warmth spreads through my

chest. I rub at the sensation, my mind battling against the idea that I am starting to grow feelings for her.

I smile at her as she sits down next to me on the outdoor bench, even as I continue the call. I steal another glance at her features, and I think about how she might be the most alluring woman I have ever laid eyes on.

I start to wrap up with Stacy, and it is as if she senses Layla next to me. Her tone suddenly drips with sickening sweetness as she utters, "I will have them prepare the hotel room just as you liked it last time for our trip to Italy, goodbye August. Sorry, I mean Mr. Steele." Before she hangs up the phone, leaving me with distaste on my face with her antics.

If only she weren't so good at her job, I would have fired her ages ago.

Layla removes her head from my shoulder before turning to look at me with a scowl.

"Who is she? What does she mean by that?" She fires questions at me. I know that a normal reaction would be for me to feel anger at her lack of trust in me, but for some reason, I am not feeling that at all. I actually enjoy her jealousy.

I smile gently at her, placing a reassuring hand on her knee. "Just my secretary, Layla. She was talking about our last business trip and planning the next one; we had and will have separate hotel rooms, of course," I assure her. Her features soften slightly but still have a twinge of discomfort. "Say the

word and she is fired," I state firmly, looking into Layla's eyes with an intensity that makes sure she knows that I mean every word I say. Her gaze softens as she processes my words, and a hint of gratitude glimmers in her eyes.

She seems to contemplate my offer before letting out a sigh and shaking her head gently. "Thank you, Auggie. I appreciate that, but I trust you. I don't think it's necessary," she replies. While her jealousy greatly amuses me, I still feel the pesky warmth return to my chest at her unwarranted and wrongly placed trust. I take her hand in mine, feeling a strange mixture of protectiveness and warmth.

"Ready to go?" I ask, noticing a somber look in her eyes. She nods, her posture slightly slouched. Holding her hand firmly, I lead her towards the car. With a gentle touch, I open the car door for her and assist with her seatbelt. As I lean in closer, I whisper softly in her ear, "I got you."

A hint of a smile tugs at the corner of her lips, and she gives me a quick peck on the cheek before leaning into her seat and fidgeting with her hands.

I separate them before climbing into the car and driving off to her father's house. I ask her to call Lily and to give me the phone, and she nods. She grabs her phone with shaky hands and dials Lily, putting it on speaker. She

plays with her hair while the phone rings, another telltale sign of her nerves.

Lily answers the phone, and a slew of questions for Layla follow, overwhelming her even more.

"Enough," I snap, my patience wearing thin. "Tell Arthur to expect us for dinner now." There is a tense silence on the other end, and then Lily's voice trembles with worry. "August, please reconsider. If you provoke him, Layla's life—"

"Is under my protection," I interrupt, my words cold as ice. "Notify Arthur, and don't even think about questioning me on this." I can sense her hesitation before she finally relents. "Fine, I'll do it. But if anything goes wrong, I will have your head on a platter." With that, she ends the call, and my jaw clenches tight.

Lily's voice brings a sour taste to my mouth; I heavily dislike her. I can't fathom how someone as pure and kind-hearted as Layla could be related to her. Layla is innocent, her spirit untouched by the shadows that have consumed Lily. The contrast between them is stark, and I find myself questioning how Layla could come from the same bloodline as that devilish family.

I glance at Layla beside me, I notice the glistening of tears in her eyes. My heart clenches at the sight, anger boiling within me at her tears. Swiftly, I brush the tears away with my thumb, my touch gentle yet firm. I keep my

attention on the road, but my hand remains on her thigh, hoping to reassure her. She puts her hand on top of mine and leans her head against the window, probably trying to distract herself with the scenery.

The tension is so thick, it could be cut with a knife as we arrive at the house. Layla's grip on the door handle tightens, her fingers trembling with unease.

She turns to me, her eyes pleading, silently begging me to reconsider and drive away. In response, I bring her hand to my lips and press a gentle kiss, my eyes conveying to her that there is no backing out.

As we step out of the car, I keep my hand on the small of her back, a subtle support as she hesitantly moves toward the imposing figure that storms out of the house.

In a surge of anger, Arthur, Layla's father, abruptly leaves the house and approaches us with a furrowed brow and a thunderous expression. Lily runs after him, a mix of panic and desperation in her eyes, while Oliver Davis, her fiancé, waddles behind her, his unhealthy figure not helping him to run after her or stand beside his future father-in-law.

I can sense Layla's fear, her steps faltering as her father takes menacing steps towards her. I squeeze her hand reassuringly, silently urging her to stay strong.

Arthur's anger is a fierce blaze, and as Layla steps backward and closer to me, he abruptly moves to stand in front of her, his accusatory finger pointing

at her with venomous rage. "You! How dare you?" He barks with fury, a vein pulsating in his forehead.

Before he can continue his bullshit, I swiftly intervene, seizing his pointed finger and twisting it with a quick, calculated movement. A guttural scream of agony escapes Arthur's lips as he clutches his injured hand.

His furious eyes flicker to his bodyguards, and he commands them to attack. Yet, they remain still and instead subtly form a wall around me and Layla for protection, a sudden realization crosses his face – the balance of power has shifted.

Panic edges into his features as his trembling hand seeks the gun concealed in his waistband. I anticipate his move and deliver a sharp kick, sending the weapon spiraling out of his reach and into the nearby bushes.

Arthur's eyes widen in terror as he analyzes his predicament. Oliver who had labored his way to the scene by waddling like a pregnant penguin, finally manages to catch up. With a grating voice, he musters the courage to speak up, though his stuttered words barely register, "Hey, you can't do that, man..." His shaky attempt at asserting authority only seems to amplify the dominance of my presence.

I shoot him a disbelieving glance, an unspoken message conveyed through the intensity of my gaze, causing him to involuntarily shrink back, his hand

nervously rubbing his neck.

Ignoring his feeble protest, I focus my attention back on Arthur. The air is crackling as I arch an incredulous eyebrow at him, challenging him to do anything I do not like.

"How about that dinner then, Arthur?" I growl, my voice low and edged with an unyielding command. Arthur gulps with fear as he nods with a hint of desperation, stumbling back towards the house. The rest of us follow suit.

As Arthur and Oliver step into the house, followed by two bodyguards to ensure they do not do anything stupid, the door swings ajar.

Lily, Layla, and I linger outside momentarily, as the cousins seem to want a moment and there is no way in hell I am leaving Layla alone in this place. Lily envelops Layla in a tight hug, her relief and concern palpable in the embrace, bridging the gap between them.

Yet, Lily's gaze shifts to me, finally analyzing my features for the first time it seems, and her complexion drains of color. A hand instinctively covers her mouth as her recognition registers, a memory of her failed seduction at the party flooding her expression with horror. She sways, seemingly overcome by the realization.

"Layla, I... I can't..," Lily stammers, her eyes wide with shock.

Layla looks at her with confusion. "What's wrong, Lily? Are you okay?"

Lily manages a nod, but her unease remains evident. "Yeah, I'm just... a bit

dizzy, that's all."

Breaking the hug, Lily attempts to regain her composure before entering the house, leaving Layla puzzled and casting a questioning glance my way.

I meet her gaze with a casual shrug, purposefully feigning unawareness. If I tell her about it, I will have to expose her to a lot of darkness she didn't need to know, and I am not doing that.

I look into her beautiful brown eyes, my voice steady as I ask her, "Ready to face this, Layla?"

Her eyes meet mine, the majority of her previous fear replaced by determination. "Yes, August. Let's do this."

27

August



We enter the house, the dining room greets us with an opulent display of dishes spread across the table. Various meals are meticulously arranged, it is likely Arthur thinks that will help his case.

The atmosphere is heavy with his fear, and the two bodyguards are standing a couple feet away from him but close enough to ensure his nerves, always aware of their presence.

He sits at the table's edge, his anxiety evident through the beads of sweat that trickle down his forehead, while Lily, appearing composed yet uneasy, occupies the seat next to her fiancé who seems on the verge of tears.

Guiding Layla to her place, I settle beside her with a calculated casualness, akin to how a king might command his throne. Spreading my legs slightly and maintaining a straight-backed posture.

A self-assured smirk plays on my lips, asserting my dominance. It's a subtle power move, a nonverbal assertion of my authority that doesn't escape Arthur's notice.

His clenched jaw and narrowed gaze reveal his frustration, but he wisely chooses to keep his objections to himself.

With deliberate precision, I spear a piece of steak with my fork, the metal scraping against the plate, a sound that seems to echo in the charged atmosphere.

Placing the meat onto my plate, I fix Arthur with a predatory gaze, my eyes locked onto his like a predator assessing its prey.

"So..." I begin, cutting a portion of the steak with my knife, the blade slicing through the flesh effortlessly. "I've been informed that your hands wandered to places they had no business being," I growl, my voice dripping with a

dangerous undercurrent.

Raising the cut piece of meat to my mouth, I chew slowly, aiming to cause him stress with my silence before I speak again, like the calm before the storm.

My unwavering stare bores into Arthur, a silent challenge that seems to unnerve him, evident in the clenching and unclenching of his fists.

Pouring a glass of wine with calculated nonchalance, I address him with a deadly tone, each word laced with a threat. "Did you dare lay a hand on my woman, Arthur?" His body language changes, his anger barely concealed as he stares at Layla with resentment, as if he would attack her right now if I were not present, over my dead body is he laying a finger on her again.

Lily seems completely absorbed in our conversation, leaning forward as if she can't resist the pull of my words. On the other hand, her fiancé is more focused on devouring his meal, greedily stuffing his face with the food laid out before him.

I shoot a glare at Arthur, a clear message that I hold the upper hand. The atmosphere is tense, and I don't mince words. "Apologize to her, now," I state firmly, my voice cutting through the silence.

Arthur's attention shifts to Layla, his face reflecting his inner struggle. He opens and closes his mouth several times, his expression a mix of venom and bitterness.

Eventually, he can't contain his spite and mutters under his breath, "You couldn't keep your legs closed, could you?" The room grows still, the weight of his insult hanging in the air, while my clenched jaw and narrowed eyes convey the simmering anger beneath my controlled exterior.

The sound of sobs fills the room, the heavy atmosphere punctuated by Layla's tearful cries. Without hesitation, I pull the gun from my waist, aiming it at Arthur with rage. "No one disrespects my future wife, especially in my presence," I assert, my words cutting through the air like a blade.

Arthur's face drains of color, his hands trembling as they rise in a futile attempt to defend himself against the deadly weapon pointed in his direction. His breathing becomes erratic, and panic dances in his eyes. Shifting my attention to Layla, I see her bowed head and tear-streaked cheeks.

Leaning closer, I whisper to her while still keeping my focus on Arthur, "Raise your head high, little dove. My woman demands respect wherever she goes." She meets my gaze, nods in agreement, and wipes her tears away before she lifts her head and glares at Arthur.

I notice how Lily seems to be leaning in even more, captivated by the scene

before her. Her eyes shine with something dark, and she leans so far forward it's as if she's practically lying on the table, her eyes shining with a strange, almost unsettling enthusiasm. Her gaze is fixated on the gun pointed at Arthur, and there's a glint of something wild in her eyes.

It's as if she's been waiting for this moment, her excitement flickering through her gaze like a rapid flame, eager to witness the final outcome. Eagerly anticipating every detail, as if she can't wait for the trigger to be pulled and for Arthur to finally be dead. I look over to her fiancé and find him cowering below a chair like a chicken. I shake my head before directing my attention back to Arthur.

"Apologize. Now," I bark at him, waving my gun in his face. He immediately starts spewing out a string of apologies, each one more creative than the next. I cannot help but notice that his gaze remains on me and I yell, "I said apologize to her, not me!"

He forces himself to look at her, his disdain still clear, but he spews out the same bullshit he was saying seconds ago in a trembling tone and she rubs her arm and looks away, clearly uncomfortable. But she keeps her head held high and I feel pride in my chest.

"Do you accept his apology, love?" I ask her, and she looks at me for a moment before nodding, as if she wants it to be done with already.

Leaning in, I press a gentle kiss to her cheek, my words for her alone. "You truly are as innocent and sweet as a little dove," I whisper, my affection for her that I try to bury evident in my tone.

However, my focus shifts back to Arthur, my expression hardening. "But I do not accept his apology," I grunt, my anger still simmering in my veins.

Placing a reassuring hand on Layla's, I whisper to her in a gentle tone, "Go pack what you need, baby. I don't want you to see this." I watch as she hesitates, her eyes briefly reflecting horror before she nods and hurries upstairs.

Turning back to Arthur, my gaze bores into his, hate and rage clear in their depths. He is terrified, and I allow myself a moment of grim satisfaction as I witness his trembling legs betraying him, causing him to collapse to the floor, a stain spreading on his pants. The panic in his eyes meets my unyielding dominance, a stark reminder of my power in this confrontation.

As I observe Arthur collapse onto the ground, his trembling body unable to support his overwhelming fear, a strange satisfaction washes over me. Part of it is the desire to seek justice for my family, and another part is the need to make him pay for daring to touch Layla. I relish in the turmoil that consumes him, finding dark pleasure in his torment.

I walk up to him purposefully, my gaze unwavering and determined, and he attempts to crawl away in fear. Using the back of my gun, I strike his temple, the impact making a sharp thud. He crumbles further, blood mingling with the white floor, as he lies passed out in a puddle of his own blood and piss.

His unconscious state is only temporary, unfortunately, a small taste of the punishment he deserves. I feel a twisted sense of fulfillment seeing him injured and defeated.

He will survive to face the consequences of his actions, even though I wish he wouldn't. But I know that it's for a reason, there are fates worse than death, and I am going to show him all of them. The feeling of having him at my mercy eases the burn in my chest slightly.

Lily approaches me cautiously, her voice carrying a twisted hope as she asks if Arthur is dead.

I meet her gaze with a steady look and respond, "No." Her disappointment is evident, and she glances towards her fiancé, still huddled in fear beneath the chair, oblivious to the chaos unfolding around him. Shaking her head in dismay, she takes hesitant steps towards Arthur's unconscious form on the floor.

A sudden, forceful kick from Lily strikes Arthur's side, full of hate that I did not expect. It is an unexpected sight, one that leaves me questioning if I know

anything about this sick family once more.

Lily then turns and runs upstairs, probably heading to Layla's room. I watch her retreating figure before rubbing my temples, feeling a headache coming.

A few seconds later, Lily rushes back down the stairs, a surge of anger propelling her forward. Without hesitation, she aims a swift, forceful kick at Arthur again, this time targeting his dick.

The impact is met with a sharp, pained groan from him, even in unconsciousness, and she wastes no time in turning and heading back up the stairs again. I grunt at what I am witnessing, this family truly is messed up.

My gaze shifts to the cowering fiancé who remains hidden beneath the chair, seemingly dissociated from the chaos surrounding him. My anger surges again, and with determined strides, I approach him. I tear the chair away with a swift, sharp motion, my frustration evident in my eyes and the tense lines of my face.

"Stand up and behave like a man," I shout at him, my voice laced with irritation and disbelief. The sight of his tear-stained cheeks does little to elicit any sympathy from me. With a heavy shake of my head, I turn away from him, unable to fathom his behavior.

With disgust, I make my way through the dimly lit corridor of Arthur's mansion. My steps are purposeful as I approach Arthur's office. The heavy wooden door stands before me, and with a swift, forceful kick, the door splinters and swings open, revealing the darkness within.

A dim desk lamp casts eerie shadows across the room, and the faint scent of cigar smoke lingers in the air.

My eyes scan the room, and there, hidden in the recesses of his meticulously organized office, I find it— a trove of paperwork that incriminates him beyond imagination.

The documents reveal a sordid web of illegal activities, from drug trafficking to human trafficking, all carefully documented in black and white. The evidence is damning, it is exactly what I need. Arthur's double life, hidden behind the facade of a wealthy businessman, is laid bare.

I take the documents with me before heading back to the dining room, pacing back and forth, my impatience growing as I await Layla's return.

When I look at Oliver again, my contempt only deepens; there he is, his face

streaked with tears one moment, and then back to greedily devouring his meal the next. He holds a steak in one hand and a baked potato in the other, he offers me a piece of the meat. I simply shake my head, unable to comprehend the absurdity of the situation.

Layla finally descends the stairs with a big backpack on her shoulders, her gaze catching Arthur's figure on the floor. A gasp escapes her lips, and I swiftly close the distance between us, enveloping her in a protective hug.

I guide her away from the distressing sight, and as I take her bag from her, I can feel the tension in her shoulders begin to ease. She shares a heartfelt hug with Lily, exchanging goodbyes and a kiss on the cheek before they part ways. With her hand now resting in mine, we make our way to the car. She settles into the seat, her eyes looking up at me, a question in her gaze.

"Are we going home?" she asks, her words resonating warmly within me. I can't help but smile at the thought that she considers my home as hers now. Though I try to suppress the feeling, and deny its existence.

My nod confirms her assumption, and a radiant grin spreads across her face. She gives me a small peck on the lips before she leans her head against the window, exhaustion taking over. I feel a rush of affection for her that I cannot stifle. She drifts off to sleep, and I battle with the idea of my heart yearning for her the entire trip home.

Layla

As the car glides along the road, I slowly stir from my sleep, the drowsiness lifting as the surroundings become more familiar. It's just a few minutes before we will arrive at August's house.

I blink my eyes open and smile slightly at August. My thoughts race, reflecting on the intense moments that occurred not long ago; I still have not processed anything.

We pull into the driveway and come to a stop, I feel a renewed sense of alertness. I reach for my bag, ready to step into the house and change my clothes for more comfortable ones. But before I can even grasp the handle, August's hand gently covers mine, stopping me in my tracks.

I look up at him, our eyes meeting, and his eyes search mine, as if wanting to know what I am feeling. I myself still do not know.

"Let me take that for you," he says softly, his voice soft and gentle. He retrieves my bag and steps out of the car, holding the door open for me. I

follow suit and get out, taking in the sight of his house. I can never get used to how beautiful his house is; I always have to admire it before stepping in.

We walk side by side to the entrance, my steps keeping pace with his. Once inside, I turn to him and wrap my arms around him in a tight hug. His embrace is strong and comforting, anchoring me through the storm of my emotions.

"Thank you," I whisper, trying to convey my appreciation. Despite the unknown that lies ahead, his actions have shown me a side of him that I hadn't fully grasped before. He has been my protector, standing by my side when I needed it most. There is no denying that the side of him I have seen today is dark, grueling, and unforgiving. Yet, I don't seem to mind. On the contrary, I love it.

He pulls back slightly, his gaze locking onto mine. "You don't have to thank me, Layla. I didn't do anything that I didn't want to do."

His words are harsh and carry a hint of something I can't decipher. I shrug his tone off, acquitting it to the rough day he has had. My heart feels full of him; having him as someone I can trust is a lifeline. The unknown future still looms before me, but in this moment, I feel safe, knowing that I am not facing it alone.

We go to the living room and get seated comfortably next to the bird enclosure. We sit side by side, the aroma of the freshly brewed coffee I made

filling the air.

The sounds of birds from the enclosure nearby soothe us, providing us with the first sense of calm since the dinner. I look at August, my heart racing slightly as I prepare to discuss the uncertain path ahead.

As I take a sip of the warm coffee, I can't help but let out a small sigh. "The birds are the most thing I look forward to coming here," I murmur, looking intently at the aviary.

August nods in agreement, his gaze locking onto mine. "Absolutely. It's mine too."

I look down into my coffee cup, swirling the liquid absentmindedly. "So, what do we do now?" I ask nervously.

His expression softens, and he reaches out to touch my hand. "We do whatever you want, Layla. Your safety and well-being are my priority."

A small smile tugs at my lips as his words resonate with me. "Well," I begin, starting to feel the excitement for the new life I am going to build for myself, "I've been thinking about buying an apartment."

He frowns, his brow furrowing. "An apartment? Why would you want that when you have a place here with me?"

I shake my head gently, meeting his gaze with sincerity. "It's not about that, August. I want to make sure that we make this decision not because I need somewhere to stay away from my father, not just to solve one of my endless

problems. I want us to be in a good place before we make a decision like moving in together. I want us to make this decision when we truly feel like it is time to do that in our relationship."

He lets out a sigh, his expression conflicted. "I understand your point, Layla. But I want you here, I love having you here."

I bite my lip, understanding his point of view but also holding onto my conviction.

"I know you do, and I love it here too. But I want to do this right. Moving in together should come at a time of love, not just out of necessity."

He nods slowly, his eyes locked onto mine. "Okay," he says, his voice tinged with reluctance. "But promise me that you'll stay at my place for now. Let me ensure your safety before we make any more decisions."

I consider his words carefully, sensing his genuine concern. After a moment, I nod in agreement.

"Alright, I'll stay with you, August. But just until we know I'm safe."

Still, I am dead set on buying an apartment, but I didn't tell him that as I had a feeling he would think I am rushing, even if I am not going to move into it now, I want it. I never had anything to my name, anything that I could call mine. That is going to change now.

He smiles faintly, his fingers tracing circles on the back of my hand. "Deal." As we finish our coffee and the birds' melodies envelop us, I can't shake the feeling of excitement that is growing in me despite the uncertainty of my future. I am going to build a life for myself, write it however I want. No one will ever dictate how it should look like. I will finally get to live.

29

Layla

I excuse myself from the living room, telling August that I need to unpack my stuff. As I walk down the hallway to the bedroom with my bag on my shoulder, each step feels like a leap towards a new chapter in my life. The bag I carry in my hand seems to carry the weight of my decisions, both old and new.

Inside the guest bedroom, I close the door behind me and place the bag gently on the bed. The soft light filters through the curtains, and I close them, wanting complete privacy as I process my funds. The funds that will help give me my desired future, my canvas to paint with my own choices and

desires.

Carefully, I unzip the bag and start emptying its contents. Clothes spill out onto the bed in a haphazard pile, but I only brought some of the clothes that were in my old wardrobe.

The one who got that wardrobe was a different me, one that was dying to adhere to father's expectations and desires. So, I only pack necessities to use until I can shop a new wardrobe for myself. I want to be true to myself, to embrace my own sense of style.

Among the clothes, my fingers brush against a smaller bag nestled in the corner of the larger one. A rush of emotion courses through me as I hold it. It's a bag of jewelry, delicate and precious, a gift from my mother before she passed away when I was just a child.

Lily had given me this bag of jewelry on my sixteenth birthday, along with the instruction to use it only in times of need. And now, as I sit on the bed surrounded by these memories, it feels like one of those times has arrived.

I unzip the bag and carefully spread out the jewelry before me. Each piece probably holds a memory for my mother; it's the only thing that connects me to her. But I have to sell them; while it breaks my heart, it's something that has to be done.

I close my eyes and send a prayer to her, thanking her for thinking of leaving something of value to me in case times got rough.

But there's something more in the bag. As I explore its contents, I discover a stack of envelopes, each containing a substantial amount of cash. My heart skips a beat as I realize that Lily must have put them there in secret before I left.

It's a gesture beyond measure, a cushion that will ensure my comfort on the hard path that I have chosen. I know that Lily was rich; she did a lot of business with father, but I wasn't stupid enough not to think that this would not cause a dent in her pocket; she is so selfless.

Tears well up in my eyes as I think back to all the things Lily has done for me; she was always by my side no matter what. I remind myself to call and thank her early morning, but no words I could ever say will be anything she deserved; she deserved more than anything I will ever try to tell or give her.

With a breath, I wipe away my tears and carefully place the jewelry back in its bag. I close it gently and look at the envelopes of cash again before quickly stuffing them back in the bag and hiding it under the bed, leaving it for tomorrow to deal with.

The gears in my head turn, and I reach for my phone, dialing John. I tap my fingers anxiously on the phone, my heart racing while I wait for John to answer. On the first ring, his voice comes through, and a wave of relief washes over me.

"Hey, John," I greet.

"Layla, are you okay?" he asks, his concern evident in his tone.

Taking a deep breath, I reply, "I'm fine, really. There's a lot to talk about, but I'll fill you in later. Where have you been?"

"Okay," he says, his voice softening. "Where have I been? Well, your father's not too thrilled with me right now. He blames me for letting you escape. So, I am laying low for now."

My heart sinks, and I apologize, my voice laden with guilt.

John's immediate response is to shush me gently. "Layla, none of this is your fault. You did what you had to do to protect yourself."

Tears prick at my eyes, grateful for his understanding. "Thank you, John. I mean it."

"Of course," he replies, his voice reassuring.

"Listen, I need a favor," I mutter, my tone more serious now. "But it's important that you keep it a secret, even from August."

There's a pause on the other end of the line, and I hold my breath, waiting for his answer. I know how complicated things are, how his loyalty is divided.

After a few moments, he speaks, his voice firm. "I promise I will."

Relief washes over me, and I let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you, John. You have no idea how much this means to me."

"But promise me in return that this won't put you in danger," he says, his concern evident.

I nod, even though he couldn't see me. "I promise."

He sighs audibly, and I could almost picture his expression, god I have missed him. "Fine. What do you need me to do?"

"I need you to meet me tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock," I say.

"Tell August you want to take me to the university as a guise."

There's a pause, and I could practically hear his internal struggle. Finally, he relents. "Okay, I'll do it. But you owe me." He says jokingly, but joke or not, there is nothing that I wouldn't do for him.

I chuckle softly. "I know, I know. You're a lifesaver, John."

His voice takes on a playful tone. "You're going to be the death of me, Layla."

My laughter bubbles out of me. "I'll make it up to you, I promise."

"Alright, take care of yourself," he says sincerely.

"Thanks again, John. Really," I say.

"Just be careful, Layla," he reminds me.

My voice softens, and a hint of vulnerability creeps in as I hurriedly tell him what I'm feeling before he could hang up. "John, I need you to know something... You've been the only parental figure I've had in my life, and I appreciate you more than words can say."

There's a heavy pause on the other end for a while before his voice comes out as a sigh, like he's trying to keep his emotions in check. "Layla, you have no

idea how much that means to me."

Tears prick at my eyes again as I continue, "I've always looked up to you and felt safe with you. You've been better of a father to me than my biological one."

His voice wavers slightly as he replies, "Layla, you're not just some assignment or responsibility to me. I care about you deeply. You're like a daughter to me."

A lump forms in my throat, and I have to swallow hard to steady my voice. "I love you, John. I want you to know that."

There's a long pause, and I can tell that he's struggling to keep his composure.

"I love you too, Layla. More than you know."

"Thank you." I say, taking a deep breath to calm myself.

"Take care, Layla," he says softly, his voice full of genuine concern.

With a trembling smile, I whisper, "You too, John."

Layla

I wake up in a daze, my surroundings unfamiliar for a moment. Slowly, the realization dawns on me that I'm not in the guest bedroom where I fell asleep. Instead, I find myself nestled in August's arms, his warmth enveloping me.

Confusion clouds my mind as I try to piece together how I ended up here. The notion that he carried me here to sleep next to me warms my chest and sends a blush to my face.

Carefully extricating myself from his arms, I tiptoe to the bathroom to

freshen up. I glance back at him as I leave the room, noticing that he hasn't stirred. It's unusual; usually, his reflexes are sharp, and he wakes the second I move away from his arms.

After washing up, I head to the kitchen with a small smile tugging at my lips. He must have been really exhausted to be sleeping this deeply. I decide to take the opportunity to prepare breakfast for us.

As I move around the kitchen, the rhythmic sounds of cooking fill the air, and a sense of comfort washes over me. I'm getting used to this—being in his house, cooking together, and just enjoying each other's company.

I set a plate of pancakes on the dining table along with some fresh fruits and two steaming cups of coffee. Glancing at the clock, I realize it's still early in the morning. It seems August needs the rest, and I'm content to let him sleep a little longer.

Sitting at the table, my thoughts drift to all the things I have to do today. I'm going to look at apartments, open up a bank account, and shop for new clothes.

I know that buying an apartment in secret from August is bad, but I don't want him to go through the hassle of looking at apartments with me. I know August too well not to think that he wouldn't tag along to help. I'm also certain that he thinks I'm rushing.

Lost in my thoughts, I don't notice the time passing until I hear a soft, groggy

voice behind me. "Good morning," August's voice breaks through my reverie, and I turn to find him standing there, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Morning," I greet him with a smile, appreciating the sight of his ruffled hair and the hint of vulnerability that sleepiness brings out in him.

His gaze sweeps over the spread on the table, and a surprised expression crosses his face. "You made breakfast?"

I chuckle softly. "Yeah, thought I'd give it a try this time."

He walks over to me, his gaze lingering on me as if he's trying to read something in my expression. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," I reply, smiling brightly at him.

As we sit down to enjoy breakfast together, the sound of rain and birds fills the air, making me smile even wider, feeling content.

I can't help but playfully tease August as I sit across from him at the dining table, savoring the last bites of my pancake. "You know, Auggie," I begin mischievously, "I've noticed a pattern. You seem to have a knack for picking me up and carrying me to your room while I'm sleeping."

He gives me a sidelong glance, his expression composed. "It's not a pattern. It's a practical solution."

I arch an eyebrow, asking with curiosity. "Oh really? And what's the practical reason behind it?"

He doesn't break his serious demeanor, meeting my gaze squarely. "You get

cold really easily. Your feet turn into blocks of ice. This way, you can use my body heat to stay warm."

I blink, surprised by the weird reason he gives for carrying me. I break down into fits of laughter; I'm sure this isn't the real reason. It's toasty in the house; this seems to be what he's telling himself to justify it.

His gaze softens as he hears me laugh, his lips curving slightly. "Besides, I like having you close."

The warmth in my cheeks spreads, and I clear my throat, trying to regain my composure. "Well, if you need to have me close to sleep properly, I suppose I can't argue with that."

His tone turns more serious, and he leans forward slightly. "Actually, there's something else I've been thinking about."

I tilt my head, intrigued. "What is it?"

He holds my gaze, his eyes unwavering. "I expect my girlfriend to share my room with me, my bed as well."

I blink, the weight of his words sinking in. "Girlfriend?" I repeat; this is the first time I've heard him call me his girlfriend, and my cheeks flush.

He looks at me with a raised eyebrow. "Yes, girlfriend. Is that a problem?"

I laugh, the relief and happiness bubbling up within me. "No, not at all. It's just... I guess I've never heard you say it before."

He chuckles softly. "Well, get used to it."

"I promise I'll move my things into your room when John returns me from university today," I tell him, my hand patting his strong thigh as reassurance. His brows furrow slightly at the mention of John's name. "John?" he repeats, a hint of curiosity in his voice.

I nod, feeling the need to explain. "Yeah, I called him yesterday to pick me up."

His scowl deepens, and I can sense his irritation. "I can drive you," he mutters, his annoyance evident. It seems that Auggie dislikes anything and anyone that could take away from the time I spend with him, I think with amusement.

Leaning down, I press a gentle kiss to his cheek, hoping to ease his irritation. "I know, but it's just for today. I haven't seen John in a while, and I kind of miss him."

He sighs, his expression softening as he looks at me. "I understand."

I peck his cheek again, offering a soothing smile. "It's just for today, August." Leaving him with a final peck on the cheek, I turn to head towards the guest room to get dressed.

I hastily don a comfortable sweatpants set and throw on a loose coat to stay warm. My hair is gathered into a messy bun on the crown of my head, not caring much to tame it without someone nagging at me.

With a touch of concealer, a swipe of mascara, a hint of blush to enliven my pale cheeks, and a coat of Chap Stick, I feel ready to face the day. I grab the bag of cash under the guest bed, securing it tightly before putting it on my shoulders.

August is busy on his laptop, so I give him a quick goodbye before stepping out.

As I exit the house, John is waiting, and I can't help but embrace him tightly. I tell him how much I missed him, and he tells me the same. Climbing into the car, we set off for an address that had caught my eye on Facebook the previous night. There was an ad for a cozy apartment there; it spoke to me, and I do not know why. I was incredibly curious to check it out. I knew that it was in a nice and safe neighborhood, and I pray that I will like it.

Layla

"Hey, John," I begin as we settle into the car, "I'm actually thinking of buying an apartment. That's where we're headed now."

John turns his gaze towards me, clearly interested. "Oh? Why are you keeping it a secret from August?"

I hesitate for a moment, debating how much to share. "I don't want him to feel pressured to help me with the process of getting one; he's a busy man. And... I kind of feel like he might think it's rushing things. He thinks it's better to move in with him for the time being and think about the apartment later. But I want it really bad."

John nods thoughtfully, absorbing my words. He remains quiet for a while, mulling over my thoughts. His silence intimidates me, and I quickly ask him,

“Do you think it’s rushed? Do you think it's better to wait?”

He looks over at me for a moment before turning his attention back towards the road, asking me in a calming tone, “What do you think, Layla?”

I sigh, looking out of the window as the scenery blurs past. "Honestly, I'm not entirely sure. But I've never really had something that's truly mine. I've never owned a place before, and I just want a space where I feel safe, where I can be myself. The house I grew up in never felt like home, and I want to create a place that's entirely mine, a place that I can always go to if things go south. I want there to be a home in my name. I feel like it's an amazing first step into the new life I want to create for myself."

John nods again, his expression softening. "I see where you're coming from now. I think it's a wonderful idea."

I smile, feeling a weight lift off my shoulders as he understands my perspective. "Thank you, John. Your support means a lot."

He grins at me, his eyes warm. "You're finally spreading your wings. I'm proud of you."

A rush of warmth fills my heart at his words. "Thank you, really."

The rest of the drive is filled with a comfortable silence. As we arrive at the address, I gaze out of the car window and feel a sense of tranquility wash over me. The neighborhood has an inviting charm, with well-maintained gardens and a cozy atmosphere that makes me feel right at home.

We approach the building, and the warm welcome from the realtor puts me at ease. With a sense of anticipation, we make our way to the apartment on the third floor by going up the stairs, since the elevator is out of service, but it's getting fixed soon which is a relief. As the realtor unlocks the door, I hold my breath in excitement. The door swings open, revealing the space that could potentially become my haven.

The living room is cozy and inviting, adorned with neutral colors that exude a sense of calmness. A television stands against one wall, and I can already picture myself curled up on the couch, enjoying quiet evenings. Moving through the apartment, the bedroom surprises me with its size. It feels spacious compared to the size of the apartment, and it has a spacious bed, perfect for my insomnia.

But it's the bathroom that truly steals my heart. The sight of a bathtub has me feeling like a child on Christmas morning, and when I notice the jets in the tub, I can't contain my excitement. I let out a delighted squeal, causing John to chuckle beside me.

The kitchen is practical and organized, equipped with everything one would need. A sophisticated dining table adds an elegant touch to the space. As I take in each corner of the apartment, I feel an overwhelming sense of contentment. It might not be the grandest of spaces, but it's exactly what I need – a place that feels like mine.

Turning to John, I can't help but smile. "I think I love it here."

He grins back at me. "It's a charming place, Layla. And seeing how excited you are, I have a feeling it's a perfect fit."

John turns to me, his brows slightly furrowed. "Would you like to explore a few more apartments before making your final decision?"

I shake my head, a sense of certainty settling within me. "No, John. I know it might not be the most practical decision, but this place... it just feels right. I can imagine making it my own, filling it with things I love. I'm attached to it already."

He nods, understanding my sentiment. Walking over to the realtor, John inquires about the elevator situation, making sure it will be fixed soon. He then delves into the financial details, asking about the cost of the apartment. As he receives the answer, he maintains a composed expression, even though I know he's absorbing every bit of information.

Turning back to me, John raises an eyebrow. "And how would you like to pay for it?"

"Cash," I reply firmly. "In full, right now. I don't want to deal with loans or mortgages."

His surprise is evident, but he eventually shrugs. "Well, it's your call."

The realtor seems ecstatic with my decision, and we discuss the logistics of the payment and the legal paperwork. We settle on a meeting time for the

transaction and the necessary formalities. As the details are ironed out, a mix of excitement and nervousness wells up inside me. This is a big step, a significant investment in my future, but I can't ignore how right it feels.

I glance around the apartment once more, envisioning the life I could create within its walls. I imagine the painting I would hang in the living room, the bookshelf that I will add, and all the cute mugs I will fill my kitchen with.

Finalizing the deal with the realtor leaves me elated.

John and I return to the car, and I ask him to take me to the bank. With his help, I establish a new account where I put some of my funds, every single action I have taken today freeing me from my father's control more and more.

We then embark on a shopping spree, a truly liberating experience. For the first time, I can choose clothes without the weight of my father's expectations or the pressure of fitting into our elitist circle.

John drops me off at August's house, arms laden with bags filled with my newfound wardrobe. Expressing my gratitude, I plant a thankful kiss on his cheek before entering the house. Upon my arrival, I notice August is absent, most likely absorbed in his work. A playful grin forms on my lips as I go to his room to organize my clothes; I'm going to fulfill my promise and move to his room.

I open the door to his room and step inside; I head to the closet and neatly

hang my clothes next to his, admiring how well the combination of our garments looks together. It's a tangible representation of how our lives are becoming intertwined. The thought makes my heart flutter with happiness.

Arranging my belongings brings a soothing sense of order to my thoughts. I stow my legal documents and secure the bag of money and precious jewels in an empty drawer.

A wave of security washes over me, a feeling I hadn't known in my father's oppressive household. Eventually, I nestle into the freshly-made bed, my head resting on August's pillow. The scent of him envelops me, and I close my eyes, imagining him sleeping next to me. I fight off the urge to call him, not wanting to disturb him while he works, especially since I distracted him long enough these past few days.

Lying there, I can't help but marvel at how my insomnia seems to vanish when I'm not sleeping under that oppressive roof. Thoughts of my new apartment and the boundless opportunities it holds fill me with hope and excitement, emotions I hadn't experienced in far too long.

August



I move through the dimly lit room, hoping that I finally get enough evidence to avoid ever stepping foot into these events again. This isn't my world, but I move through it with the precision of a predator navigating unfamiliar territory.

In this realm of power and deception, showing even a little bit of weakness is dangerous; it's like a little drop of blood in shark-infested waters. They will eat you alive.

My eyes sweep across the room, a hawk searching for its prey among the sea of masks and polished façades. Conversations held in the corners of the room are laden with hidden meanings, deals struck with a mere nod and a handshake. Deals that are the epitome of human depravity, each one more wicked than the other.

Amidst this orchestrated chaos, my attention is drawn like a magnet to one figure standing at the center of it all. Arthur. His posture radiates control, but

when his eyes meet mine, I catch a glimpse of the cracks in his armor. Beneath the façade of invincibility, vulnerability simmers. He hides the tremble in his hand by putting it in his pocket and wipes the few drops of sweat that appear on his upper lip. He can't show weakness; hence, he can't react to me.

Step by confident step, I move closer towards him, heading to his table with a smirk on my face. Arthur's smile is a practiced curve, a mask that barely conceals the tension beneath. "August," his voice, a low murmur, carries layers of caution.

My lips quirk in response, choosing my words carefully. "Curiosity tends to lead us to places we never thought we'd venture."

Our exchange is a conversation within a conversation, each word a puzzle piece in a game only we understand. Leaning in, I hold Arthur's gaze, a silent challenge in my eyes. "Curiosity often comes at a price." He tells me, displeased.

Our unspoken understanding hangs heavy in the air. He tries to appear nonchalant, relaxed even. Yet, I see through it, glimpsing the distress that churns beneath the surface.

"You seem better than when I last saw you, Arthur." I chuckle darkly, and it looks like a blood vessel is about to pop in his eye. His eye constantly twitches, and his jaw clenches, appearing to try to avoid making a scene at

this event that he planned.

“What can I say? I bounce back quickly.” He says, faking a chuckle that I can tell scratches his throat on the way out from the venom of it. “A little bit of warning before you removed all my bodyguards would have been nice though.” He grouses, grabbing a whiskey from the passing tray of alcohol and downing it.

“Yeah, you’re right. I know how important protection is to people like you. You never know when all the heinous shit you do will come back to bite you in the ass, right?” I say with a shrug, grabbing a water bottle from the nearby table and gulping down some of it, my throat feeling dry.

Discreetly, I press record on the phone that I snuck in with me; this is it. This is finally the moment I am going to get the evidence I need. My heart pounds as I wait to hear what he says.

“You act so high and mighty, August. As if you aren’t here for the same reason as the rest of us. Do not pretend to be so innocent, you’re a regular here.” He voices, looking at me with a dark glint in his eyes. As if he knows my persona and all that I stand for, while he knows nothing.

“I got to admit. These events you organize are really dark, even for you.” I say, keeping a watchful eye on his reaction.

He turns red, before he crumbles down laughing, his laughter grating my ears. I clench my jaw and my fists, fighting the urge to beat him into a pulp.

“You think I don’t know that you bought that child in the auction during the last event? Get off your fucking high horse; you are just as dark as the rest of us.” He exclaims, effectively steering the conversation exactly where I want it.

I ignore his rambling before asking him, pulling words out of his mouth for the voice audio. “Where do you get the children, Arthur?”

He looks at me with annoyance before he asks me in return, “Are you going to become a competitor of mine, August?”

I shrug my shoulders, my eyes narrowing on what is going to come out of his mouth next, and he doesn’t disappoint me.

“Even if you did dip your toes into this business, you will never replace me. We have been doing this for years; my grandfather passed on to me just like his grandfather passed it on to him. We have been in this game for way too long to be replaced by newbies like you.” He utters with sick pride, not having an inkling that what he was saying was digging his grave deeper and deeper.

He put way too much trust in his security, ensuring no recording devices entered. It is a wonder how he hasn’t been exposed for so long.

“You have to be a different kind of fucked up to gloat over having a pedophile ring,” I tell him, leaning back into my chair and watching how the

disgusting smirk returns to his awful face.

“There you go again, pretending to be so clean and righteous. Is that what attracted you to Layla? You think being with a prude like her will erase your sins or something?” He asks me, smiling a Cheshire smile, knowing I cannot attack him right here.

I take a deep breath, trying to soothe my anger, and he just continues, oblivious to the ticking time bomb in front of him. “You were never supposed to be with Layla. We were going to sell her virginity on her 25th birthday. She would have made us a lot of cash, a lot of men were already lined up for that shit, some women even. They all wanted a piece of her-pure, never even had alcohol before, a girl who was as untainted as snow. She ain’t a virgin no more though, all because of you, and you didn’t even pay for that shit.”

I crack my neck, releasing my breath through my nose, fighting not to kill this motherfucker right here and there. “We?” I growl out, needing to know.

He nods, his gaze goes over to Lily, who is on her knees sucking a man’s dick. The man sits with his legs spread, back straight, and head high, as if he owns the place, because he does and everybody knows it. Even though Lily

looks like she is giving it her all, he seems to be more focused on the room, assessing everyone in it with an un-miscible scowl on his face.

“Lily came up with this scheme. Initially, I wanted her to be a seductress, but Lily convinced me that she wasn’t pretty enough for that and if we managed to keep her a virgin for long, we can sell it for good. Smart head on her shoulders, that woman.” He tells me while looking at her with lust in his eyes.

A shiver of disgust makes its way down my back, both at Lily for pretending to care for Layla while scheming her downfall and at the debauchery happening in front of me.

Suddenly, Arthur pales as the man currently receiving the blowjob shoots him a deadly look. If looks could kill, Arthur would be six feet under at this moment. The man lifts his head, a clear warning to Arthur to look away, and he does. His face is still flushed as he takes a deep breath to steady himself.

My brows furrow at the scene; that man is Dante Accardi, some type of underground king here. I shake my head and ignore my thoughts, focusing back on Arthur.

He seems not to want to show his weakness as he immediately looks at me, pretending to be all big and mighty. “So, how are you going to pay us for Layla?” He barks out.

Immediately, my hand goes to his face, squeezing hard enough for his eyes to

widen. “Disrespect her one more time.” I growl before leaning in to whisper roughly in his ear, ensuring that my voice is not audible in the recording. “And you won’t like what I will do to you.”

His face contorts in pain as well as in shock at my doing this so publicly. I remove my hand when I see him turning red, and he chugs down another glass of whiskey the waiter placed on the table not long ago. He continues the conversation like nothing happened a moment ago. “I’ve heard you’ve got some top-notch stuff. Thinking we could strike a deal and supply our ring on the cheap.”

I groan, my hand rubbing my eyes. He is referring to the reputation I deliberately crafted to be able to attend events like these; he wants some drugs. I have decided that I have had more than enough information to finally expose this family. My goal is soon going to be achieved, and my work here is done.

I nod to him, getting up to leave. He grabs my hand in a hurry before muttering, “Hey! What do you say?” I sigh, tilting my head to the sky for patience before telling him, “I will keep that in mind.”

I head out, having a need to go home much larger than my need to breathe. I feel a stare follow me on the way out, and as I look back, it is Dante again.

This time he had physically manhandled Lily to sit on his lap; her scowl is evident, showing her dislike of the situation, but her cheeks are flushed. I

ignore his calculating gaze before stepping out of the event and getting into my car, driving home.

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August



I drive home, the road stretches on forever, and exhaustion grips my body. Yet, an undeniable fervor surges through my veins, igniting a restlessness in me to see Layla. The thought of her is like a constant drumbeat in my mind, urging me onward. Even the idea of finding her asleep upon my arrival doesn't dampen my mood; just the image of her curled up in bed would satiate this strange longing blooming within me. With each passing mile, my exhaustion is overridden by a pulsating eagerness.

As I pull up to my house, a rush of energy replaces my fatigue from the eventful day. I park the car and can't help but chuckle at my own impatience.

I quickly shed my suit jacket, feeling the constriction of the tie loosen around my neck. I take quick steps up the stairs, eager to walk into the bedrooms.

My mind is still busy with the thoughts of Layla; everything about her attracts me.

The thought of her, snug and peaceful in bed, is enough to make my heart race in a way that has nothing to do with weariness.

Her presence is like a gentle hug that warms me, a presence that I can't easily dismiss. Yet, a war wages within my mind – a battle between the growing affection I feel and the bitter history that ties us together. I find myself drawn to Layla's spirit, her laughter, and her quirks.

And yet, I stubbornly cling to the idea that these are simply the product of

growing accustomed to her company rather than a reflection of something deeper. The blood of those who took my father's life flows within her veins, a fact that constantly whispers in the background, reminding me of the past we can't escape.

I convince myself that love is too strong a word, too grand a sentiment to be applied to what I feel. Instead, I tell myself that I have simply gotten used to her – that her presence has become a comfortable routine rather than the pull of emotions.

I quietly step into the dimly lit bedroom, my gaze falls upon Layla, peacefully asleep in my bed. A soft smile tugs at the corners of my lips as I see her curled up, her head resting gently on my pillow, as if seeking my scent. The sight of her hugging the pillow, as though holding onto a piece of me, warms my heart in a way that isn't welcome.

Needing to wash the smell of the night off of me, I make my way to the bathroom adjoining the bedroom. The cool water cascades over me, washing away the remnants of darkness from me.

I dry off and take a deep breath, feeling the conflict within me resurface. However, as I put on a pair of comfortable sweatpants, I convince myself to indulge in Layla for the time being. I know that whatever we have at the moment won't last; it has an expiration date, which is me exposing her father's deeds, and that date is very close.

As I leave the bathroom and return to the bedroom, a soft rustling sound catches my attention. Layla is awake, her eyes warm and welcoming as they meet mine.

Her smile is wide as she looks at me, her eyes surveying my naked chest with appreciation. "Did I wake you up?" I inquire.

She shakes her head gently, her smile growing more pronounced. She opens her arms to me, beckoning me over to join her in bed. I take steps closer to her, drawn to her like a moth to a flame. She shifts over, making room for me beside her, and as I settle in, I find myself wrapping an arm around her, pulling her closer.

She nuzzles into my naked chest before planting a warm kiss on it, her kiss lighting my body on fire.

I feel my body get hot as she plants another kiss on my neck; I hum in pleasure and lift my head to give her better access to my neck.

She straddles me, seating herself on top of my body and rocks gently, still kissing all over my neck. She even sucks and bites on my skin, giving me a couple of love marks in her wake.

She proceeds to trail her kisses to my ear, biting it gently and pleading, "Please, August, I want you."

I can't control myself any longer; in a second, I flip our position around. She

is now on her back, looking up at me with a mixture of amazement and lust. I put the weight of my body on her, pressing every inch of myself onto her, allowing her to feel every crevice of my body.

Immediately, she grabs my face and kisses me. Our tongues mingle and I suck on hers, eliciting a moan. I break the kiss with a lingering bite to her bottom lip, and she sighs.

Quickly, I undress her from the nightdress she is wearing, allowing my knuckles to pass over her feverish skin as I take the dress off.

She shivers from my touch, looking at me with so much passion that it makes my cock ache.

She grabs my sweatpants, ripping them off me, prompting my hard dick to spring out. I see her lick her lips, one of her hands reaching out to touch it, and she starts to move her hand up and down. She is clearly inexperienced, but I would be damned if it isn't the best feeling I've ever had.

She looks up at my features, surveying my expression to see if I enjoy what she is doing; she appears to like the expression on my face as she leans in to kiss the head of my cock with a smile on her beautiful face.

I allow her to play with me this time, hoping to soothe her nerves before I give her my dick.

She opens her mouth and puts the head of my cock inside her warm haven, sucking hard while licking the tip at the same time. She looks up at me while

sucking, taking an inch more into her mouth while moaning around it, sending vibrations through the length.

I collect her hair and allow her to experiment with me; she takes another inch before gagging. Her eyes open wide, and a blush forms on her face. She tries to move away from my cock, clearly embarrassed, and there is no way that I will let her reservation stop her from having fun. I tighten my hand on her hair, keeping her in place, and she looks at me with shock.

Using my other hand, I caress her face, moving away the pesky little baby hairs that are there.

“You look so good sucking my cock, little dove. You look so pretty with it stuffed in your mouth. You are also making me feel so damn good, baby, there is no need to be embarrassed.” I rasp.

She contemplates it for a minute before she nods her head around my cock, making me groan.

With new determination, she sucks even harder, taking a few more inches in her mouth. This time, when she gags, she still continues, and I feel pride simmer in my chest. “So pretty gagging around my cock, little dove.” I encourage.

After a few minutes, I use her hair to pull her away from my cock, and she lets out a sound of disappointment. I pay her no mind, flipping her on her stomach into a doggy-style position, spreading her legs, and lifting her hips to

get a clear view of her pussy.

Her lace panties are all wet, and I run my fingers all over them, feeling her juices. I hook my fingers inside them and pull them down, exposing her to me.

Deciding to play around a bit more with her panties, I let my thumb move over them, collecting her juices before putting my thumb in her mouth.

“Suck,” I order, wanting her to taste how delicious she is.

She complies, sucking my thumb, even moving her tongue all around it, such a good girl. I move my thumb away from her mouth with a pop before using it to rub her pretty little pink asshole in circular motions. She recoils slightly, but I grab her hips and bring them back, growling out a warning. “All your holes are mine, little dove. You don't run away from me when I touch what's mine.”

She lets out a small moan and nods her head, ready to give me every part of herself. As I rub her asshole, I spread her pussy lips with my other hand, rubbing her all over.

I kneel down so her pussy is at the same height as my face, and I feast. My tongue flicks at her clit continuously, hearing her scream my name. I put a finger inside her cunt, fucking her with it, and once she adjusts, I add another one, twisting them and scissoring them inside of her. The moans that come out of her mouth are so hot they make my blood boil with the need to fuck

her.

After a few minutes, I take my fingers out of her pussy and put my tongue in instead, swirling it around in her.

I'm also rubbing her clit vigorously as well as her asshole at the same time.

“Mmh, you taste so good, little dove. Come on, cum for me so that I can give you my dick,” I grunt against her pussy lips before putting my tongue back inside her.

She tightens around my tongue intensely before screaming, announcing her orgasm.

I let her take a breather for a few minutes, watching as she comes down from her high. Once I'm sure she's rested, I line myself up against her wet pussy.

“I'll try to be gentle, little dove,” I rasp, dying to feel her.

She nods, taking a deep breath to steady herself. I feel heaven as I push into her tight cunt, it envelops me, and I groan from the pleasure.

Once I'm fully inside, I check on her, seeing pain etched on her features. My heart aches, and I wait a few moments, not moving, for her to adjust. My hand reaches her head, and I pat her hair down, moving it away from her face.

“You feeling okay?” I ask, my voice deep with pleasure.

She turns to look at me and purrs, “Yes, August, it hurts a bit but feels good at the same time. Please, move.” She ends her sentence with a moan, and I

oblige; there's no way that I won't answer her pleas.

I move inside her, gently at first, but then my raging need for her takes over, and I start pounding her pretty little cunt.

Her moans are endless and push me closer and closer to orgasm. I put a hand on her stomach before asking her, "Do you feel me here, little dove?"

She nods vigorously, and I spank her ass cheek, "Hey!" She shouts at me, and I chuckle darkly, my pace never diminishing. "Words, little dove." She sighs but otherwise gives in, "I feel it, August, it's so deep inside of me."

"Do you feel it hitting your womb, love?" I ask her, and she moans loudly before muttering, "Yes, Yes, Yes. I feel it, August. I'm about to cum."

"Cum for me, squeeze my cock and milk my orgasm for me," I growl out, my speed increasing, and my hand rubs figure eights on her clit in a constant steady motion.

She screams her orgasm, and her little pussy clings so hard onto me that it triggers my own. Hot cum leaks into her pussy, and she sighs, loving the sensation. After our intimacy, we're wrapped in each other, being lulled to sleep in each other's arms

34

August



I stir awake, my gaze naturally finds its way to Layla, still deep asleep. A tender smile plays at the corners of my lips as I gently brush a strand of hair away from her face, revealing her delicate features. Her face seems to have a permanent blush after what we did last night, even in sleep, making me chuckle.

Leaning in, I place a soft kiss on her forehead, my heart squeezing uncomfortably at the contact. I watch as a faint smile tugs at the corners of her lips, yet again making something uncomfortable occur in my chest. Gathering my resolve, I whisper her name, my voice a gentle murmur in the quiet room. "Layla, wake up."

Her eyelashes flutter as she slowly emerges from her dreams, her eyes meeting mine in a haze of sleep. "Mmm, August?" she mumbles, her voice tinged with drowsiness.

A hint of mischief dances in my eyes as I speak, my fingers lightly tracing her jawline. "Guess what? I've got a surprise for you."

She blinks in surprise, the last vestiges of sleep receding as curiosity takes its place. "A surprise?"

I nod, my lips curling into a smile. "Indeed. How would you like to pack your bags? We're going on a vacation."

Her brows furrow, concern crossing her features. "A vacation? But my thesis

work..."

Before she can continue, I interject, my voice gentle but firm. "Layla, you're miles ahead in your work. You deserve a break, and we both know it."

There's a pause, a contemplative silence that hangs between us. Her expression softens, and she finally relents with a nod, her excitement already showing. "Alright, August. I'll pack my bags."

I lean in, my tone tinged with amusement. "When you're packing, make sure you choose clothes suitable for warm weather."

She furrows her brows, confusion clouding her features. "Warm weather? August, where are we going?"

I can't help but chuckle softly, the smugness evident in my expression. I shrug my shoulders casually, a smirk dancing on my lips. "You'll find out soon enough. For now, just make sure you're prepared for the heat."

She shoots me a playful glare, clearly torn between wanting to know and wanting to be surprised. "You're not going to tell me, are you?"

I shake my head, a glint of excitement in my eyes. "Nope, it's a surprise."

Her lips curve into a reluctant smile, a mixture of frustration and curiosity evident in her gaze. "Fine, August. I'll play along."

She heads to freshen up and prepare for our trip, and a torrent of conflicting emotions surges within me.

This trip isn't as innocent as I'm letting on. I'm heading to Miami to meet an

acquaintance who has an important position in a very big news channel. I'm going to give him the evidence that I've collected on the Lexingtons for them to be exposed.

I see the irony in bringing her along on a trip that will destroy her family's reputation. But despite my better judgment, I can't leave her alone. I can't fathom leaving her alone in this big house after all that she's been through. Besides, she would think I simply discarded her after taking her virginity.

Layla has felt too unwanted in her life, betrayed by the people closest to her, and while it kills me that I am going to be added to that list soon, I can't stomach making her feel these negative emotions right now, specifically a day after I made love to her.

I brush aside my swirling thoughts as Layla enters the room, a skip in her steps and a radiant smile on her face, vibrating with excitement. She looks at me with those bright eyes, and before I can react, she leans in, pecking me on the lips. It's as if her happiness is contagious, and a smile makes its way to my lips unconsciously.

I hastily get ready after her, and once we're both prepared, we stand side by side, double-checking our bags and travel essentials. And then, as we step out of the door, John is there, just as I had instructed, ready to take us to the airport.

Layla's happiness is clear as she greets him with a bright smile and an embrace. A sense of warmth fills the air as I watch her, a flicker of a smile touching my lips at the genuine connection they share. She's buzzing in her seat on the way to the airport the entire time, and I can't help but find it adorable. When we reach the airport, we say our goodbyes to John and step hand in hand through the airport door.

Inside the bustling terminal, I hand Layla her ticket, a knowing smile on my lips as I watch her gaze settle on the destination: Miami. The spark of realization lights up her eyes, and a joyful squeal escapes her lips.

She hugs me tightly, her excitement radiating through her like a vibrant energy. "Miami! I've always wanted to go there!" she exclaims, her voice filled with glee.

As we approach the gate, the hum of excitement surrounding us is electrifying. I can't help but notice Layla's rapid heartbeat, her excitement so tangible that I can practically hear it.

With a reassuring smile, I guide her towards the airplane, the anticipation building with every step. Once onboard, I help her settle into her first-class seat, ensuring she's comfortable.

I fasten her seatbelt, her gaze meets mine, nervousness clear in her eyes.

"This is my first time on a plane," she admits, her voice laced with a hint of uncertainty.

I lean in, my voice a comforting presence in her ear. "Don't worry, Layla. I'm here with you every step of the way. Just relax and enjoy the experience."

Her nerves seem to ease as she nods, offering me a grateful smile. And as the plane taxis down the runway, I can feel her hand trembling in mine. With a reassuring squeeze, I whisper, "It's going to be alright," and she turns to me, her trust in my presence evident.

As the plane lifts off the ground, I watch as exhilaration paints Layla's features. Her fingers tighten around mine, and I can sense her tension giving way to wonder. The cityscape below transforms into a patchwork of lights, and her grip on my hand gradually relaxes.

Throughout the flight, the soothing hum of the engines and the gentle vibrations of the plane seem to have a calming effect on Layla.

As if caught in a cocoon of serenity, she drifts into a peaceful slumber, her breathing steady and even. I watch her with a tender smile, her relaxed form a welcome contrast to the excitement that had filled her just moments before.

Unable to resist, I lean over and place a soft kiss on her hand, the touch gentle and almost reverent. It's a silent gesture, a connection that transcends words, expressing the depth of the emotions I so strongly deny in a single act. She sleeps on, undisturbed, her trust in my presence evident even in her

unconscious state.

When the plane descends, I gently wake Layla, her drowsy eyes meeting mine. "We're about to land," I whisper, my voice a warm caress against her ear.

She blinks, momentarily disoriented before realization dawns on her. As the plane touches down, she straightens up in her seat, her excitement rekindling. With a smile, she gazes out of the window, watching as the tarmac rushes by. After landing, we make our way to a luxurious resort that I own in Miami. The short journey is filled with Layla's curious glances, her amazement evident in her every expression as I tell her about my resort. The moment we arrive, her eyes widen in awe, her lips parting in astonishment at the sheer beauty of the place.

"August, this is... breathtaking," she breathes, her voice filled with wonder as she takes in the lush surroundings and the elegantly designed resort. "Everything you do, you do with such taste."

A smile makes its way to my face without my permission. No matter how much I deny my feelings for her, I can't deny that I love the way she views me; it makes my chest tingle with pride.

After arriving at the resort, I lead Layla through the grand entrance, the familiar faces of my employees greeting me with nods of respect. With a

smile, I introduce Layla as my girlfriend, her presence by my side making my chest swell with possessiveness.

"Hello, everyone," I address my staff, my tone commanding their attention.

"Meet Layla, my girlfriend."

Layla greets them with a warm smile, her charm evident as she extends a friendly hand. "Nice to meet you all."

The employees respond with polite smiles and greetings, their professionalism on full display. As we make our way to our designated cabin, Layla's curious gaze takes in the opulent surroundings in a swift glance. I can practically feel the excitement radiating from her as she turns those captivating eyes towards me.

"Can we go for a swim?" she asks, her voice a sweet plea.

I hesitate for a moment, considering whether she needs some rest after the journey. But then, I realize there's no denying her anything – not after everything that has passed between us.

"Sure, let's go," I reply, the corners of my lips turning up in response to her enthusiasm.

As Layla disappears into the bedroom to change, my mind is filled with images of how I'm going to take her in every crevice of this cabin; my desire for her is already so intense. When she emerges, however, the anticipation shifts into something else entirely.

She stands before me in a sad excuse for a bikini, just a couple of strings covering her private areas and small curves. Gritting my teeth, I growl lowly, my eyes narrowing on her. "Layla, change," I command, my tone firm.

She furrows her brows, a stubborn glint in her eyes as she defies me with a stomp of her foot. "No, August."

I grunt disapprovingly, the tension between us simmering as I step out of the cabin, making a quick phone call. When I return, I inform her that she can wear it, her victorious smile practically taunting me. She dons a cover-up, her determination to spite me clear as she heads towards the beach.

However, as she reaches the beach, her smile falters at the emptiness. Her shocked gaze meets mine, and she questions, "Did you really reserve a section of the beach just for us?"

I offer a smirk, my eyes locking onto hers as I reply, "This is my resort, Layla. I do whatever I want."

Drawing close to her, I lean in, my voice a low whisper that sends shivers down her spine. "No one looks at you so scantily dressed but me. Every inch of you is mine, and I won't allow anyone to ogle at what is mine."

Her breath catches in her throat as I assert my claim over her, the tension between us reaching a crescendo. As my words sink in, Layla's cheeks flush a deep shade of red, her chest heaving with anger. A charged energy crackles between us. I hold her gaze, my own resolve unwavering despite the fire in

her eyes.

"You look like you need to cool off," I remark, a hint of amusement lacing my voice. Before she can react, I swiftly move, my arms wrapping around her waist as I effortlessly lift her over my shoulders. Ignoring her sputtering protests, I sprint towards the beach.

Her anger quickly transforms into fits of giggles, the jostling motion and unexpected turn of events breaking through the tension. Laughter spills from her lips. Her grip on me shifts from resistance to a more playful hold, her fingers lightly tapping against my back.

As I set her down on the soft sand by the water's edge, Layla's laughter continues, infectious and contagious. She looks up at me, eyes sparkling with mirth, and I can't help but smile in response. The anger that had simmered moments ago seems to have dissipated entirely, replaced by a carefree and playful energy.

"Okay, okay, you win," she gasps between giggles, the remnants of her irritation now a distant memory. The sun's warm embrace, the sound of waves crashing, and her laughter mingle together, creating a moment that feels almost surreal in its simplicity and joy.

With a triumphant grin, I extend a hand towards her. "Glad you've come to your senses."

She accepts my hand, allowing me to pull her up from the sand. The lightness

in her eyes, the playful grin that tugs at her lips – it's a sight that makes everything else fade into the background.

35

August



We spend a couple of hours swimming, enjoying the Miami sun, which is a stark contrast to rainy, cold Seattle. The water and the sun invigorate our senses, relaxing our bodies and minds.

After hours of swimming, we get very tired and are now resting on the beach. I cannot take my eyes off Layla; she lies on her stomach, accentuating the curve of her ass. That bikini is so small that her ass cheeks are on full display, much to my enjoyment. I would kill whoever saw her like this. This view is only available to me. Only I can see her this exposed.

My hands move on their own accord, spanking one of her cheeks, then the

other. She turns her head and glares at me. "What was that for?" She whines with a pout, and I chuckle darkly before responding, my voice rough. "For thinking that you can showcase what's mine."

She shakes her head at me before turning around, blessing me with the sight of her small, perky tits barely covered by the fabric of her bikini.

My eyes move downwards, eyeing her flat stomach and toned legs before settling on her pussy. The barely-there fabric of her bikini bottoms has shifted, exposing part of her little cunt to the air.

My fingers immediately hook into the fabric, moving it even further away and exposing her cunt completely to the outside air. She shivers before attempting to push my fingers away from her womanhood, wanting to cover herself back up. But my hands don't budge, and she sighs before giving up, moving her hands away and letting me have my way.

I push a finger inside of her while I play with her clit and can see her eyes clouding over with lust at the taboo of being pleased in the open.

A smirk makes its way to my face when she can no longer stop her moans; they tumble out of her, mixing with the sounds of the waves, creating a perfect symphony.

My other hand removes her bikini top, leaving her completely exposed to the open while I play with her.

After a minute, the pleasure blinds her, making her lose her inhibitions as her

hips start to meet mine, rutting herself on my hands. My smirk widens, seeing her being such a pretty little slut for me, just for me.

I can sense her tightening around my fingers as her orgasm washes over her, screaming my name with no reservation as waves of pure hot bliss wash over her.

I chuckle slightly, bringing my fingers that are now soaked with her essence to my lips, sucking on them under her watchful gaze.

A dark side of me starts taking over, a side that wants to see her under the mercy of my cock. I climb over to straddle her chest, not putting my full weight as I know full well that I would crush her.

I take my dick out of my swim shorts and start slapping her face with it, the combination of the sun and air on my hot cock bringing a shiver down my spine.

I can see her mesmerized by cock slapping her face, and I growl out, "You are a cockslut for me, aren't you? Just for me?" She takes a deep breath before saying, "Yes, August, I love your cock. It is the only one for me."

I gently move her hair away from her face before I guide my cock into her mouth; she takes it in hungrily, as if dying for its taste. She starts sucking hastily, moaning around my dick like a whore, my whore.

At that moment, I decide that I don't want to be gentle. I want my dick to be imprinted in her memory; my hips start moving faster, rougher. And my hand

is a dark contrast to my movements, still gently caressing her head and putting her hair away. She still sucks vigorously, despite me fucking her face hard.

After a couple of minutes, I take mercy on her flushed face and pull my cock out. Spit follows it, and I wipe her mouth from the reminiscence of my cock softly.

I lay on top of her, missionary, and she wraps both her arms and legs around me. Gently, knowing it is only her second time, I put my dick in her, and she sighs with relief, as if no longer used to her pussy being without my cock.

I start moving gently, waiting for her to adjust, and when she starts moaning loudly, I take that as my sign to fuck harder.

My thrusts are hard, bruising, almost punishing. And she takes the pounding like she was born for it, enjoying every second of it.

Our movement causes sand to rub against our skin, probably getting into crevices that would take ages to wash out. But the feeling adds to the intensity, reminding us of how we are fucking out in the open, under the sun and next to the beach.

It only adds to the thrill of our lovemaking. Layla's nails scratch against my back as she screams her pleasure in my ear, telling me she is about to come.

I slip my hand between our slippery bodies and find her clit, rubbing it for her. That is all it takes for her to cum, squeezing my cock tight and milking

my own orgasm out of me and into her pussy.

I already know that she is on birth control due to period pains, but at that moment, I imagine I am breeding her under the sun. That thought is supposed to scare me, but instead, it prolongs my orgasm as I imagine her swollen with my child, her perky tits dripping milk.

My mouth finds one of her nipples and sucks, and a ripple goes through her body, clearly still overstimulated from her orgasm. I am truly messed up with this woman; I want her, but I can't have her.

My arms tighten around her form, knowing that our time will come to an end very soon. Knowing that I shouldn't even dream of a future with her swollen with my baby.

I have a nagging feeling that this woman has ruined me for anybody else; I already can't get it up for anybody but her. I do not know what I will do when the time comes to let her go, but today, just for today and the next couple of days, I will not think about it.

I will just pretend like we are a normal couple. My arms tighten even more around her, I do not know how I am going to let this woman go.

36

August



As the sun sets, leaving a beautiful orange hue on the horizon, I slowly wake up from my nap. The sound of the waves crashing against the

shore has lulled us to sleep, and I blink my eyes open to the amazing view.

Layla stirs beside me, her eyes meeting mine as a soft smile tugs at her lips.

"Looks like we dozed off longer than we planned," she says, her voice carrying a playful note.

I chuckle, stretching my arms overhead to shake off the remnants of sleep.

The day has passed in a blur of sun, sand, sex, and laughter. "Yeah," I reply, my voice still carrying a hint of drowsiness.

With a contented sigh, I push myself up onto my elbows, taking in the disarray of our belongings around us. Our towels are scattered haphazardly on the sand, Layla's bikini thrown on the ground as well as my swimming shorts, evidence of a day well spent. I reach for my shorts and put them on, noticing that my dick is covered in sand.

Layla rises gracefully to her feet and puts on her cover-up, which billows gently in the breeze as she gazes out at the ocean. Her beauty is as captivating as ever, and the way the fading sunlight plays off her hair makes my heart skip a beat.

"Think it's time to pack up?" I ask, my fingers fumbling with the drawstring of my swim shorts as I stand up.

Layla turns her gaze back to me, a playful spark in her eyes. "Almost. Let's make sure we leave this place just as perfect as we found it."

We gather our belongings, folding towels and tucking away Layla's forgotten

bikini, and I shake off the sand from my swim shorts. As I adjust my shirt, I can't help but watch Layla as she meticulously brushes the sand off her cover-up. I always want this woman; she is like a drug to me.

"Ready to head back?" I ask, a grin playing on my lips.

She shoulders her bag and meets my gaze, her smile warm, and nods.

We walk back to our cabin, our steps carrying us away from the water's edge.

The sand is cool between my toes, providing comfort to our warm skin.

As we reach the cabin, we kick off our sandy flip-flops and step inside. We make our way to the bathroom, ready to remove the piles of sand that have become incredibly uncomfortable against our bodies.

The warm water of the shower cascades over us, and I can't help but chuckle as Layla and I work together to get rid of every last bit of sand that seems to have infiltrated every crevice. The laughter that fills the air is infectious.

We dry off and wrap ourselves in fluffy towels. Layla's eyes begin to droop with the combined effects of our day at the beach and the soothing shower. I can't help but smile as I watch her yawning, her eyelids growing heavier by the second.

"You look like you're ready to fall asleep standing up," I tease, my voice a gentle whisper.

She chuckles softly, her movements slow and deliberate as she pulls on her pajamas. "I guess I'm more tired than I thought."

With a soft kiss on her forehead, I tuck her into bed, pulling the covers up to her chin. "Rest up, Layla."

Her eyes close almost immediately, and it isn't long before the steady rhythm of her breathing fills the room. I linger for a moment, just watching her sleep, before slipping out of the room to get ready for my own evening plans.

Dressed in a clean shirt and jeans, I feel anticipation and unease churning in my chest. I am meeting an old friend who works at the local news channel, someone I haven't seen in years. The connection has remained, but over time, life has taken us on different paths. As I look at myself in the mirror, I know this is it, the work I have put in for years will pay off after this.

I comb my fingers through my hair, my thoughts drifting back to a time when I was not so attached to Layla. When my world was different, simpler, yet somehow less complete. I can feel a darkness simmering in my chest; nothing will stop me from getting my revenge, even her.

As I reach the designated meeting spot, I spot my friend sitting at a table on the resort. His face lights up when he sees me, and we exchange a warm handshake and a few words of greeting.

We catch up on the usual small talk, but beneath the surface, I sense an unspoken tension; we both know what this meeting will reveal.

"So, how's life been treating you, August?" he finally asks, his voice gentle yet probing.

I lean back in my chair, tracing the rim of my drink with my finger. "Life's been good. Can't complain."

He studies me for a moment, as if searching for something in my words, seemingly finding it before nodding.

I sigh, a heaviness settling in my chest. "I finally collected all I need, Cole."

He nods, his gaze unwavering. "I always knew you would."

His words hang in the air, the weight of them sinking in. The darkness that had simmered within me is now a tangible presence.

Cole leans forward, his eyes fixed on me with a mixture of anticipation and excitement. We have been in agreement for months— if I could gather evidence against the Lexingtons, he would use his high-ranking position at the news channel to expose their crimes to the world.

As we talk, I can feel the weight of the file in my bag, the evidence of the Lexingtons' monstrous deeds waiting to be revealed. This is our chance to bring their empire crashing down, to make sure justice is served, and to offer me and the other unknown victims some closure.

"So, August," Cole begins, his voice a low, intense whisper. "Is this it?"

I take a deep breath and nod, my fingers gripping the strap of my bag. With anticipation, I reach into the bag and pull out the thick folder. I place it on the table between us, the weight of its contents nearly tangible in the air.

Cole's eyes widen as he looks at the file, awe flashing across his face. He

reaches for it almost reverently, his fingers brushing over the cover before he finally opens it. The documents, photographs, and audio recordings within seem to captivate him, his gaze scanning the pages as his expression shifts from disbelief to fiery determination.

"You did it, August," he breathes.

"This is incredible. The depth of this evidence... it's more than I could have hoped for."

I can't help but crack a small, cautious smile. It has taken time, effort, and no small amount of risk to gather this evidence, but knowing that the truth is finally on the brink of exposure makes it all worthwhile; my parents will finally be avenged.

Cole looks up at me, his eyes gleaming, and dollar bills almost reflecting in them. "August, my friend, we're going to bring them down. The Lexingtons won't be able to escape this."

For me, this is more than just news; it's a chance to make a difference, to dismantle a corrupt empire, and to offer justice to those who have suffered at the hands of the Lexingtons.

"I've already talked to my team at the news channel," Cole continues, his excitement clear. "We're going to put together an extensive exposé. We'll reveal every gruesome detail, every ounce of evidence we have."

The thought of the Lexingtons' dark secrets being aired for the world to see is

both satisfying and sobering. Their reputation will crumble, and the truth will prevail. Justice will finally be served.

"And you know what else?" Cole's grin is infectious. "The ratings are going to skyrocket. This kind of story, it's going to be big, August. Real big."

As we discuss the next steps, I can't deny the excitement that I'm feeling, but at the same time, my heart aches. It aches because I know deep in my chest that the time to let Layla go has become very close.

37

August



The weight of the evening's conversation still hangs in the air as I return to the cabin. The moonlight casts a soft glow on the path, guiding my steps. The file of evidence is now in capable hands, and with each passing

moment, the darkness that simmers within me seems to ease, replaced with a nagging worry of what this will mean for my supposedly fake relationship with Layla.

Slipping back into the cabin, I find Layla still nestled in bed, her breathing steady and calm. A heaviness swirls within me as I undress and settle beside her, pulling her close. I hold her tighter than usual, as if she might disappear in this very moment. Our time together is limited, and I want to savor every moment.

As I lay there, watching her sleep, the hours slip away. The moon paints patterns on the walls, and the soft rustle of the sheets becomes a soothing lullaby. Eventually, exhaustion overcomes me, and I close my eyes, sleep finally coming to me.

The sun filters through the curtains as morning arrives, and the scent of the ocean breeze mingles with the scent of Layla's shampoo and body wash, relaxing my senses. Layla stirs beside me, her eyes fluttering open, and a warm smile spreads across her lips when she sees me watching her.

"Good morning," she murmurs, her voice still tinged with sleep.

"Good morning," I reply, my voice a soft rasp. I lean in and brush my lips against hers, savoring the connection between us.

With a leisurely pace, we get ready for the day. The sun is high in the sky when we finally make our way to the beach. The warmth on our skin is a

welcome change from the cold Seattle weather we left behind. We stretch out on the sand, the sound of the waves and the gentle caress of the sun creating a serene backdrop.

Hours melt away as we lounge on the beach, a sense of peace settling over us. We share stories, laugh, and revel in the simplicity of the moment.

Later that evening, as the sun dips below the horizon, Layla's mischievous grin appears as she makes a suggestion. "You know, there's a bar not too far from here, according to Google maps. What do you say we change up the routine a bit?"

A twinge of hesitation ripples through me. The thought of navigating through a crowded, noisy place with people jostling against us makes me uneasy. I don't want anyone coming too close to her, anyone rubbing against her in the packed atmosphere. The possessiveness that stirs within me is undeniable, a primal instinct to protect her from any potential harm, even if it's just the innocent bumping of strangers in a bar. But the spark in her eyes is infectious, and I find myself nodding reluctantly, unable to deny her pretty eyes anything.

At the bar, the laughter and clinking glasses create a lively atmosphere. Layla's enthusiasm is contagious as she grabs the microphone for karaoke. She looks at me with a playful challenge in her eyes.

"Your turn," she says, her voice daring me.

I roll my eyes but eventually give in to her persistence. We sing and laugh, the worries of the world seeming to fade away in the midst of our carefree antics. Our voices are probably grating on the ears of all the people in the bar, and despite that, I find myself enjoying the moment.

As the night goes on, Layla's laughter becomes more exuberant, and I can't help but notice her swaying a bit more than usual. She's having a blast, and it's contagious. But as the night wears on, I begin to sense a shift in her demeanor. Her words slur, and her movements become unsteady.

"Layla, maybe you've had enough," I suggest, concern lacing my voice.

She waves me off, a mischievous grin on her face. "Nonsense, Auggie! It's all in good fun."

But as the hours go by, her speech becomes even more slurred, and it's clear that she's had a bit too much to drink. I grow increasingly worried, my protective instincts kicking in.

"Layla, seriously, let's get you back to the cabin," I insist, helping her to her feet.

She leans into me, her gaze unfocused but affectionate. "You're a good guy, August. You know that?"

I chuckle, guiding her toward the exit. "Yeah, well, someone's got to keep you out of trouble."

We step out of the bar, warm air hitting us in the face. I see how Layla's face

pales slightly, probably feeling nauseous. I tie her hair back out of her face and wrap my arm around her waist, leading her stumbling form back to the cabin.

"I... August, I need to tell you something," Layla slurs, her words heavy with the effects of alcohol.

I gaze at her, my concern mixing with curiosity. "What is it, Layla?"

She pauses, her gaze unfocused as if struggling to find the right words in her inebriated state. "I bought an apartment. A really nice one. I'm planning to move... move out after our trip."

Her words land like a punch, the shock reverberating through me. Anger and frustration churn within me. The fact that she kept this significant decision hidden has me fighting back my rage, I am aware of how hypocritical I am but I can't stop myself.

We probably only have a week left together after this trip before the news comes out; that is the timeline. I only have one week left with her, and the fact that she isn't going to be spending that one week with me, in my home and in my bed makes my chest light on fire.

"You did what?" My voice is sharp, edged with anger that I can barely control.

Layla blinks at me, her expression confused and innocent. "I bought an apartment. I thought... I thought it would be good."

My fists clench involuntarily, my own anger and resentment threatening to consume me. The darkness that has simmered beneath the surface is now a raging storm, fueled by Layla's unexpected bombshell.

"You just decided this on your own, without even considering what it might mean for us?" My words are a seething torrent, frustration coloring every syllable. I know it may seem like I am overreacting, but I only have this fucking week left.

Confusion clouds Layla's eyes as the weight of my anger begins to register.

"August, I... I didn't think it would bother you this much. I promise I will move back in with you when the conditions are better."

I fight to control the turbulent emotions surging within me, the knowledge that time is running out, that our days are numbered, adding fuel to the inferno. She won't be moving in with me under better circumstances; she just doesn't know that.

Tears well in her eyes, and for a moment, I see a glimmer of understanding in her gaze. "August, I thought... I thought it was the right decision."

Gritting my teeth, I struggle to contain the storm of emotions that rage within me. Layla's words hang heavy in the air, the weight of her decision to move out after our trip a bitter reality I hadn't expected. The darkness that has simmered within me now threatens to consume me, and I fight to regain control.

"I understand," I manage to mutter through clenched teeth, my voice strained and heavy with the unwanted emotions swirling within me.

Layla's tearful gaze meets mine, a mixture of confusion and regret clouding her eyes. But I can't bear to look at her any longer, can't allow her to see the maelstrom of emotions churning beneath the surface.

With a deep breath, I guide her gently into the cabin, making sure she is safe before stepping out into the night. The cool breeze from the ocean offers a welcome contrast to the fiery turmoil within me. My heart is a tempest of anger, and the painful realization that the time we have left is slipping through my fingers.

Walking along the shore, I find a secluded spot and order a cup of whiskey from the beachside restaurant. I stare out at the waves, their steady rhythm a stark contrast to the chaos within me. Taking a sip of the drink, I hope that the alcohol will soothe the turbulence of my thoughts. But even as I watch the waves, I can't escape the fact that I am acting irrationally, driven by feelings I struggle to process.

I know I am being unreasonable, that my anger and possessiveness are spiraling out of control. But the thought of Layla discovering my betrayal, of not sharing my bed or my heart again, is a reality I am ill-equipped to handle. It wasn't supposed to be that way; I wasn't supposed to fall for her.

As the waves crash against the shore, I feel a strange sense of kinship with

their relentless rhythm. They mirror the pain within me, the conflict between the desire to hold on and the realization that letting go might be the only option. Layla has unwittingly become a beacon of light in my darkness, a presence that has brought warmth and happiness into my life. But now, facing the impending truth, I struggle to reconcile the idea of her knowing my true intentions, of her understanding the depths of my betrayal.

The whiskey burns down my throat, a bitter reminder of the decisions I have made and the path I have chosen. I am being torn apart, my heart and mind locked in a battle for control. I know that this is the right course of action, that I have to let her go for both our sakes. The fear of her being hurt, of her heart breaking, is too great a burden for me to bear.

The waves continue their steady rhythm, a hypnotic dance that begins to seep into my thoughts. I take another sip of the whiskey, the bitterness of the drink matching the bitter reality I face. I have to forget her, to move on from this twisted fate we have found ourselves in. I can't be with her, not after what I have set in motion.

The night wears on, and I gaze out at the expanse of the ocean, hoping that its vastness and serenity will somehow wash away the chaos within me. But even as I seek solace in its beauty, I can't escape the truth that lies ahead—a truth that will shatter the fragile connection we have shared and leave me grappling with the darkness that has been unleashed.

Layla

I wake up to the gentle embrace of August's arms around me. Despite the anger that simmers between us the previous night, he holds me close, his grip strong and protective. A soft smile curves my lips as I peck him on the lips, the warmth of his presence melting away any residual tension.

His eyes flutter open, a grumpy expression crossing his features before he manages to stifle it. I can see the battle he's waging within himself, the effort to let go of his anger and focus on the moment. My lips move against his skin, leaving a trail of kisses across his cheek, and I can't help but laugh silently at his struggle.

"We're impossible," I whisper with a playful grin, my lips brushing against his ear.

He lets out a grumbling sound, half annoyance and half amusement, as I continue to pepper his face with kisses. The tension between us is still there, a silent reminder of the conversation we had the previous night, but I'm determined to ease it, even if only for a little while.

"We should go get breakfast," he finally mutters, his tone gruff.

I smile, pressing another kiss to his forehead before untangling myself from his embrace. I hop out of bed, feeling a sense of determination wash over me. I'm not going to let the current undercurrent of tension ruin our day.

After washing up, I slip into a pretty sundress and apply some makeup. The routine helps me regain a sense of normalcy, a shield against the uncertainty that hangs between us. As I lean down to put on my heels, I struggle slightly, the straps proving a bit tricky to manage.

When I look up, I'm met with the sight of August leaning against the door, navy blue trousers paired with a crisp white top that makes him look incredibly handsome. The surprise of seeing him there makes me momentarily forget about my shoes.

"You look handsome," I say with a soft smile, my gaze lingering on him.

He doesn't say anything, his expression a mix of seriousness and something else, something I can't quite place. But when he sees me struggling again, he shakes his head in that characteristic exasperated way of his.

"Let me help," he grumbles, and before I can react, he's kneeling in front of

me, his fingers deftly securing the straps of my heels.

A shiver runs down my spine as he leans in, pressing a gentle kiss to my ankle. His proximity, the way his fingers brush against my skin, sends a jolt of warmth through me. I swallow, my heart racing, as I watch him with a mixture of awe and longing.

He looks up at me, his eyes meeting mine, and I see something flicker in their depths—something dark and hot. He kisses all the way from my ankle to my inner thighs. Leaving my skin hot in his wake, each place he kisses burns with white hot pleasure. He concentrates his kisses, sometimes his tongue even pokes out and licks me there.

I moan slightly as he makes me feel good, his fingers remove my panties to the side, exposing my pussy to him.

“Who does this pretty little cunt belong to, little dove?” He growls, his finger moving up and down gently on my slit.

“It’s mine.” I say cheekily, with a teasing smile. Instantly, he places a gentle slap on my cunt, making me jolt.

“You won’t like it if I repeat the question, baby.” He rasps, and I fight back a giggle as she says, “it’s yours, baby, yours.”

“What is?” He teases back, and I look away, feeling heat attack my face, sure that I was blushing. I force the words to come out of my mouth, “My cunt.”

He laughs darkly before he dives in, his mouth on my pussy making me feel

stars. He licks me up and down, all of me, before sucking on my clit and using his teeth to bite it gently. He holds my hips tightly, his touch bruising as he guides my hips to ride his face. I muster up my courage before I hump his face, closing my eyes as the pleasure becomes overwhelming. My orgasm is so close, a string of moans comes out of my mouth as I rut his face harder, determined to chase my high. Just as I can feel it coming, he stops, his hands delivering bruising spanks on my ass instead. I ignore the pain and grab his hair roughly, urging him to continue. However, he doesn't budge, refusing to give me my pleasure and I groan both in pain and in disappointment.

"How does it feel to be robbed of something that is rightfully yours, little dove?" He growls out against my heat, referring to me refusing to move in with him at the moment, and I let out a whimper. His mouth is glowing with my juices, his eyes dark and I want anything at this point, I just want to be pushed over that delicious edge that I was standing at.

"Please, August, Please." I beg but he just shakes his head, returning my underwear to its place before patting my pussy gently and standing up. Wiping away the traces of me from his mouth. I spot his hard cock, and my hand sneaks between us to squeeze it, dying for it. He gently removes my hand before kissing me, and I taste myself on his lips.

"Later," He promises, and I pout, it is clear that he is punishing me. But I won't let anything sour our vacation, and I shrug my desire off, knowing he

will give me what I need when we return just like he promised.

We walk towards the resort's restaurant, August's hands wrapped around me to ensure I do not fall in my heels. The restaurant within the resort exudes a cozy ambiance, its inviting atmosphere carrying the scent of delicious dishes that await us.

August and I choose a table near the window, a sense of anticipation mingling with the tension that lingers between us. We navigate the buffet line together, selecting an array of delectable foods before settling in for a meal.

As we eat, my attention wanders to a man across the room. He's an imposing figure, tall and broad-shouldered, his body adorned with intricate tattoos that seem to tell a story of their own. Despite his rugged appearance, there's an undeniable handsomeness about him. However, my eyes inevitably return to August, and I can't help but think that he outshines any man in the room.

"The food is delicious," I tell him, as the flavors explode in my mouth.

August's chuckle is warm, a familiar sound that eases the tension between us.

"I know, this is my second serving."

Our easy banter creates a comfortable bubble in which we can momentarily forget the weight of our recent conversation. But the undercurrent of emotions remains, simmering just beneath the surface. Amidst our meal, I can't help but notice the enigmatic man making his way towards our table.

"August, it's been a while," the man greets, his voice carrying an air of

familiarity.

August's response is cautious, a nod that reveals little. "Dante,"

My curiosity piques, and I watch their exchange intently, sensing an unspoken tension between them. As Dante's attention shifts to me, his gaze sharp and assessing, I feel a wave of unease wash over me.

"And who's this lovely lady?" he inquires, his piercing gaze focusing on me.

I meet his gaze with a polite smile, appreciating the compliment despite the tension that fills the air. "I'm Layla. Nice to meet you."

Dante's smirk deepens as he turns his attention back to August. "Lily's mentioned you."

My heart races at the mention of Lily's name. Leaning forward, my eagerness is evident as I ask, "Oh, Lily... how do you know her?"

Dante's smile holds a hint of amusement as his gaze holds mine. "We have worked together," he says, and I can't help but want to know more. Lily didn't mention this man! I was going to kill her. Secretly, though, I hope she replaces Oliver with him.

I nod, my excitement probably clear. "Should I tell her about our meet up?"

Dante's smile transforms into a warm one, his eyes meeting mine. "Yeah, tell her Dante says hello."

With a nod of agreement, Dante bids us goodbye, leaving behind a trail of intrigue. The tension lingers, though, August clenching and unclenching his

fists in what seems like anger.

I shrug the tension off and return my focus to my plate, my heart racing from the unexpected encounter, my heart racing with anticipation to tell Lily about this. I can't wait to find out more about her and Dante.

After our meal, August and I decide to roam the resort further. The tension between us still lingers, but we're making an effort to enjoy our vacation. We stroll through lush gardens, hand in hand, the warm breeze ruffling our hair. It's a beautiful day, and the beauty of the surroundings begins to seep into my consciousness, soothing the worries that have been gnawing at me.

As we walk, I can't help but steal glances at August. Despite everything, I'm still drawn to him, still hopelessly infatuated. His profile is striking, his features chiseled and handsome. I wonder what's going on in his mind, if he's still upset about my decision to buy the apartment.

"August," I begin tentatively, "about what I told you last night..."

He glances at me, his expression guarded. "Layla, can we not talk about it right now?"

I nod, understanding his reluctance. We continue our walk in silence, the weight of our unspoken conversation hanging heavy between us.

As we meander through the resort, we enter a quaint little art gallery. The vibrant paintings and sculptures on display catch my eye, and I suggest that we take a look inside. August agrees, and we step into the world of art.

The gallery is a serene oasis, the vibrant colors and creative expressions of the artists serving as a welcome distraction. We move from one piece to another, discussing our interpretations and impressions. It's a small respite from the tensions of the morning, and I find myself enjoying our shared experience.

Amidst the art, I notice a particularly captivating painting. It's a surreal landscape, with vivid colors and dreamlike imagery. I'm drawn to it, unable to tear my gaze away. As I stand there, August comes up beside me, and for a moment, we're lost in the beauty of the artwork.

"It's mesmerizing, isn't it?" I say softly, my eyes still fixed on the painting.

August nods, his voice equally hushed. "Yeah, it's like stepping into another world."

We stand there for a while, simply absorbing the art. It's a moment of connection, a fleeting escape from the complexities of our relationship.

After we leave the art gallery, we decide to head back to our cabin to rest before dinner. The day has been eventful, and the tension between us has eased, if only slightly. As we enter our cabin, I can't help but feel a sense of uncertainty about what the future holds for us. But for now, I push those thoughts aside and focus on enjoying the rest of our vacation together.

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Layla 

August and I finally make our way back to the cabin. As we settle inside, I can't stop myself from reaching out to Lily. I need to know more about Dante, the man who seems to have a connection to her.

Dialing Lily's number, I wait anxiously for her to pick up. Her voice finally comes through the line, a mix of surprise and happiness in her tone. "Layla! It's been a while, how are you?"

A smile tugs at my lips at the sound of her voice. "I'm doing well. Listen, I need to ask you about something."

Her curiosity piqued, Lily replies, "Sure, what's on your mind?"

I take a deep breath, my curiosity and excitement mingling. "There's this man, Dante, who approached August and me at breakfast. He mentioned working with you. Who is he to you?"

There's a moment of silence on the other end of the line before Lily speaks, her voice slightly flustered. "Dante? Oh, um... we work together, yeah. He's just a colleague."

I raise an eyebrow, sensing something more in her words. "Just a colleague? Are you sure, Lily?"

She lets out a soft chuckle, the tension in her voice evident. "Yeah, Layla. There's really nothing between us."

I can't help but press further, a mischievous grin forming on my lips. "Oh come on, Lily. He's smoking hot. You should consider dropping Oliver and giving Dante a chance."

A low growl emanates from Lily, the jealousy in her voice evident. "Layla, don't start."

I burst into laughter, the image of Lily's reaction playing in my mind. "Oh, come on, Lily. You know I'm just teasing. Besides, August is way more handsome than Dante."

Lily's tone softens slightly, though she remains defensive. "Yeah, yeah. Look, I gotta go. Just drop it, okay?"

I giggle, unable to resist teasing her a bit more. "Alright, alright. Take care, Lily."

With a huff of exasperation, Lily hangs up, leaving me with a grin on my face. As I put my phone down, I can't help but chuckle at the thought of her reaction.

I startle as I turn around to find August leaning against the doorframe. I put my hand on my heart as it races, not expecting to find him there.

"You think Dante is hot, huh?" He growls, and I flush. The silliness of the situation doesn't go over my head, and I explode in laughter. The sound causes his lips to tip up in a small smile.

"The only thing that saved your ass some spanking was you saying I was much more handsome than Dante," he admits in a gruff voice, and even more giggles escape me.

He takes dominating strides towards me putting his hands around my face and kissing me gently. Then, he trails kisses down my neck, sucking my skin and biting it as well. Like lightning, we quickly undress each other. Dying to

feel skin against skin.

He put his fingers in my mouth before ordering me to suck and I do, he uses his fingers that are now lubricated with saliva to finger me, his thumb rolling my clit in expert motions that make my eyes roll to the back of my head.

He keeps on going till I cum on his fingers, and he slowly pulls them out of my hot heat, using my juices to jerk off for a minute before he lines himself up with my entrance. He pushes home and we both groan in pleasure, we fit perfectly, like we are made for each other. He carries me, my arms wrapping around his neck and my legs around his ass. He uses his astounding strength to bounce me on his cock, fucking me while he is standing and holding me up.

His amazing show of his strength makes my pussy clench tighter around him and he grunts. He continues bouncing me up and down on his cock, but this time he takes a nipple into his mouth, sucking it hard as my small tits shake in his face.

This, along with my clit rubbing against his abs is enough to get me to cum around his cock, screaming his name. After a couple more bounces, he follows right after me. Shooting his warm load inside of me.

He puts me down, and we both take deep breaths, trying to steady ourselves after our rough session. We enjoyed every minute of it.

After a moment, August carries me to the bathroom, proceeding to run a bath for the both of us. A smile makes its way to my lips as I see him setting the water temperature exactly the way I like it, even if it scorches him. He also uses my favorite scent of bubble soap, gardenia.

As we ease into the bath, the water envelops us in warmth, and the tension that had lingered between us seems to melt away. August's touch is gentle as he brushes his fingers along my shoulders, his touch sending shivers down my spine.

His voice is low, carrying a weight of sincerity as he speaks, "Being with you, Layla, it's like some of that darkness that's been haunting me for so long starts to lift."

I turn to face him, his eyes capturing mine in an unbreakable gaze. "And you, August, you chase away all my demons. You help set me free."

A small smile tugs at the corners of his lips, his expression tender. He runs a hand through my hair, the touch gentle and affectionate. "You're the light that breaks through the shadows, Layla."

Leaning in, he presses a soft kiss to my shoulder, the gesture filled with an unspoken promise of protection and support. I shift closer, running my fingers through the scruff of his facial hair, the touch both intimate and comforting.

"Thank you, August," I whisper, my voice sincere and filled with

appreciation. "For being here with me, for helping me heal."

His response is a whisper against my skin, his lips brushing my ear as he speaks, "Thank you for letting me in, Layla. For giving my life some color."

40

August



I awaken to find her naked form snuggled beside me, my arms wrapped tightly around her. I play with her long wavy hair, and she stirs, looking up at me with those beautiful brown eyes. A big smile spreads across her face as she reciprocates, hugging me back.

"Are you feeling okay? Sore?" I rasp in her ear, my voice rough from sleep. She giggles slightly, her hand playing with my beard. "Just a little sore," she responds, still smiling contentedly. "This feels really good." She purrs, referring to my facial hair.

A deep laugh rumbles in my chest, and I ask her, "Do you think I should shave it?" She immediately shakes her head, whispering roughly, "I will kill you. I love how it feels when you kiss me." I nod in acknowledgment, still chuckling.

"This is the best morning ever," she says, and I feel a sense of satisfaction.

I hate to admit it to myself, but I love this. This isn't supposed to be real, and I shouldn't like it or crave it, but I do, and it consumes me.

"It really is, my love," I whisper in her ear. The delicate strands of Layla's hair flowed through my fingers like silk, a sensation that sent a gentle wave of warmth through my chest.

The scent of beach and sun fills the room. Layla's eyes are closed, a serene smile gracing her lips, as my touch traces patterns through her hair.

Her fingers intertwine with mine, and it is as if a subtle current of connection

passes between us, sending a jolt through our bodies, it seems like we will never be immune to even the simplest touches from each other. Her presence beside me, her fingers brushing against mine, made my unwilling heart beat faster.

Breaking the silence that enveloped us, I murmur softly, my voice barely audible. "What do you think we should do today?" The knowledge of our impending departure hung in the air – our flight back home was just a couple of hours away.

It feels like time is slipping through my fingers, each moment more precious than the last.

Layla's eyes flicker open, and a playful glint dances in her gaze as she looks at me. "I vote for more lounging right here," she replies, her tone playfully teasing. "I think just lounging lazily on the beach is best before we head back to the cold."

A chuckle escapes my lips, and I give her hand a gentle squeeze, our fingers still intertwined. "Your idea has merit," I admit, a fond smile curving my lips. "Soaking up more sun before we head back is a good idea."

Layla's eyebrow arch in mock skepticism. "Sunbathing, huh?"

I nod, a grin tugging at my lips. "Why not? The weather is perfect, and it could be a nice change of pace."

She seems to consider my suggestion, tapping her chin as if in deep thought.

"Well, I suppose a bit of sun wouldn't hurt. But you know I'll probably end up looking like a lobster."

I couldn't help but chuckle again, my heart swelling with affection for her. "That's the charm of your pale skin," I say softly, my gaze locked on hers with genuine admiration. "It reminds me of freshly fallen snow. I love it, it suits you."

A blush tinges her cheeks, but her eyes hold a warmth that melted my heart. "You always know how to make me feel special," she replies, her voice affectionate.

Leaning in, I press a tender kiss to her forehead. "Because you are special," I whisper, my lips lingering against her skin. "Every moment with you is a treasure." I tell her softly.

Since I am really fond of teasing her, I start tickling her, causing laughter to erupt from her. She tries to fight back, but her petite frame is no match for mine. After about five minutes, tears of laughter stream down her face, and I decide to stop. As I let her compose herself, she quickly puts me on my back and straddles me. I gaze up at her with pride, enjoying the little burst of strength she showed me.

"Who's in control now?" she asks playfully while tickling me, and I raise an eyebrow before flipping us over, pinning her arms above her head.

She looks at me with eyes full of desire, her chest heaving.

I put more weight on her, and our tension becomes unbearable. I lean down, and we kiss passionately, our tongues meet in a heated battle. I break the kiss and start kissing her neck, eliciting a small moan from her.

Suddenly, she utters three words that freeze everything in me. "I love you," she moans, and my heart instantly turns to ice.

I right myself up, no longer on top of her, and feel as though my heart has stopped beating.

She sits up, her face a mix of confusion and hurt, as if I'm in the process of shattering her world.

However, in this moment, the guilt of loving her pulls me into a suffocating place. A place where I can't feel, move, or breathe. I feel paralyzed, as though I've lost control. I'd do anything to stop feeling like this, to escape from emotions I haven't experienced since the death of my parents, even if it means hurting her.

"I can never love a monster like you, Layla," I say, watching her face crumble before me.

Her eyes instantly well up with tears, and I feel numb. All I care about is escaping this situation that's consuming me alive, and now the only way that seems possible is to hurt her to the point of leaving me.

I've already gathered enough information from her to get my revenge. It's time for her to leave, no matter how much it hurts me. I don't listen to my

heart that feels like it's being stabbed repeatedly from the look on her face as I continue, "Do you really think anyone will ever love you if they find out the truth of where you come from?"

Her eyes search my face for the meaning of my words, looking as confused as she does hurt. "You're truly going to act like you don't know what I'm talking about?" I ask, feigning humor.

She stands up with shaking legs, grabbing her clothes and dressing herself hastily.

"I'm not going to stay for another minute and listen to your bullshit, August," she says firmly, despite the tears streaming down her face.

"You don't want to know what makes you a monster. What makes your entire family monsters?" I tell her, laughing bitterly. She ignores me and starts getting her purse ready to leave.

"Your family killed my father," I say with rage, and I hear her gasp, followed by her purse dropping to the ground, its contents spilling all over. She turns to look into my eyes, her own flooded with tears, shaking her head as if refusing to believe what I said.

"Lily's mother was under the influence of drugs and alcohol when she crashed into my father's car—drugs she had access to through the business your father and uncle ran. Well, your uncle was more focused on the drugs,

while your father was involved in a pedophile ring. A lucrative family business, don't you think?" I laugh bitterly, and her legs seem incapable of holding her anymore as she sits on the ground, starting to hyperventilate.

"Oh no, little dove, it doesn't end there. Your father then proceeded to get her off without a jail sentence, not even with a slap on the wrist. You're the Lexingtons, aren't you?" I tell her, and at this point, she seems to be dissociating from reality. She puts the contents of her purse back in and stands up on shaky legs, stumbling twice before finally finding balance. I clench and unclench my fists to stop myself from going over and helping her up.

She turns and starts walking out of the bedroom, but I refuse to let her leave without telling her the entire truth. "And Lily, sweet thing, isn't she? Your father certainly thinks so," I speak, my voice grating with rage.

She freezes and turns around to face me, her head tilted in confusion and fear. "Lily is innocent; she has nothing to do with the monstrosities of my family," she says with conviction, but I can't help but laugh, knowing how wrong she is.

"Lily is what we call a seductress, my dear; your father uses her to seal deals with different business partners—a gift, you could say. He certainly enjoys her himself," I tell her, watching as her face loses all its color at once. "She

and your father were planning to sell your virginity off soon," I deliver the killer blow.

She puts a hand against the wall and leans on it for support as her eyes seem to glaze over while processing everything. "My father and Lily sleep together? She knows all about the illegal rings and helps secure deals? She planned to sell me?" she fires off questions, and I nod to confirm each revelation.

She puts her hands on her knees and starts hyperventilating, and a scream tears through her before sobs echo through the room, as if among all the revelations, this was the worst.

"You may seem innocent now, little dove, but you have their blood in you, and that isn't comforting," I tell her, despite knowing that my little dove is incapable of hurting a fly.

But I cannot be with her; she must hate me.

Her telling me that she loves me, it woke me up from the trance that I was in, made me realize how important it is to cut her off, I already got what I wanted out of her. This is the right thing to do, my mind was clouded with her, that's why I didn't do it sooner, and this is what needed to be done. Then why does my heart feel like it is being ripped out from my chest?

She looks up at me with so much hurt before putting a hand over her mouth and rushing to the bathroom to throw up. I take this time to wipe a tear from

my eye; it hurts me to see her so hurt, but I don't have another choice. She must know the truth at some point anyway.

I hear the bathroom faucet turn on, and she seems to be rinsing her mouth. She exits the bathroom without looking at me, making her way out of the cabin to leave.

I make sure she left before dropping to my knees and screaming. I scream at fate for not allowing us to be together, for hurting the only woman I've ever loved, and for the fear of her hating me, even though that's my ultimate goal.

41

Layla

Sitting in the airport, the surroundings blur as my vision clouds with tears. My heart aches with a pain so intense, it feels like a physical weight pressing down on my chest.

August's betrayal echoes in my mind like a cruel refrain, each harsh word he spoke etching itself into my memory.

How did it come to this? How did the person I opened my heart to turn out to be someone I don't recognize? The tears stream down my cheeks, and I can feel the sobs wracking my body. It's as if my world is torn apart, and I'm left adrift in a sea of pain and confusion.

The memories of our time together play in my mind like a movie reel, the laughter, the shared moments, the whispered promises. I thought we were building something beautiful, something that could withstand anything.

But now I realize it's all been a facade, a carefully constructed illusion meant to deceive me.

The weight of his words hangs over me like a dark cloud. The secrets he exposed, the truths he revealed, leave me feeling exposed and vulnerable.

I never could have imagined that my own father, flawed as he is, could be involved in something so monstrous. A drug and pedophile ring? The words send shivers down my spine, and I feel sick to my stomach.

Amidst the chaos of my emotions, my phone begins to buzz incessantly, each notification a jarring interruption to my despair. I glance at the screen through tear-blurred eyes and see the flood of messages from Lily. Begging me to listen, to give her a chance to explain. Her calls go unanswered as I struggle to process the depth of the betrayal.

I open my web browser, my fingers trembling as I type in my father's name. The search results are damning, filled with articles detailing the horrors that August has exposed. My family's secrets are splashed across the internet, laid bare for the world to see. I feel a fresh wave of pain as I realize August hasn't given me a chance to come to terms with any of it. He's ripped away the facade, leaving me to grapple with the shocking reality. He didn't even give me time to adjust to the news before exposing it everywhere; he never once cared for me.

I hear my name being called over the intercom, signaling the final boarding call for my flight back to Seattle, and I feel a heaviness in my heart. The tears continue to fall, and my steps feel mechanical as I make my way towards the airplane.

Stepping into first class, I feel hateful gazes on me. Whispers and sidelong glances follow me as I make my way to my seat.

The recognition in their eyes, the hushed discussions, send a pang of self-consciousness coursing through me. It's as if my life has become a spectacle, laid bare for everyone to dissect.

My arms wrap around me instinctively, as if the physical barrier can shield me from the judgment and scrutiny. I sink into my seat, tears threatening to spill again.

The quiet sobbing seems to echo in my ears, a constant reminder of the pain that has become my new reality. The plush surroundings of the first-class cabin offer no solace, no escape from the turmoil within.

As the plane continues its journey, I try to shrink into myself, avoiding the eyes that seem to follow me.

The quiet hum of the engines is accompanied by the soft sound of my sniffles, my attempts to wipe away the tears that won't stop flowing. I feel exposed, as if the carefully constructed walls that shielded me from the world have crumbled overnight.

As the plane touches down, the tension in the cabin seems to rise. Passengers eagerly gather their belongings, preparing to disembark. But as I move to stand, an old lady suddenly blocks my path. Her words cut through the air like a blade, a venomous tirade that leaves me frozen in shock.

"How dare you show your face in public?" she spits, her voice dripping with disgust. "After all that has been exposed, you have the nerve to walk around as if nothing's wrong? Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

Her words are like a punch to the gut, each one a reminder of the shame and humiliation that has become my reality. I feel my cheeks burn, hot tears streaming down as I struggle to find a response. Before I can even muster a word, she continues, her anger unabated.

"I should kill you right here," she hisses, her voice low and threatening. "But I can't afford to be jailed for the likes of you."

With that final, chilling declaration, she waddles away, leaving me standing there, shaken and shattered. Her harsh words, the raw hatred in her eyes, cut me to my core. My head hangs low as I leave the airplane, the weight of the encounter still heavy on my heart.

Walking through the halls of Seattle's airport, my heart feels heavy, burdened by the sudden twist of my life. The faces around me seem distant and indifferent, lost in their own worlds as they hurry to their destinations. I clutch my bag tightly, as if it could protect me.

As I step outside the airport, the city's familiar skyline greets me. The sight is bittersweet, a reminder of the life I've known before everything fell apart.

With a deep breath, I hail a taxi, directing the driver to my new apartment. The apartment – a decision I've made on a gut feeling – has turned out to be

my saving grace in this storm. I'm thankful for that small victory amidst the wreckage of my life.

The taxi pulls up to the building, and I pay the fare and step out onto the sidewalk. But before I can even fully take in my surroundings, my eyes land on John.

He stands there, his normally stern face etched with sorrow as he takes in my disheveled appearance. The sight of him, someone I've come to trust, brings a rush of emotions bubbling to the surface.

Without hesitation, I launch myself at him, my fists connecting with his chest in a flurry of blows. "Did you know? Did you know?" The words tumble from my lips, each punch punctuating the anguish that has consumed me. The pain of August's deception and the horror of my family's secrets collide within me, a storm of emotions I can no longer contain.

He nods, his gaze heavy with regret and unshed tears. "I did," he admits, his voice strained. "I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't."

My fists continue to pound against his chest, the anger and betrayal fueling each strike. But as my strength wanes, he wraps his arms around me, pulling me close despite the blows. "I'm so sorry," he whispers, his voice trembling. "I couldn't protect you from this pain, and I couldn't tell you the truth."

Sobbing uncontrollably, I sag against him, my anger dissolving into a torrent of grief. The reality of my shattered world settles over me like a heavy

shroud. Everyone I've trusted, everyone I've loved, has betrayed me in their own ways. The weight of it all feels crushing, an unbearable burden I'm struggling to carry.

But in this moment, as I cling to John, his arms wrapped around me in a protective embrace, I find a sliver of comfort. Amidst the ugly mess, amidst the pain, I have someone who still cares. As my tears soak into his shirt, his touch is a lifeline. And so, I let myself collapse into his chest, surrendering to the sorrow and the comfort he offers, both of us crying together for the shattered pieces of my life.

42

Layla 

Closing the door behind me, I stand alone in my new apartment, the quietness of the space enveloping me. It's my refuge, a place I am happy to have secured in the midst of the storm that has become my life. After ushering John to leave, promising him that I'll be okay, I feel the loneliness making my bones cold.

I walk through the rooms, each corner a reminder of my attempt to carve out

a new beginning for myself. But as I step into my bedroom, the events of the day come crashing on me. Collapsing onto my bed, I bury my face in the pillow and let the sobs consume me once more.

Lily's name continues to flash on my phone's screen every fifteen minutes like a relentless reminder of her deceit. I've known her for so long, trusted her implicitly, and yet she's been plotting against me all this time. How could she have pretended to love me while planning something sinister for me all along?

It feels like a million knives are hurling at my chest, and a bolt of anger shoots through me. August – the man who has manipulated me, who has pretended to care while using me as a means to his end. The tears that have been my constant companions turn into flames of fury. Why has he chosen to involve me in his schemes? He could have gathered his information without luring me into false delusions, without making me believe in something that isn't real.

With trembling fingers, I reach for my phone. Lily's name blinks on the screen, but again, I ignore it. My determination to confront August is only accentuated by the hot red anger that courses through my veins. I navigate to his contact and press the call button, my heart pounding in my chest as the phone rings.

I take a deep breath, trying to maintain my strength to make the call. The

phone rings for what feels like an eternity, my heart pounding in my chest.

Finally, his voice crackles through the line. "Hello?"

"August," I say, my voice tinged with a mix of anger and pain, my eyes narrowing as I stare at nothing in particular. "We need to talk."

His response is a pause, one that stretches for a painfully long moment.

"Make it quick," he says curtly, his tone laced with impatience. "I'm on my way to Italy, and I'm quite busy."

His words hit me like a slap in the face. I furrow my eyebrows, anger coursing through me like a wildfire. How dare he be so dismissive, so callous after everything he has put me through? The words are on the tip of my tongue, ready to explode into a tirade, but he beats me to it.

"Look, Layla," he snaps, his tone turning harsh and cutting. "I've moved on from whatever it was between us. You should do the same."

My breath catches in my throat, hate overwhelming me. How can he be so heartless, so cruel? The words tumble out of my mouth before I can even think, a torrent of emotions spilling over. "You jerk! You can't just waltz into my life, turn it upside down, and then tell me to move on like it meant nothing!"

His retort is sharp, biting. "Well, that's exactly what I'm doing. It meant nothing."

The pain of his words pierces through me, the reality of his betrayal hitting

me all over again. But then, a voice cuts through from the background – a voice I recognize all too well. It's his secretary, a voice that drips with disdain as she speaks. "Baby, is she still chasing after you? Pathetic."

My eyes widen, my grip on the phone tightening. The shock of the moment is overwhelming, a stark reminder of the reality of the situation. He has moved on, he has someone else, probably had someone else for all this time we were "together," and I'm nothing more than an inconvenience to him now.

I can't take it any longer. I feel a scream of frustration and pain building up within me, and before I can stop myself, I let it out. "You heartless bastard! How could you do this to me?" The words are raw, filled with a pain that feels unbearable.

And then, without another word, I hang up the phone, my hand shaking. I can't bear to listen to him or his secretary any longer. I slam the phone against the wall, a mix of anger, sadness, and frustration coursing through me. The shattering sound seems to echo the fragments of my heart, broken and irreparable.

It feels like a boulder is pressing down on my chest. The raw pain and anger I've been holding back surge to the surface, overwhelming me. I sink to the floor, my back against the wall, hugging my knees to my chest. The world around me blurs as screams erupt from deep within me, tearing at my throat until it feels sore and raw.

Each cry is a release, a catharsis for the emotions that have been festering within me. I can't contain the anguish, the betrayal, the sheer agony that has consumed me. My cries hurt my throat as they erupt, the only sound in the empty apartment.

And then, just when I think I can't bear it any longer, I hear the door to my apartment begin to slam repeatedly, a relentless barrage that seems to shake the very foundation of the whole building. My head snaps up in confusion, and I strain to hear what's happening.

"Layla, please let me explain," Lily's voice pierces through the air, desperation and sorrow lacing her words. She slams the door even harder, as if trying to break through the physical barrier separating us. "I won't let you go through that pain alone. John told me you are here, I won't let you be alone now."

I blink in disbelief, unable to comprehend the situation. Lily, the person I've thought was my closest friend, the person who has been involved in my family's sinister secrets, is now standing outside my door, begging for forgiveness.

"Please, I can explain," her voice pleads, each word laced with regret and an urgency that leaves me bewildered.

My heart aches with confusion and a deep desire for answers. I push myself to my feet, my steps shaky as I approach the door. I hesitate for a moment,

my hand trembling as I reach for the doorknob. With a deep breath, I turn it slowly, the door creaking open to reveal Lily on the other side.

Her eyes are red-rimmed, her face streaked with tears, but there's a sincerity in her gaze that I can't deny. She steps closer, her body trembling with emotion, and she reaches out as if to touch me.

I back away, my own emotions a tumultuous storm inside me. "Explain," I whisper, my voice barely more than a hoarse murmur.

43

Layla



I take a breath to explain, dark emotions sweep through me. My heart starts pounding, and I change my mind in an instant; I don't want to hear whatever she has to say. My mind races; there is nothing she can tell me that would make her actions justified. I regret telling her to explain, and I cut her off before she even starts.

"Explain? Explain?" I shout, my voice filled with disbelief as I pace back and forth, my hands clenched into fists. Each word I utter is laced with anger that I can't contain.

Lily, her eyes are filled with remorse, begins to try to speak again, but before she can finish, I turn towards her and grab her by the collar of her shirt. "Explain what? How you and father were plotting to sell me all along?" The accusation hangs in the air, a dagger aimed at the heart of our friendship.

My anger and confusion reach a breaking point, and I can't contain it any longer. I start hitting myself, my fists connecting with my own body as if trying to punish myself for my naivety. "How you are involved in all of father's illegal deals, even help make them happen? How you sleep with father?" The words pour out like a torrent, each revelation a fresh wound that cuts deep.

Lily manages to stop my hands from striking myself, her whispered apologies a fragile attempt to calm the storm raging inside me. She tries to pull me into a hug, but I look at her with a gaze filled with pain and anger. "You are nobody, Lily," I spit out, my words dripping with bitterness. "Just a sad, pathetic pawn in a game played by ruthless men. A ran-through slut is all that you are."

Her eyes, once filled with remorse, turn red with anger. In a swift motion, she pushes me away from her, the force of it causing me to stumble backward. The room seems to spin as I fight to regain my balance, the air thick with tension and betrayal.

"How dare you?" She screams at me, her words full of hurt as she looks at me

like I am the one at fault. "Do you know how much I went through for you? I have been through hell to protect you." She barks out, her hands trembling at her side as tears flow down her cheeks.

"Oh please-" I chuckle humorlessly as I turn around to go back to my room, closing myself off from this conversation.

"I was eleven, Layla," She says, her voice cracking with pain, and I stop in my tracks, my heart racing at the possible meaning of her words. I turn to face her again, my legs shaking as I wait for her to continue.

She takes wide strides my way until she is facing me. Her hand reaches out to twirl my hair between her fingers as she whispers, "I was eleven when your father started to touch me just like this." I pale as she continues, my chest pounding with a combination of fright and disgust.

"But he didn't stop there, Layla," She whispers in my ear, and I feel my legs give out from under me. I sit on the floor next to her feet as she continues, "It was either you or me, Layla, and I chose to put myself through that to protect you."

"And then after a couple of years, when I hit puberty, I started to not satisfy his pedophilic urges anymore. I had to think of a plan to protect you from him, and that's when I started convincing him to sell your virginity when you're older. I started telling him of all the money he could make from selling off his daughter, pure. Each year he would nag at me that it's time, but I

would come up with a reason to postpone it to another year. I vowed to come up with an escape for us before that could ever happen." She tells me shakily, looking off to the distance, and when I try to reach for her hand, she pulls it roughly from mine. I feel a sob rake through me as guilt eats me from the inside out.

"By convincing him of this, I had to take your destined place as the seductress. I did awful things, I am not going to deny that, but I do not regret anything. I did them all to protect you. I have demons that haunt me because of all that I was forced to do, never felt happy a day since my eleventh birthday. I even had to be with someone I hated, all to appease your father. But if time goes back, I wouldn't change a thing because my actions meant that you could stay safe, it meant I could fight the battles that were meant for you." She says as tears flow down her cheeks, she turns to look at me, her eyes full of pain.

"I endured years of abuse for you, got scarred for life for you, have wounds that will never heal for you. And when a man comes along and shit-talks me to you, you believe him instantly without even hearing me out. Is this how you repay me for all that I did? No one in this world can ever love you more than me, Layla. No one in this world will ever sacrifice what I did for you." She says, appearing broken, tears streaming down her beautiful face, and I feel self-hatred eat away at my heart.

She turns away to leave, and I clutch onto her knees, feeling like I am holding onto the last threads of my world. Tears stream down my face, and my voice trembles with desperation as I beg her not to leave me.

"Lily, please... please don't go," I choke out, my heart aching with the intensity of my emotions. "You can't leave me now. You mean everything to me. I promise I didn't mean what I said."

Lily's eyes look distant, like she is lost in her own thoughts, her own pain. I hold on tighter, hoping that my grip can convey the depth of my feelings when words seem insufficient.

"Thank you, Lily. Thank you for being my rock, for being there when no one else was," I whisper, my voice carrying the weight of genuine gratitude. "You've stopped so much darkness from coming to me, you saved me. I am sorry for all the things you went through for my expense, I am so sorry."

But Lily remains silent, her gaze still distant, unresponsive to my words. Any hope I had in me begins to wane. My world is unraveling as I cling desperately to Lily's knees. Hot tears flow down my cheeks, each drop a testament to the depths of my desperation.

"Lily, please, please don't go," I implore, my voice cracking with my emotions. "I can't bear the thought of losing you. You're everything to me."

But Lily's eyes remain vacant, her expression a painful mask of resignation. She gazes down at me, her lips trembling as though holding back words that

remain trapped within her.

I tighten my grip on her knees, my fingers digging into her jeans. I have always depended on Lily in ways that are probably unhealthy, and the mere idea of our connection shattering because of me is unbearable.

Lily never once looks at me, unreachable. My heart sinks, realizing that my words seem to fall into an abyss, I say, "I'm sorry, Lily. So profoundly sorry," my voice trembling with remorse.

"I've made mistakes, hurt you in ways that I can never undo. But I didn't mean any of it, I apologize."

A heavy silence hangs between us, broken only by my soft sobs. I cling to Lily's knees as if they are a lifeline, as if my entire world depends on this one fragile moment.

Then, something shifts in Lily's expression. A glimmer of emotion, a final tear escapes her eye. My heart surges with hope.

But that hope is short-lived. Lily's broken gaze meets mine, and in that instant, I understand that the pain I've inflicted is beyond repair. With a trembling hand, she gently pushes me away, disentangling herself from my desperate embrace.

I fall on my ass, my heart shattering as I watch Lily take steps out of my apartment. The place seems to grow colder, emptier, as she moves toward the door. I want to reach out, to stop her, but my limbs feel heavy, uncooperative,

and my voice is way too hoarse to utter any more words.

And then, Lily is gone. The door closes softly, sealing my fate. The apartment feels cavernous, loneliness and self-hate bites away at my skin.

With a guttural cry of anguish, my fists clench, and I stumble into the kitchen. Tears blur my vision as I swipe my arm across the countertop, sending plates and glasses crashing to the floor. Each shattering sound reminds me of the world that is now shattering.

As the last glass falls and shatters, I sink to my knees amidst the wreckage. My body is wracked with sobs, and the apartment now mirrors my heart as well as my life—broken, shattered, beyond repair. The weight of my mistakes bears down on me, an oppressive burden I can't escape.

44

August



In the bustling airport, I stand with my secretary Stacy, who had

insisted on coming to Miami so we can depart from the same airport, which is completely unnecessary in my opinion, but I have no energy to argue, my soul drained from what went on with Layla. The throngs of travelers are a distant backdrop to the hurt I feel in my chest.

I notice Layla calling me, and my heart aches. I cannot go back on my decision. I cannot be with her; we are not meant to be. So, I am very harsh to her during the call.

I tell her that what we had was nothing, that she should move on because I have, but that isn't the truth. I can never move on from Layla; I am pretty sure she has carved her name in my heart. I love her more than words can say, more than I would like to admit. But I cannot be with her; our past is too twisted.

A sense of discomfort prickles at my consciousness, and I glance around to see that Stacy has sneaked up behind me, a smug expression on her face. I realize she has overheard the last part of our conversation. Rage twists my insides.

Suddenly, she opens her mouth and says, "Baby, is she still chasing after you? Pathetic." My heart drops, and my chest surges with anger as I realize what she did. She wants Layla to think we had something going on, that my heart belongs to someone other than her. My grip on the phone is so tight I think it will crack under my fingers, and I register that Layla has ended the

call.

"Pathetic? Layla is anything but pathetic," I shoot back, my voice trembling with the need to murder Stacy. No one talks badly about the women residing in my heart, especially in my presence.

Our eyes lock, and I can see the sick smugness in her eyes, a smile etched on her features as if she finally has a chance with me now after that disgusting thing she did. It is then that impulse takes over reason. I reach out and grip her arm, my fingers tightening in a vice-like grip as I propel her towards the exit, my travel plans forgotten.

Once we are seated in the car, her satisfaction seems to pour forth from every pore. She has always carried a torch for me, and this incident is an opportunity she has seized with cunning precision.

My hands clench around the steering wheel as I find a quiet spot to pull over. I turn to her, my anger threatening to break free from its fragile restraints. "Listen to me," I grind out, my words laced with violence. "You mean nothing to me. My heart belongs to Layla."

A crimson hue creeps up her cheeks, a cocktail of anger and humiliation swirling in her gaze. She shoots back, her voice sharp with challenge. "Lair, you clearly don't love her, she doesn't even deserve you. I have waited for you for years. I won't allow her to steal you from me. We are perfect for each other."

My patience snaps. In one swift motion, I retrieve a gun hidden beneath the seat, its cold weight familiar and foreboding. The weapon finds its place between us, my trembling hand pointing it straight at her head. I have to constantly remind myself that I do not hurt women. I am seconds away from blowing her brains out.

"Never insult Layla again, I was never yours for her to steal me. Every inch of me is hers." I warn, my voice icy as I fix her with a steely gaze. "I have a policy of not harming women, but if you don't step out of this car right now, I'll make an exception."

Her defiance wavers, replaced by a raw fear that dances in her eyes. She scrambles out of the car, stumbling away from me as the gravity of the situation sinks in. Her retreating steps are marked by a newfound vulnerability, and she can't help but offer one last parting shot. "I'll see you back in the office when you come to your senses."

My reply is cold, unyielding, the gun a somber reminder of the lines that have been crossed. "If I ever lay eyes on you again, I won't hesitate to end you."

She scrambles away, and I feel my hands shake at the images of me choking her to death. "I do not hurt women," I keep repeating as a mantra in my head. I try to calm myself down, running a hand through my hair as I take a deep breath, willing the murderous urges in me to stifle down.

My phone rings, breaking the silence that has settled over the car. In that split

second, a desperate hope flares up within me, a yearning for the one person I shouldn't want to hear from. I pray that it is Layla, that she has called me again. I cannot understand my own contradiction.

But as I look at the screen, my heart clenches. It isn't Layla. It is Cole. I answer, my voice tinged with the exhaustion I feel. "Hey, Cole."

"August!" Cole's voice rings out proudly, oblivious to the state I am in. "It's done. I exposed the Lexingtons."

My breath catches in my throat. The words reverberate through my mind like a thunderclap. It is done. The truth about the Lexingtons, the darkness that has haunted me for so long, is finally out in the open. A mix of emotions surges within me—relief, triumph, but above all, a gnawing worry for Layla.

"You did it?" I ask, my voice betraying a sense of urgency. "Why now? It wasn't supposed to happen so soon."

Cole's response is tinged with confusion. "What do you mean? I thought the timing didn't matter as long as it got out there."

I hang up without another word, my heart racing, my mind a whirlwind of thoughts. I open my search engine, my fingers typing out the dreaded name—Lexingtons. The results flood the screen, multiple articles and news channels reporting the sordid tales, backed by evidence that I have meticulously gathered.

I click through the articles, and my chest constricts. The Lexingtons have

built their empire on a foundation of lies and corruption, and now the world is witnessing their downfall.

But amid the tumult of emotions, my thoughts are consumed by Layla. How is she dealing with this onslaught? Just days ago, she was thrust into a whirlwind of revelations, of emotions, and now this—another layer of her reality torn apart. My chest tightens as I picture her struggling to process it all, to find her footing in a world that has been upended.

I know that our relationship can never be what I want it to be, that the barriers between us are insurmountable. I understand the necessity of making her hate me, of pushing her away for her own sake. But in this moment, all that rationale fades, and the only thing that remains is a burning desire to be there for her, to explain that there is nothing between me and my secretary, that my heart, my mind, my soul are all hers.

I know I cannot call her, cannot reach out. It will only complicate matters further. And yet, as I stare at my phone, I cannot help but wish for a miracle—that Layla will defy all odds and somehow understand the truth beneath the layers of deception. That she will see through the pain I have caused and hear the desperate plea in my heart.

Worry consumes me, gnawing at my chest like a relentless hunger. I cannot shake the image of Layla, her world unraveling.

My fingers tremble as I dial John. He picks up after a few rings, and I waste

no time. "John, I need you to do something for me."

There is a sigh on the other end of the line, a resigned exhale that speaks of familiarity with my demands. "What is it, boss?"

"Protect Layla," I instruct, my voice laced with urgency. "Keep an eye on her, make sure she's safe. Report to me immediately if anything seems off."

There is a brief pause before John responds, his tone tinged with tension. "I'll keep an eye on her."

I hang up, my fingers gripping the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white. My mind is a maelstrom of emotions—guilt, concern, and an overwhelming desire to shield Layla from the storm I have inadvertently set into motion.

I slam my hand against the steering wheel, frustration and helplessness coursing through me. This is supposed to be a triumph, a culmination of years of hard work. I have meticulously built the foundation that will expose the Lexingtons for who they truly are. This should have been a moment of elation, of satisfaction. So, why do I feel this way?

My emotions churn, a tumultuous blend of longing and despair. I know why—Layla. She has unknowingly become the axis around which my world revolves. The very thought of her in pain, in turmoil, ignites a fire within me that I cannot control.

This is not how it is supposed to be. I have constructed walls around me to

keep her away. But now those walls are confining me, suffocating me. My rational mind clashes with my heart, and I cannot escape the truth—I want to be there for her, to grovel to have her back. But I just know I cannot.

45

August



I book a last-minute ticket to Seattle, urgency pushing me forward as the plane touches down on unfamiliar ground. I can't stand the silence in my own home, the absence of Layla creating a void that swallows me whole. So, I find myself in my office, surrounded by the familiar trappings of work, yet unable to escape the consuming thoughts of her.

I pour myself a glass of whiskey, its burn a fleeting distraction from the

turmoil churning inside me. But even as the alcohol slides down my throat, the sharp edges of my emotions remain unblunted. The weight of my decisions, the guilt, and longing, press down upon me like a heavy fog.

Abruptly, the door to my office explodes open, a wave of pent-up fury preceding Dante's entrance. His very presence a tempest of anger and resentment. His eyes are ablaze, reddened with unchecked rage, and the tension emanating from him is undeniable.

Before anyone can react, he strides past my bewildered staff, their attempts to intervene lacking as he waves them off with one arm. I raise a hand, gesturing for them to stand down, allowing Dante to enter my office. He closes the door behind him.

His glare is unrelenting as he focuses on me, the intensity of his anger like a physical force that sears the air. Despite his entrance resembling a furious blizzard, I remain seated behind my desk, unaffected by the tempest he has brought with him. My posture remains unchanged, my gaze level as I meet his fiery eyes with calm detachment.

The storm of Dante's emotions churns, his glare directed at me like he wants to kill me. The corners of my lips twitch, an almost imperceptible challenge flickering in my expression. The contrast between his rage and my composed demeanor is stark, which seems to make him even angrier.

I meet his glare with indifference. My voice is measured when I finally

speak. "You have something to say, Dante?"

Without warning, his fist arcs through the air, connecting solidly with my jaw. The impact sends a shockwave through me, snapping my head to the side.

The force of the blow fuels my own adrenaline, my body reacting instinctively. I lunge forward, grappling with Dante as our tempers flare into a fierce, unbridled struggle. Fists exchange blows, each punch a vent for the pent-up frustration that has consumed us both.

Finally, the storm of our rage begins to subside, the intensity of our struggle winding down until we stand facing each other, both of us panting and bruised.

I gesture to the seat, and we sit across from each other. I reach for the whiskey bottle on my desk, pouring two glasses without a word. The amber liquid swirls into the glasses.

I push a glass towards him, and he accepts the drink with a grunt. We sip the whiskey as we regain our breath.

His features are etched with lingering anger, his intense gaze never straying from mine. "You know," he begins, his voice laden with a simmering resentment, "I really don't appreciate what you did to Lily."

I scoff, a bitter edge creeping into my tone. "I didn't fabricate anything. I just exposed what she has been doing."

Dante's glare could have burned holes through steel as he leans forward, his voice low and laden with a potent mix of anger and accusation. "You don't get it, do you? Lily fought battles that were meant for Layla. She shielded her from the darkness, took abuse so Layla could be safe."

I try to deny it because believing it would mean that I truly did something unforgivable to these girls. Before I can deny it much longer, his gruff voice cuts me off, his expression lethal. "Lily only came up with the plan to sell Layla's virginity to assure she is safe. He would have raped her if Lily didn't do that; she meant to escape with Layla before that ever happened."

I feel my heart drop and my stomach twist as he continues. "She took on the role of the seductress in Layla's place. She had to do unspeakable things just so your women didn't have to. She protected her tooth and nail."

The weight of his words hits me like a ton of bricks, realization crashing over me like a tidal wave. Lily's sacrifice, the torment she endured—it all falls into place. The pieces of the puzzle that I had chosen to ignore suddenly form a clear picture of the lengths Lily had gone to protect Layla.

I pale, guilt washing over me like a relentless tide. The implications of my actions, the pain I had inadvertently caused both Lily and Layla, are undeniable. My hand trembles slightly as I bring it to my chin, rubbing at my beard in frustration.

Dante's voice is a low, raw growl as he continues, his words a condemnation

that pierces through my defenses. "She did things she shouldn't have had to do, all to protect your little dove."

A heavy sigh escapes me, guilt and regret weighing down my every breath. I feel the weight of my mistakes settle like an anchor around my neck. "I know," I mutter, my voice tinged with guilt. The truth was in front of me all along, I just chose to ignore it.

Dante's gaze holds mine, understanding passing between us. "You punished two innocent girls for something they had no hand in," he states.

My hand trembles, the weight of my actions crashing down on me like a tidal wave. His words reverberate in my mind, the reality of my choices becoming painfully clear.

But he isn't done; his voice softens as he continues. "Layla has nothing to do with your parents' death. Why are you punishing her for it?"

My head snaps up, surprise and realization etched across my features. "How do you know about my parents?" I ask.

Dante smirks, a wry twist to his lips. "Layla is really important to Lily. I did a bit of digging to find out who she was involved with."

I fall back into my seat, my hand rubbing my face in exasperation. "I messed up," I mumble, the weight of my actions crashing over me like a tidal wave.

His gaze holds mine, his expression a mixture of understanding and gravity. "You messed up," he agrees, his voice laced with the weight of truth. "You

need to grovel."

I nod slowly, the realization settling over me like a heavy fog. "A whole lot,"

I add, a sense of determination mingling with the guilt that consumes me.

46

Layla 

I lie in my bed, consumed by disgust. It has been a week since my last shower, and I reek. I must look like a complete mess, a reflection of the turmoil within me. Words cannot express the self-loathing I feel. I am like one of those monsters that appear beautiful on the outside but are a tangled, horrifying mess on the inside. Just like August Steele. There is no difference between him and me.

Well, perhaps there is one integral difference. He became a monster due to my family's actions. As for me, I was born one—I just never realized it. But that still doesn't justify August's actions.

Lily, my father put her through unimaginable pain, yet she remained an angel, a guardian for me. And I tore her wings off and fed them to her.

I don't deserve Lily. I wish she had let me suffer—be raped and tortured—while she lived her life and protected herself. Because I deserve it.

I deserve to be treated like scum, for that's what I am. I hurt my real soul mate, my best friend, and my protector for the infatuation I had with a man. And what did it gain me? The man I gave myself to, the man I believed over someone who truly cares for me, discarded me like I meant nothing. Because in reality, I mean nothing.

I wish Lily had fought for someone who actually meant something—herself.

I wish Lily had fought for Lily.

Finally, I drag myself out of bed, nearly suffocating from my own stench, and make my way to the bathroom. I strip off my week-old clothes stained with tears, mucus, and who knows what else, and stand before the mirror.

The woman staring back at me is an exact reflection of the monster I am inside. My hair resembles a rat's nest, golf ball-sized bags weigh down my eyes, my lips are chapped and bloody, and my ribs poke out from my emaciated stomach. I don't deserve to eat, so I don't. My diet for the past

week consisted of a couple of pieces of toast; I can't stomach food nor am I deserving of it.

I turn on the shower, letting ice-cold water wash over me. From this day forward, I will fully embrace the monster I am. I will relieve Lily of the burden of pretending to be a monster and reclaim the title for myself. I will be her guardian angel this time; she is the only weak spot a villain like me is allowed to have.

I shave, spending half an hour untangling and brushing my hair, which I haven't touched in a week. I apply a face mask and pamper myself. I am going to chew men up and spit them out.

If my father wants a seductress to further his deals, then a seductress he shall have. Only this time, it won't be Lily. It will be me. If anyone in the world deserves my sacrifices, it's her. And it's not even a sacrifice; I was born for this. The position of the seductress was meant for me since birth; I was born to lure men, born to be a sexual being.

Practice makes perfect, right? I am determined to take Lily's place. I wish I could alleviate her pain, but I know I can't. So, I'll settle for preventing any future pain from reaching her. However, I realize I don't have enough experience for that. I've only slept with one man in the twenty-three years I've been alive. While he had many kinks and taught me many things, I need more practice and experience to become the perfect seductress my father desires.

The fact that I now equate August Steele to "just a man" hits me like a ton of bricks. That's what he is now—just a man—no matter what my heart tells me. He is nothing. Just a man I slept with.

I step out of the shower, blow-dry and style my hair, and conceal my tired eyes with makeup before applying bright red lipstick. I try to imitate Lily's makeup style as much as I can. I miss her like crazy; she hasn't called me since our encounter a week ago. I understand her though; why would she want to talk to an ungrateful monster like me? I just hope she is somewhere resting and not doing my father's dirty work. The police still have not caught him despite trying their hardest; unfortunately, the manhunt dedicated to him still has not located him, which means that his monstrosities are still continuing.

I open my closet and rummage through it. I find a super short black lace dress that could pass as lingerie. It's backless, with a plunging neckline and barely covers my butt, I bought it specifically for sexy time with August but now it has other purposes. I put it on, completely bare underneath. I am a seductress now, after all. Just as I'm about to leave, something sparkling catches my eye on the floor. I approach it and ecstatically discover it's Lily's engagement ring from that prick, Oliver Davis.

I slip on the ring onto my finger, deciding that if my father isn't caught, and he still has control over Lily, I will be the one to marry Oliver Davis. I will be

his fiancée, his future wife. I will free my sweet Lily from this burden. I spritz perfume on myself, grab my handbag stuffed with cash, and slip on incredibly high heels that make my legs look long and toned. Then I leave the apartment, my walk confident and sexy, a way I never walked before.

Once outside, I hail a taxi and head to a notorious downtown club called Red. It's time for me to embrace the persona I was always meant to be, the persona I was born for. When the taxi arrives at the club, I pay the fare, offering the driver a playful wink. I sashay into the club, swaying my hips seductively, and take a seat at the bar.

I scan the room, searching for the perfect man to seduce tonight. I nurse the whiskey I ordered as my eyes roam, though no one here is as handsome as August.

I remind myself that he is now a thing of the past. Finally, a tall man captures my attention. He has deep hazel eyes and black hair tied up in a man bun. August does not have hair that long. I wonder what it would feel like to run my hands through this man's hair while he pleases me.

He is also quite tall, but what truly captivates me are his full, juicy lips. This is the man, the first man I will seduce as Layla the seductress.

I slide off my chair and approach him. I watch as his gaze devours me, and then I wrap my hands around his neck. With a deliberate rasp in my voice, I whisper in his ear, "Are you alone tonight?"

He chuckles, sending shivers down my spine, before responding, "From the ring pressing against my neck, I should be asking you that question." My hands glide up to his hair, freeing it from the tie, and I play with the luscious locks. "I am alone tonight. Tell me, would you like to feel that ring on places other than your neck?"

I swear I hear a faint moan escape his lips. I derive no pleasure from this, though. I am on autopilot, merely practicing. This is my way of proving that I can save Lily from the fate of the seductress. I ensure that my body melds into his, that my eyes exude desire, and that my fingers enthusiastically play in his hair.

I take calculated steps to appear to enjoy this encounter because a seductress would. I feel his hands move from his sides, finally touching my naked back and caressing it. That's when I notice a ring on his finger. He's married. I fight the urge to grimace. A seductress would never let that stop her. He leans in with a nod, and we kiss.

His mouth feels all wrong, his tongue entwined with mine feels wrong, and his hands on me feel wrong. It was different with August—it felt right. But August is no longer part of my life, and this is what I must do to save Lily. So, I let out a calculated moan, showing him that I'm enjoying his touch, even though I'm not. Suddenly, he is gone. I open my eyes in shock to see August holding him up by the neck. Why is he here? How did he find me?

August's gaze turns towards me, a glimmer of murderous rage in his eyes. They are terrifying, swimming in anger. "Did you enjoy the way he kissed you?" he growls, his voice clouded with so much fury that I can barely recognize it. But I've had enough—enough of him discarding me and returning as if I must answer to him, enough of being threatened and violated by the men in my life. So, I make sure my voice comes out in a seductive tone, "No, August, I didn't just like his kiss. I loved it." And that's when all hell breaks loose.

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August 

I tremble with worry as I gaze at Layla's bedroom, she isn't there even though she usually would be fast asleep at this time. It has been a week since

I have broken her heart, a week of planning how to get her back to me, how to grovel to be worth even a second of her time.

I can't stay away though, at night when I lie in my cold bed, I always end up going to my car and heading to park outside her apartment, just to get even a small glimpse of her. The weight of guilt consumes me as I realize the depth of pain I've inflicted upon a genuinely good woman. Deep down, I've always known that she possesses a gentle soul, though I refused to acknowledge it.

Now, I must face the consequences of my actions—the inability to touch her, to breathe in her scent, to hear her voice. I understand that she needs time and space to process the revelations, but her absence is tearing me apart.

Witnessing her struggle, knowing that I am a significant cause of her pain, yet being unable to be by her side, it's an agony I cannot bear.

I decided to grant her the necessary breathing room before making my move. I refuse to let her slip away.

I won't allow another man to swoop in and mend the pieces I shattered. I vow to ensure she no longer sheds tears of pain, not because of me or anyone else on this earth.

Another five minutes pass without Layla's return, and my nervous energy intensifies. It's unusual for her to sleep anywhere other than her own bed; my bed has been the only exception. Well, it used to be. It's highly unlikely she's sleeping on the couch. I call upon John, who is lounging in the parked car

next to me and tell him my concern.

"Mr. Steele, please do not worry. We have security personnel everywhere, and no one has reported any suspicious activity. However, I will knock on her door to check up on her, just to put your mind at ease," John assures me in a composed manner. I nod in gratitude as he proceeds to enter the building to inquire about my beloved white dove.

Ten minutes pass since his departure, and still, there is no sign of him. Filled with mounting anxiety, I open the car door, ready to rush inside. Just as I step out of the car, John comes sprinting toward me, his face flushed and drenched in sweat. My heart races in response to his urgency.

"Mr. Steele, Layla isn't in her apartment. I knocked and called repeatedly, she didn't answer," he blurts out, his words hurried and his features marked with concern.

My chest tightens instantly, and panic surges through me. Layla has left the apartment on her own, without any protection, in such a fragile state. What if someone takes advantage of her vulnerability? Moreover, she hasn't been eating properly, and her weakness adds to my growing alarm. What if she collapses somewhere? What if she contemplates doing something to herself? Desperation grips me, and I find myself striking my chest, attempting to calm the racing of my heart so I can focus on what needs to be done next.

The atmosphere around me thickens with panic, yet John swiftly formulates a

plan. He sends security personnel to scour the nearby streets, and requests footage from all the security cameras around for the past couple of hours to be sent to his phone.

John assures me that we will find her, but I struggle to find solace in his words. What if she has departed with the intention of starting a new life in some faraway place? Perhaps she has someone who can facilitate such a move—Dante. Helping her would make Lily happy, and that man is obsessed with her, he would stop at nothing to get in her good graces. The thought fills me with an excruciating blend of fear and uncontrollable anger.

If Layla reached out to him for help, it would drive me to madness. I alone am responsible for soothing her pain and pleasing her. No other man has the right to believe they can heal the wounds I've inflicted upon her. She is mine to please and to make whole again. It's no one else's duty or concern.

John interrupts the haze of my thoughts, informing me that the security cameras captured Layla heading out in a cab.

Normally, I would reprimand the security team for their negligence, but it's not the time for it now. All my focus is directed at finding her. I urgently demand to see the footage, noting a flicker of unease on John's face.

"Mr. Steele, considering your current state, I don't think it's a good idea for you to watch this video," he says nervously, raising my hackles instantly.

"What the hell do you mean, John?" I growl, my anger simmering beneath

the surface. He rubs his neck anxiously and urges me to control my anger before showing me the footage.

I'm certain that a blood vessel bursts in my eyes the moment I watch the video. Blood rushes to my face, and I'm convinced smoke is billowing out of my ears, much like in the cartoons. Layla left the house wearing nothing but lingerie. She's probably flaunting my property to everyone, and the thought ignites a raging fire within me. I would gouge out the eyes of any man who dares to ogle her, and sever their hands if they dare to touch her.

I wonder where she's headed dressed like that, and I pray for my sanity—and her ass—that it's not to be with another man. I would kill him without hesitation if he even glances at her the way I do.

I don't realize how tightly I've been clutching John's phone until the screen cracks down the center. I thrust the phone back at him, demanding that he delete the footage. It's bad enough that he saw my girl in such a state; I won't allow anyone else to have access to a video of her barely dressed. John issues the order to delete the footage to someone else, but my attention is drawn away by the ringing of my phone.

It's an unknown number, and my gut tells me it's related to Layla. I answer, and Dante grates his voice through the receiver.

"Do you happen to have lost a possession, August? Specifically, someone who stands five foot two and is wearing a microscopic dress?" he tells me,

fueling my anger.

"Just tell me where the fuck she is. Don't play with me," I snarl, struggling to contain my rage at the mere thought of others seeing my Layla in that state.

"Well, she seems to be enjoying herself. Did you know she's into man buns? Terrible taste, if you ask me," he says, injecting a hint of humor that sends me into a frenzy.

"What the fuck are you implying?" I ask, fearing his response. I won't like the person I will become if his insinuation is true.

"I mean she's currently undoing some guy's man bun and playing with his hair. Do you think she wants to braid it or something? Women are into that shit," he says, laughing. I emit a primal scream, my breath coming out in uneven gasps. The thought of Layla in the arms of another man is a torment in itself.

"Where. The. Fuck. Is. She?" I growl each word like an animal, barely coherent.

"Relax, you'll do something you regret if you arrive in this state. She's at my downtown club, Red. If you want to remain the only man who's touched her, I suggest you hurry. Things are progressing rather quickly," he responds, and I don't need to be told twice. I swiftly get into my car and speed off, with John trailing closely behind.

As I race through the city streets, my heart pounds like a war drum, matching

the urgency of my thoughts. Layla, in that vulnerable state, surrounded by strangers, and in a club owned by a man who has his own agenda, is a recipe for disaster. I've never felt such desperation and helplessness before. It's like a fire rages inside me, consuming everything in its path, leaving only a singular focus—rescuing Layla.

The neon lights of the club, Red, come into view, and I park the car hastily, not caring about proper parking procedures. John is right behind me, his eyes reflecting concern and fear.

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August



I storm into the dimly lit club, my pulse echoing the heavy bass of the music. People dance, lost in their own worlds, but my focus is solely on finding her. Layla. The mere thought of her with someone else sends a surge of possessiveness through me, an intensity I have never experienced before.

As I push through the crowd, a mixture of anger and anxiety fuels my steps. Every beat of the music feels like a pounding reminder of what I might find. And then, there she is.

Layla stands amidst the pulsating lights, her laughter mingling with the chaotic ambiance of the club. Her eyes, those eyes that held mine with an intensity I couldn't forget, are now fixed on another man. My chest tightens, and I can't tear my gaze away from the sight that ignites a storm within me.

Her smile, the one I thought was reserved for me alone, is now directed at

someone else. A dark cloud of jealousy overshadows my thoughts, and an instinctual need to reclaim what is mine surges through me.

With determination, I approach them, my steps steady and resolute. I see his hand on her waist and his lips on her; this sends a jolt of possessive anger through me. Without thinking, my hand shoots out, gripping his shoulder with a force that matches the turmoil inside me. I pull him back, a growl escaping my lips.

He stumbles, his surprise quickly turning into irritation. Our eyes lock, and I can't help but notice the defiance in his gaze. I hold him in my grip, my fingers digging into his flesh, lifting him off the ground. But my eyes never leave Layla's, even as she meets my gaze with a mixture of shock and defiance.

"Did you like his kiss?" I snarl, my voice laced with anger and a pain I can't deny.

Layla's response, the unapologetic admission that she had "loved it," strikes me like a blow to the gut. The surge of rage that follows is blinding, a white-hot fire that consumes reason and judgment.

I release the man, my hand transforming into a fist, striking blow after blow. The thud of my fists against his body is almost rhythmic, each hit a physical manifestation of the chaos that rages within me. The music, the laughter, the voices of the club-goers—all fade into the background as my entire world

narrows down to the figure in front of me.

Layla's voice reaches me, distant and desperate. "August, stop!"

But I can't stop. Not now. The need to obliterate any trace of the threat, to prove that no one else can claim her attention, fuels my relentless assault. It takes the combined efforts of security and bystanders to pull me away, my chest heaving with exertion and the storm of emotions that have driven me to this point.

I register Dante's presence in the midst of the chaos. His sharp eyes catch mine, and he tilts his head ever so slightly, telling me that he will handle the situation here. I nod in response.

Turning my attention back to Layla, I hold her hand in a tight grip. A gnawing emptiness is growing in me, making me feel hollow.

With angry strides, I lead her away from the scene, guiding her through the maze of bodies. But as we move, my gaze catches John, his expression a mix of shame and desperation as Layla looks at him, and I can see the plea in her eyes. It's as if she's silently begging him to choose her this time.

John's eyes meet mine, and something shifts within him. Determination replaces the shame, and he reaches out, placing a gentle hand on my chest. His touch is meant to calm me, to persuade me to reason, but I'm not in a place for reason.

I gently push his hand away, my focus solely on Layla. I need her to hear me

out. Without another word, I guide her screaming form to the car waiting just outside the club.

As I settle into the driver's seat, her cursing fills the car, telling me off. Starting the engine, I navigate the familiar streets, each turn taking us closer to my house.

I reach out and gently place a hand on her thigh, and she rips it off her like my touch burned. My teeth clench, and I take a breath to calm myself down.

"Layla, please," I implore, my voice laced with urgency. "We need to talk."

She jerks her arm away from my touch, her voice rising with rage. "I don't want to talk to you, August. Don't you dare think that your return changes anything. You're nothing but another man to me now, you hold no place in my heart."

I feel the weight of her words like a physical blow, a reminder of the rift I created between us. My heart constricts, the pain of her indifference digging deep into my chest. But I refuse to let her slip away from me like this.

"Layla," I say, my voice low but resolute. "I will never be just another man to you. I won't allow it."

She scoffs, bitterness etched in her features. "You have some nerve saying that after everything."

I look at her, my gaze steady and unwavering. "Believe me or not, it doesn't change the truth. You're the only one for me."

Her eyes hold mine, a silent standoff between us. The world seems to fade away, leaving only the two of us deeply engaged in this conversation. I know I need to make her understand, to bridge the gap that has grown between us.

"We'll talk when we get back to the house," I say firmly, my voice carrying a dominant edge that brooks no argument.

She shakes her head, frustration wallowing in her eyes. "I'll never step foot in that house again. Every corner reminds me of your lies, your deception. For all I know, I had been sleeping in your and your secretary's shared bed."

I feel a pang in my chest at her words, the realization of the damage I caused hitting me like a wave. But I can't let her slip away now, not when I have a chance to make things right.

"Layla," I sigh softly, the intensity of my feelings seeping into my voice. "Every inch of me is yours, and Stacy means nothing. You have to believe that."

Her brows furrow, the skepticism still evident in her eyes. "And why should I believe you? After everything that's happened, how can I trust your words?"

My heart clenches at the doubt in her voice, the realization that my actions shattered the foundation of trust between us. I look at her with a raw honesty that I hadn't allowed myself to express before.

"She saw the connection between us, and she wanted to destroy it," I explain, my voice steady and earnest. "I never once touched her; we were heading to

that business trip in Italy I told you about. When she said those things, I fired her on the spot. "

"Layla, you need to understand—I don't tolerate anyone disrespecting you," I say, my tone rough at just that thought. "I would never stand by and let someone hurt you."

Her gaze holds mine, the intensity of her emotions visible in her eyes. The car seems to shrink as she looks at me, never once spotting the love that used to be there.

"Why then, August," she retorts bitterly, her voice tinged with a hint of accusation, "did you disrespect me? Did you hurt me?"

Her words cut through the air like a knife, hitting me square in the chest. The accusation, the truth behind her question, strikes a chord within me. It's a question I have grappled with myself, one I have tried to rationalize but have never found a satisfactory answer for.

I look at her, my gaze unwavering, and feel the weight of my own mistakes settling heavily upon my shoulders. "Layla, I know what I did was wrong and I am so sorry. There's no excuse for my actions."

"I know I've hurt you," I say, my voice cracking slightly with the weight of my confession. "But I want to make things right. I want to earn your trust back."

"August, Stacy could not destroy us," she whispers, completely ignoring my

pleas. Hope fills my chest at her words, my heart starts beating so hard I can hear it. But she looks at me with so much bitterness and hurt before uttering "You already broke us, it's really hard to destroy something that is already broken."

My heart that was full of hope not a second ago plummets, breaking for the millionth time this week. "Little dove, I know it won't be easy," I admit, my voice raw with emotion. "But I'm willing to do whatever it takes to mend what we had. To mend us."

I park the car once we reach my home, the engines hum a backdrop to the tension that has settled between us.

"Layla, we're here," I say gently, pointing out the obvious.

She looks out of the window, her gaze fixed on the house. "I won't be entering," she replies, her tone firm.

My heart sinks, the reality of the situation making my stomach churn. I had hoped that we could talk, that maybe being in a familiar place could help us find some common ground. But it seems that Layla has made up her mind.

I reach out to unbuckle my seatbelt, intending to coax her out of the car gently, but she holds on with a fierce determination. Her hands grasp the edges of the seat, and she meets my gaze with sadness.

"I won't go in there, August," she says, her voice defiant.

I can see the pain in her eyes, the hurt that I have caused reflected in her gaze.

I don't want to hurt her any further, don't want to push her to a place she isn't ready for.

Reluctantly, I withdraw my hands from the seatbelt, my fingers curling into fists at my sides. "Okay, Layla," I say, my voice quiet. "I won't force you."

She looks at me, her gaze steady and unwavering. "You know, August," she begins, her voice tinged with a mix of bitterness and resignation, "I don't hate you. But I've realized that I feel completely indifferent towards you." Her words are like a dagger to my heart, killing me slowly.

"You punished me for something I had nothing to do with," she continues, her voice gaining strength. "You judged Lily and tarnished her reputation without even bothering to look beyond her actions to understand her pain. You drove a wedge between us, a rift that may never fully heal."

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"I've decided to move on from you," she says, her gaze unwavering as she meets my eyes. "I won't wallow in your hate or stay trapped in the pain you've caused. I deserve more than that."

Her final words hit me like a devastating blow, the finality of her decision washing over me. It's not going to happen; I won't allow it.

"Don't dream that I will give you a second chance, August," she says firmly, her voice carrying a note of resolution. "I'm moving forward, and I hope you find your own path as well. That hate welling up in your heart isn't healthy."

"Layla, I hear you," I say harshly, my voice carrying the rage I feel at the thought of her with another. "If you need space, I'll give it to you. If it takes a hundred years of groveling for you to forgive me, then that's what I'll do. But do not think that I will hesitate to kill any man you as much as look at during that time. You are mine just like I am yours; I won't stand by and watch some other man take my place."

Layla looks at me, her eyes blazing with fire. "But you can't dictate my choices, August. You can't control who I talk to or who I'll be with. You have no right."

"Damn if I can't, little dove." I growl, and if looks could kill, I would be six feet under.

"And you called me a monster?! Do you see the way you are acting, you brute?" She shouts in my face.

I squeeze her hand gently, before I rasp out. "Layla, you're not a monster. You never were; you are as innocent as a white dove. I know I am acting like a brute, but fuck if I care. You bring out dark urges in me that I won't contain anymore."

"Take me home." She tells me while avoiding my gaze; my jaw tightens, but I nod. I start the car and make my way to her apartment. She is silent the whole ride, not even looking at me once. My heart burns; it has been burning ever since I hurt her.

Once we reach, she heads to open the door, and before she can, my urges take control of me. I lean in and kiss her roughly, determined to erase the taste of that other man from her tongue. She pushes me away roughly, wiping her mouth, and it is only then I notice a wedding ring on her finger. I am about to pop my fuse.

I roughly remove it from her hand, discarding it before growling out, "The only person that is allowed to put a wedding ring on your finger is me, little dove. Whose is this?"

She clenches her teeth but reluctantly says, "Oliver Davis,"

"Why the fuck is his wedding ring on your finger, Layla?" I growl, and she looks away with anger before shouting, "Because I actually care about the people I love, August. I would do anything to relieve them of their pain. Father married Layla off to Oliver Davis for a reason, and I will take her place... in everything."

I feel her fear, her need to make it up to her best friend, and I sigh, "Layla, you never have to worry about that ever again. I promise that you never even have to think of Arthur anymore; I promise."

She scoffs, getting out of the car to go to her apartment before uttering, "We've already seen how you handle your promises, August."

I watch as she enters her apartment, the door slamming shut behind her. My heart aches at the truth in her words. I've broken promises before, shattered

the trust between us, and now I'm left to grapple with the consequences.

Sitting in my car, I can't help but reflect on the mess I've made of things. The storm of emotions inside me rages on, a tumultuous mix of regret, anger, and a fierce determination to make amends.

Hours pass, and I remain parked outside Layla's apartment building, lost in thought. It's clear that Layla is hurt and angry, and I know I need to find a way to rebuild what we once had. But how do I begin to mend a love that I've damaged so severely?

Finally, I gather my thoughts and start the car. It's time to make amends, even if it means starting from scratch. I have to prove to Layla that I'm willing to change, to be the man she deserves.

The drive back to my house is filled with silence, broken only by the hum of the engine and the weight of my thoughts. I know Layla is right; I can't control her choices. But I can control my own actions, and I'm determined to show her that I can change.

As I pull into my driveway, the house stands dark and silent, a stark reminder of the emptiness I feel without Layla. I get out of the car and head inside, vowing to do whatever it takes to win her back.

The path ahead is uncertain, and I know it won't be easy. But I refuse to give up on Layla. She's the love of my life, and I'll fight to make things right between us, no matter how long it takes.

Layla



I stir, gradually waking from my sleep. As my grogginess fades, the realization of the day ahead settles in. I'm meeting with my advisor, George, to finalize and practice my thesis presentation—a crucial step toward the culmination of years of hard work.

I stretch and yawn, my mind gradually transitioning from dreams to reality. I swing my legs over the side of the bed and make my way to the bathroom. The sound of running water fills the room as I wash away the last traces of sleep. The mirror reflects my image, my eyes are swollen from how much I cried after my confrontation with August. I don't know how concealer can even hide that.

After getting ready, I glance at the clock. It's time to leave. As I head toward the door, my gaze lands on the bouquet of white roses sitting just outside my

apartment. Confusion knits my brows together; I hadn't ordered any flowers.

The scent of the roses fills the air, their pristine white petals a stark contrast against the neutral tones of the hallway. Beside the bouquet, a folded letter catches my attention. I pick it up, my heart racing as I read the words:

"My little dove, I am so sorry. Please, forgive me. There is no August without Layla."

I feel a lump form in my throat as I read the words over and over again. But as quickly as my love had risen, anger and resentment follow. I crumple the letter in my hand, my grip tight and unyielding. I leave the bouquet exactly where it is, determined not to let this gesture sway me.

With a deep breath, I turn away and walk down the hallway, my determination solidifying with every step. The letter might have tugged at my heart, but I refuse to change my decision, especially at such a small gesture, the bare minimum. As I head out to the university, my focus shifts solely to the task at hand—my presentation, my hard work, and the future I'm determined to shape for myself.

I arrive at the university, the mixture of excitement and nerves bubbling within me as I approach the familiar building where my advisor, Professor George, has his office. I knock on the door, and his warm voice beckons me to enter.

"Ah, Layla! Right on time," George greets me with a smile.

"Hi, professor," I reply, returning his smile. My heart races, even though this is just a practice session.

We exchange pleasantries before I launch into my presentation. As I speak, Professor George listens intently, his attention focused solely on me and my work. My nerves seem to shrink as I delve into my research, explaining the intricacies of my findings, the challenges I've overcome, and the implications for the field.

When I finish, a sense of accomplishment washes over me. George's applause is genuine, his smile wide. "Layla, that was flawless. Your thesis practically defends itself. I must say, this is probably the best presentation I've seen from a student in years."

Tears of pride well up in my eyes as I thank him, my emotions getting the best of me. The hard work, the sleepless nights, the doubts—all of it has led to this moment.

George's kind eyes soften as he observes my reaction. "You've earned this, Layla."

I wipe away my tears, my smile radiating gratitude. "Thank you, Professor."

We share a warm hug. He then steps back, excitement dancing in his eyes.

"Layla, I have some exciting news to share," he says, his voice filled with anticipation.

I look at him, curiosity piqued. "What is it?"

George's grin grows even wider. "Our lab has just secured a substantial fund to continue our research on organoids and personalized therapy, especially in the field of breast cancer."

My eyes widen, a mixture of surprise and joy flooding my senses. "That's amazing news!"

He nods, his enthusiasm contagious. "I thought you'd be excited. Your dedication to this area of research is truly amazing."

I can't contain my happiness. In a burst of elation, I do a little happy dance right there in his office. Professor George laughs, his joy blending with mine. "Who are the funders?" I ask excitedly.

George's smile grows wider, his enthusiasm matching my own. "They're currently speaking with the dean of the Faculty of Sciences. Let's head over there."

I nod eagerly, ready to seize this opportunity. As Professor George places a hand on my back to lead me, we walk down the corridor, my heart racing with a mix of anticipation and gratitude. But as we approach the conversation between the funder and the dean, a realization strikes me—a realization that causes my excitement to falter.

August.

There he is, the one who has funded this incredible opportunity, the one who has found a way to support the very research that has become my passion.

The person that broke me is there, funding one of my biggest dreams. My teeth clench.

August turns, his gaze locking onto me. Our eyes meet, and in that instant, the world seems to stand still. But something changes in his expression—a subtle shift, a growl of sorts, a narrowing of his eyes.

My heart pounds, and my mind races to understand the source of his reaction. Then, I remember what he said about killing any man that got my attention, the need to claim me as his. Panic flits through me, and I quickly recall his words of warning. At this moment, I don't want to take the risk with my professor's life.

Hastily, I move, my mind racing. The touch of George's hand on the small of my back—a gesture that had felt so innocent and supportive. But in this moment, it feels intimate. With a swift, determined movement, I gently remove George's hand from my back, ensuring that there is no trace of physical contact between us, taking a couple of steps away from him to put more distance between us.

August's gaze never leaves us, his eyes narrowed and intense. As the hand falls away, his anger still lingers. But honestly, I can't care less. He doesn't get to stop me from interacting with men, and if it weren't for my professor's sake, I would have kept his hand exactly where it was.

My professor starts to introduce me, and before I can fully comprehend the

situation, August steps forward, closing the gap between us. His hand finds its way to my waist, his touch both possessive and gentle.

"Are you really introducing me to my girlfriend?" August's voice is laced with fake amusement, his lips curving into a condescending smirk.

Caught off guard, Professor George flushes deeply, his stammered apologies revealing that he has no idea about our connection. My cheeks warm with anger and embarrassment too. Who does this man think he is?

The dean bursts into laughter at the unexpected revelation. "Ah, funding your girlfriend's dream. What a cute couple."

August's grip on my waist tightens subtly as he notices how tense I am, and I can't help but glance up at him, my heart racing as I meet his gaze.

"There isn't a thing I wouldn't give to my little dove on a plate of gold," August's words are tender, the intensity in his gaze not escaping me.

My cheeks flush even deeper, the heat of embarrassment mingling with the warmth of his words. But I know that to save myself from further embarrassment, I need to play along.

I offer a shy smile, allowing him to pull me slightly closer to his side. "You're too kind, August."

After a bit more of small talk, he catches my eye and, without a word, excuses us with a subtle gesture. I follow him outside, trying to free myself from his arms.

Once we are outside, I snatch myself from his arms. Without warning, frustration bubbles up within me, and I turn to him, my voice laced with anger.

"I'm not your girlfriend anymore, August! Leave me alone!" I practically scream, my emotions getting the best of me.

He reaches out, his hands gently cupping my face, an intensity in his gaze that catches me off guard. "Aren't you happy?" he asks softly, his tone laced with vulnerability.

I growl out my response, my anger fueling my words. "I was happy until the moment I found out it's you meddling in my life again. I wasn't."

A scowl crosses his features, his frustration mirroring mine. I meet his gaze with unyielding anger, a sense of defiance that has become my armor.

"August, no more flowers. No more gestures. No more shit. I want you gone, out of my life," I declare, my voice steady despite the turmoil within.

He tskes, shaking his head as if my words are inconsequential. The dismissive gesture only fuels my anger further.

With a soft whisper, he speaks again, his words carrying an undeniable determination. "You're not getting rid of me, little dove."

August



After I drop Layla off at her apartment despite her resistance, Dante and I find ourselves in my office again, a place where we can speak freely and without drawing unwanted attention. The air is thick with tension, our work for the past month finally paying off, we have officially tracked Arthur Lexington. This is powered by the need to bring justice to the women who hold our hearts.

Leaning forward, I lock eyes with Dante, my gaze unwavering. "He can't escape the consequences of what he has done to them. It's time for him to pay."

Dante's nod is firm, his jaw sets with rage. "Absolutely. We can't let Arthur Lexington slip through our fingers. I am going to make him regret the day he was fucking born."

We share a knowing look, we are not going to let anyone who hurt our women roam free, I know deep down that Layla is still scared of her father.

Still scared that one day he will show up to her door and hurt her, over my dead fucking body. I would do anything to make her feel safe.

Dante and I swiftly leave the office as we notice Arthur in the area. We climb into Dante's car, the engine roaring to life as he takes the driver's seat. We are

predators and Arthur is prey, we are going to hunt him, and we won't rest until he is caught.

The tires screech as we pull out onto the road, the city lights painting streaks of color across the night. The chase has begun, and every turn, every twist of the road brings us closer to our target. The adrenaline surges through my veins, a mix of anticipation and resolve propelling me forward.

Dante's grip on the steering wheel is steady, his focus unwavering as he navigates through the streets. Our pursuit is relentless, a dance as we close in on Arthur's fleeing vehicle. We quickly block his car and get out of ours, marching towards him with the need to kill. During the chase, we end up on a secluded road, which is really bad for Arthur and great for us.

Dante tries to open Arthur's car door but it is locked. Arthur's face is pale as he looks at us in fear and when Dante breaks the car's window to unlock the door, I am pretty sure he peed himself. I remove him from the car roughly by his collar and throw him to the ground.

Our fists plummet into him, taking turns to smash his face in. We spend about an hour just hitting, kicking, and punching him. Every time he goes unconscious we wake him just so he can feel the pain again and again. I never once thought that I would turn into this bloodthirsty beast, but just the thought of what this man wanted to do with my Layla is enough for murderous rage to rise up my throat.

After we beat him an inch for his life, we leave him bruised and battered near a police station, and we depart back to my office after Dante switches cars, effectively erasing any trace of the car we used for the race.

As we settle into the space, the soft glow of the lamps casting a warm light, I lean back in my chair, my fingers steeped in thought. "I've spoken with Cole," I begin, my voice steady. "He's going to spread the news about Layla and Lily, how they had nothing to do with Arthur's actions. He'll make sure the world sees them as victims, especially Lily." I want to reverse my mistake of tarnishing Lily's reputation, especially after I learned how much she protected my Layla.

He nods approvingly, the lines of tension on his face easing slightly. It's a step toward redemption, a way to cleanse their names from the tarnish that had been unjustly cast upon them. The weight of guilt that had lingered in my chest begins to lift.

Pouring ourselves a drink, we sit across from each other, the clinking of glasses filling the room. The liquid provides a moment of respite, a way to unwind from the intensity of our actions.

"Who's next?" Dante's voice cuts through the quiet, the question hanging in the air.

I lean forward, my thoughts focused on the task at hand. "We need to erase every person who hurt Layla and Lily in the past. Those who took advantage

of their vulnerability, who caused them pain. We owe it to them."

We spend the night poring over a list, names and faces from their pasts that had inflicted pain and suffering. Each name carries weight, each act of cruelty etched into our memories. It's a sobering task, the scars that have marred Layla and Lily's lives on display to us.

We discuss, debate, and analyze, crafting a plan that aims to remove every threat and every reminder of their painful pasts. It's a promise to Layla and Lily that we are here to protect them, no matter the cost.

At the heart of the night, we look at the list we have meticulously assembled. With a shared nod, we know it's time to call it a day. We are going to make every person who hurt our women beg for mercy, and we are not going to give it to them.

The night is still and quiet as I stand before Layla's door, It is 3:30 am, an hour when the world is cloaked in darkness and sleep. I knock gently, knowing I am waking her from slumber, but I need to see her or else my chest will explode, the time without her has been torture. I patiently wait for her to answer.

When Layla opens the door, her eyes heavy with sleep, she looks at me with surprise and concern. Her voice is groggy as she asks, "August, what's... what's going on?"

Her gaze travels over my form, and her gasp of shock echoes in the hallway. I

am standing before her bloodied from the previous altercation, and immediately her hands roam all over my body, trying to find any wound that could be leaking blood. I smile as I feel her touch, despite her claim of indifference, she can't stand to see me hurt.

I manage a weak smile, my voice soft. "I'm alright, Layla. The blood isn't mine."

Her hand reaches out instinctively to raise my fist up to the light, her fingers lightly touching the fresh bruises she finds, her touch gentle and caring. It's a surreal moment, her hands on my body, offering me a comfort I forgot existed since the moment we separated.

She meets my gaze, her eyes searching for answers. "What did you do, August?"

A heavy sigh escapes me as I look into her eyes. "I already told you, no one hurts you and gets away with it. You don't have to worry about anything anymore. I took care of your father."

Her eyebrows furrow in confusion, her voice tinged with disbelief. "Took care of him? What does that mean?"

I shake my head, my tone soothing. "I didn't kill him, Layla. I just hurt him, hurt him good. He's with the police now."

Relief crosses her features, a tension she hadn't even realized she was carrying dissipating. "Oh... I see."

But before I can respond, her tone shifts, her words sharper. "Thank you, but you need to leave."

I look at her, my heart aching at the distance between us. "Please, little dove, I can't eat, I can't sleep, I can't even breathe. I am merely existing. Please forgive me."

Her expression hardens, a mixture of anger and hurt in her eyes. She stands her ground and orders, "On your knees, August, you lost the privilege of speaking to me standing."

I do as she commands, my pride taking a backseat to the gravity of the moment. I kneel before her, my forehead resting on her feet.

"I am so sorry," I mutter over and over again, begging to be forgiven. I cannot be away from her anymore, I can't stand another second without her.

As she steps back and closes the door, the sound of her sobbing reaches my ears. It's a sound that cuts through me, a reminder of the pain I have inflicted.

I force myself to listen, to feel the weight of her suffering, knowing that I deserve every bit of it.

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Layla

The day has dawned, and the weight of the previous night still clings to me like a heavy shroud. The image of August on his knees, the turmoil in his eyes, it all replays in my mind, a confusing blend of emotions that leaves me feeling raw and vulnerable. Despite the pain he caused me, the sight of him in pain stirs something within me, something I can't quite define.

But today is a new day, and my focus is on something more immediate—reconnecting with Lily. Ever since that incident, I've been trying to reach her, my calls and messages met with silence. The void of her absence feels like a gaping hole in my heart.

Finally, the phone rings, and I answer with a tremor in my voice, tears springing to my eyes as I hear Lily's familiar tone. "Lily?"

Her voice on the other end is a soothing balm, and I can't hold back my tears

any longer. "Lily, I'm so sorry," I choke out, the words a rush of emotion I've been holding in.

Lily's response is gentle, her voice carrying understanding and compassion. "Layla, it's okay. We'll talk, alright? Let's meet up."

We agree to meet at our favorite café, a place where we've shared countless memories over the years. I arrive early, my nerves making me fidget in my seat as I wait for Lily's arrival. When she walks in, the sight of her brings a mixture of relief and apprehension. She looks at me, her gaze softening with unspoken understanding.

"I ordered your favorite coffee," I say, my voice trembling.

Lily's response is a simple nod, but it carries a world of meaning. She understands that this is my attempt to mend things, to bridge the gap that has formed between us.

We sit across from each other, the tension in the air is palpable. I can't hold it in any longer, the weight of my remorse pressing down on me. "Lily, I'm so sorry," I repeat, my voice breaking as tears flow freely.

She can't bear to see me in pain any longer, and she rushes over to me, her fingers gentle as they play with my hair. "Layla, it's okay. You don't have to keep apologizing."

Her touch is a soothing balm, and I let myself lean into it, the tears finally finding release. We hug tightly, a silent exchange of forgiveness and

understanding passing between us.

After our emotional release, Lily's smile returns, and she looks at me mischievously. "How about we shake off all this heaviness with a girls' day? Shopping, food, and just enjoying ourselves?"

I can't help but smile through my tears, feeling a sense of lightness return. "That sounds perfect."

And so, our day is filled with laughter, shared stories, and the simple joy of being in each other's company. As we walk through the shops, try on clothes, and savor delicious food, no one bats an eye at us. After the news channels discuss our innocence and that we were victims of Arthur as well, we are left in peace. No more interaction like that with the old lady on the airplane, phew! Everything is starting to fall back into place.

After our fun day, I beg Lily to have a sleepover in my apartment, and she agrees. She pretends to roll her eyes in annoyance, but I know that she's just as excited as I am.

Lily enters my apartment, her gaze sweeping over the space appreciatively. "Wow, Layla, your place looks amazing. I love what you've done with it."

I grin, pleased by her compliment. "Thanks, Lily. I've been working on making it feel cozy."

We settle in, making ourselves comfortable on the couch, and I notice Lily's phone vibrating on the coffee table. She glances at it, her expression a mix of

curiosity and hesitation.

"It's been ringing a lot," she says, her tone slightly puzzled. "I wonder who could be calling me at this hour."

My curiosity gets the better of me. "Do you mind if I take a quick look?"

Lily shrugs, a playful smile dancing on her lips. "Go ahead."

I pick up her phone and see the caller ID: "Dante." My eyes widen in surprise, and I can't suppress a squeal of delight. "Lily! It's Dante!"

Her cheeks flush a delicate shade of pink, and she bites her lip, her eyes avoiding mine. "Yeah, we've been talking... a lot."

I can't contain my excitement, my voice rising in pitch. "Talking? Is that what you call it?"

Lily's laughter fills the room, her bashful smile contagious. "Alright, fine. We're dating."

I practically dance around the room, celebrating the news. "Yes! Oh, this is amazing! No more Oliver Davis nonsense!"

Lily joins in my laughter, relief evident in her eyes. "Yeah, it's a relief. And, you know, Dante's different."

I settle back on the couch, grinning at her. "I can see that. He seems like a good guy."

We chat about Lily's new relationship and catch up on each other's lives, the night grows late. We eventually settle into my bedroom, both of us wearing

pajamas and ready for some much-needed rest.

Lying side by side in bed, we share a comfortable silence. The weight of the past seems to melt away in the presence of our friendship. I reach out, pulling Lily into a gentle embrace, and she nestles against me with a contented sigh.

"Remember Oliver?" Lily's voice is a soft whisper.

I look at her, my heart full of affection. "Yeah?"

"He just disappeared. Like, completely."

A sense of satisfaction surges through me, a reminder that we have both moved beyond the hurt of the past. "Good riddance."

Lily chuckles softly, her fingers intertwining with mine. "Yeah, exactly."

"Do you know that father's in jail?" I ask her hesitantly, and she nods.

"Good riddance." It's her turn to say, and I smile brightly.

"Yeah, exactly!"

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Layla 

The morning sunlight creeps through the curtains, casting a warm glow

across the room as Lily and I slowly stir awake. As consciousness returns, another sensation accompanies it—the unmistakable scent of flowers.

Confusion furrows my brow as I glance around, trying to discern the source of the fragrant aroma.

Lily and I exchange puzzled looks, then share a silent understanding. Slipping out of bed, we follow our noses, curiosity guiding our steps as we make our way toward the living room.

And there, our eyes widen in awe and disbelief. My entire apartment is transformed into a fragrant garden, an assortment of roses and flowers covering every available surface. It's like stepping into a dream, the delicate petals and vibrant colors creating a breathtaking spectacle.

"What on earth?" Lily whispers, her voice filled with equal parts astonishment and amusement.

On top of each bouquet lay a note, and as I begin to read them aloud, the sentiments expressed range from sweet to apologetic.

"You are even prettier than these flowers." "Please forgive me, little dove."

"Best of luck for today." "How lucky I am to have a genius for a love."

I turn to Lily, my voice tinged with incredulity, I ask the question that has been bothering me since the first note. "How could August possibly get into my apartment?"

Lily's response is a mischievous smile, her eyes dancing with secret knowledge. She shrugs playfully, refusing to divulge more. I can't help but roll my eyes, exasperated by her cryptic response.

"Wait, you let him in?!" I exclaim, my disbelief giving way to a mixture of annoyance and amusement.

Lily nods with a knowing grin before pushing me gently toward the bathroom. "Come on, Layla. Shower time. We have a big day ahead. I need to get you ready for your thesis."

I huff in protest, still wrapped up in the mystery of the flowers and notes, but Lily's determined demeanor leaves no room for argument. I sigh in resignation, realizing that I won't get any more answers out of her at that moment.

I step into the shower, the warm water washes away my confusion and leaves me with a sense of wonder. I can't help but feel start to soften. August's actions are puzzling and infuriating, but they also stir something within me that I haven't been trying to deny for so long- I still love him. I close my eyes as water mingles with my tears.

I knew I can't forgive him, but I want to so badly. I thought a month would

be enough for me to forget him, but he is making things so much more complicated. I step out of the shower and wipe my tears. As I reach for a towel, the bathroom door swings open and Lily bursts in, her eyes filled with determination. Before I can even react, she's already helping me into my dress, adjusting the fabric to fit perfectly.

"Come on, Layla, we don't have much time," Lily says with a grin, her hands moving deftly to fasten the dress and zip it up.

She works on my dress, her efficient hands move to my hair, her fingers weaving strands into an intricate bun. She then guides me to the vanity, expertly applying makeup that highlights my features. I marvel at her skill, her fingers working with a grace and confidence that I've always admired.

Once my makeup is done, Lily quickly puts the finishing touches on her own appearance. Within no time, we're both ready, stepping out of the apartment and locking the door behind us.

We descend the stairs and I'm surprised to find August waiting for me, a cup of coffee and a box of donuts in his hands. His presence catches me off guard, and all the emotions I'm trying to bottle up threaten to spill out.

"I know you well enough to know you didn't eat from the nerves. Please eat before presenting," he says softly, his gaze holding a hint of concern.

I can't help but bristle at his words, my frustration boiling over. "Do not pretend like you care for me, August. You never once cared."

I turn to leave, but his touch on my wrist is gentle yet firm, stopping me in my tracks. His voice is a quiet murmur as he whispers, "That is where you are wrong, little dove. All I ever did was care. Still, all I ever do is care about every little detail about you."

I take a deep breath, willing myself to contain the jumble of emotions that threaten to overwhelm me. I choose to ignore his words, refusing to believe them. He suggests taking Lily and me to the university, and I feel an instant surge of resistance.

"No, thank you," I reply curtly, my voice laced with a touch of defensiveness. Lily's touch on my arm is gentle, a silent plea in her eyes. I glance at her, and in that moment, I understand that she wants me to accept. Reluctantly, I nod, acquiescing to her unspoken request.

We get into the car, the atmosphere charged. As August starts the engine, he turns his attention to me, his movements gentle as he reaches across to fasten my seatbelt. The scent of his cologne fills the air, and my heart skips a beat as memories flood back—memories of a time when things had been different between us.

I shake off the nostalgia, determined not to let myself be swayed by the emotions that his mere presence invokes. I prepare to decline whatever gesture he might make next, but he surprises me by stuffing a donut into my mouth. I shoot him a glare, my attempt at resistance met with Lily's laughter

and his amused smile.

I munch on the donut, a mixture of annoyance and begrudging amusement as the car starts moving. We head toward the university.

Our story is incredibly complex. He has hurt me, and the wounds are still fresh even if they are hidden beneath the surface. But despite the pain and confusion, there is something about his concern that tugs at my heart. I miss him, in a way that I can't quite admit to myself.

After we reached and August parked, I enter with fake confidence. Taking a deep breath, I steady myself as I stand before the room filled with professors and peers, my presentation ready to begin. This is the moment I have worked tirelessly for.

Lily sits with a bright smile on her face and a thumbs up, giving me the boost of confidence I need. And then, there is August, his gaze fixed on me with a warmth that makes my chest flutter despite myself.

I launch into my presentation, my voice steady despite the jumble of nerves beneath the surface. The words flow, my research coming to life as I share my findings and defend my thesis. Every slide is a testament to the countless hours I have poured into this project, and with every passing moment, my nerves melt and my passion takes its place.

As the minutes turn into an hour, I navigate through the complexities of my

work, my passion guiding me through the more intricate details. The room listens intently, their expressions a mix of interest and curiosity. And then, finally, I am done. I have presented my thesis, and all that is left is the verdict.

The room erupts into applause, and I blink back tears of happiness as I face the professors who have guided me on this journey. Their expressions are a blend of pride and approval, their words echoing in my ears as they praise my presentation.

"Bravo, Layla! That is an exceptional defense. One of the best we've seen," one of my professors exclaims, her smile beaming with genuine happiness.

Tears well up in my eyes as I thank them, feeling a sense of accomplishment that is beyond words. As the room begins to disperse, I start packing up my things, exhilaration coursing through me. I share a hug with Professor George, his warm embrace filled with pride. He twirls me around playfully, and I can't help but giggle.

Just as I am saying goodbye to him, August approaches, his eyes glowing with a dark tint. "Congratulations, Layla. You are amazing," he says softly, but I do not miss the dangerous edge in his words, he is angry at Professor George again, ridiculous.

Suddenly, August's warm breath brushes against my ear as he leans in, his whispered words meant for my ears alone, yet intentionally audible to

Professor George. The intimacy of his gesture sends a shiver down my spine, a strange sort of pleasure that I try to fight.

"I have a surprise for you later tonight," he murmurs, his voice a gentle caress against my skin. Immediately, I know that he did it on purpose, and I slap his chest with my hand, glaring at him with glowing cheeks.

My professor excuses himself, leaving Lily who appeared when she noticed the tension, August, and me standing there, embarrassment and frustration creep over me, and I cannot believe he has just insinuated that we are going to make love tonight in front of my professor.

I turn to August, my eyes red with anger and nostrils flared. His nonchalant expression only adds to my vexation. "Are you ever going to stop?" I blurt out, my voice tinged with annoyance.

His response is a simple grunt, and it only serves to increase my irritation. He frustrates me so much that without thinking, my open palm meets his chest in a swift, controlled smack, for the second time.

"Seriously?" I snap, my eyes narrowing as I glare at him. "You cannot just keep doing things like that without considering how it makes me feel!"

Lily glances between us, and lets out a nervous chuckle. "Okay, guys, let's not turn this into a public scene," she interjects, attempting to diffuse the situation.

August's gaze remains steady, and I can see a hint of amusement in his eyes.

It is infuriating how he always seems to find a way to maintain his composure, even in moments that leave me flustered and agitated.

I grab Lily's arm, my frustration still simmering beneath the surface, and lead her towards the exit. I am determined to get some distance from August and his infuriating antics.

However, as we make our way towards the exit, I feel a hand gently grasp my wrist. I turn around to find August hot on our trail, his gaze unyielding and his expression both amused and unapologetic.

"Where do you think you are going in such a hurry?" he asks, his voice teasing.

I let out an exasperated groan, my patience wearing thin. "What do you want, August?" I snap, my frustration evident in my tone. "Lily and I are going to celebrate. ALONE."

He chuckles as he meets my glare. "I know," he replies, his tone deceptively calm. "Lily told me. And I am driving you to the restaurant."

My jaw drops in disbelief. He cannot be serious. "No, you are not, mister!" I protest, crossing my arms defiantly.

Ignoring my protests, August continues to lead the way, his hand on my wrist gently guiding me. I shoot a frustrated glance at Lily, who looks both amused and slightly guilty. She had betrayed my plans to him!

When August reaches the car, he opens the door and gestures for us to get in.

My annoyance intensifies, but before I can argue further, he moves behind me, his hands expertly fastening my seatbelt.

"Hey!" I protest, swatting at his hands.

He does not seem deterred by my protest. Instead, he leans down and presses a kiss to my lips—a stolen moment that catches me off guard. My heart races, my irritation momentarily forgotten as his touch ignites a familiar spark between us.

As he pulls away, his gaze locks onto mine, and his voice is low and teasing.

"You can groan all you want, but that does not change the fact that I am driving you."

I let out an exasperated sigh, my resistance crumbling in the face of his persistence. There is no denying that August has a way of getting under my skin, and I am starting to fear that my resolve is crumbling.

Layla



After an enjoyable dinner at the restaurant, Lily and I decide to continue the celebration by heading to a club. The pulsating music and vibrant atmosphere engulf us as we dance the night away, our worries momentarily forgotten in the rhythm of the music. But even in the midst of the excitement, I can't shake the feeling that I'm being watched.

I cast a discreet glance around the club, my senses tingling as I try to pinpoint the source of the unease. It doesn't take long for me to realize that the prying eyes are likely a result of August's influence. I know he has a tendency to be overly protective, but at this moment, I choose to ignore it. I refuse to let anything sour the joyous mood that I'm in.

As the night winds down, I ask Lily to stay over at my apartment. She hesitates, mentioning that Dante wants her to spend the night with him.

The mention of Dante's name stings, a reminder of the normalcy that seems to elude me. I nod, masking my own disappointment behind a smile.

It's a bittersweet realization that my circumstances are far from ordinary, and I can't help but wish that August and I could have a normal relationship, but that's not possible.

Entering my apartment, I make my way to my bedroom, my heart feeling

heavy as loneliness creeps up on me. But as I step into the room, I freeze. There's August, lounging on the bed, a glass of whiskey in hand. My heart skips a beat at the unexpected sight. How is this man getting into my apartment? I need to change the locks. I knew I shouldn't have given the hopeless romantic Lily the spare keys.

He places the glass on the nearby vanity and gets up, approaching me with a steady gaze. Kneeling down in front of me, he gently takes off my heels, his strong hands massaging my feet as if he's done it a hundred times before. It's an intimate gesture that catches me off guard, his presence so close and so powerful even in this vulnerable position.

I watch him silently, a swirl of emotions dancing within me. In this moment, I can't deny the complex, undeniable attraction that has always drawn me to him. I want to be wrapped in his arms, want him in my bed. But I fight my need and order, "Get the fuck out."

What catches me off guard is that he ignores my words and instead places gentle kisses on each foot, a gesture that leaves me speechless.

Before I can react, his voice, raspy and intimate, brushes against my skin, his lips kissing all the way from my feet to my thighs. "Let me show you how that bastard can never compete with me, little dove."

Confusion knits my brows together as his words sink in. "What bastard?" I ask, genuinely perplexed by his cryptic statement. My mind races, trying to

recall if there had been someone at the club who had drawn his ire, before I remember his animosity towards Professor George.

His eyes darken, a deep intensity in his gaze as he growls, "The one that was all over you today."

I can't believe he's still thinking of that innocent hug I shared with my professor. I roll my eyes so far back I'm genuinely concerned they'll get stuck in the back of my head.

"He is just my professor," I retort, a mixture of annoyance and exasperation tainting my voice. "Even if he were more, it's none of your business."

A possessive gleam flashes in his eyes, his grip on my feet tightening ever so slightly. "You are mine to please and grovel to, nobody else's," he states firmly, his words laced with a possessiveness that both infuriates and ignites something within me.

My heart races, torn between wanting to defy his claim and acknowledging the undeniable truth in his words. August has always been a force that commands attention, a presence that I can't easily escape, no matter how hard I try.

His gaze bores into mine, a silent promise in his eyes. "Do not force me to make him disappear, Layla," he warns, his tone a mix of sternness and vulnerability.

Before I can respond, he continues his journey kissing up my thighs. God, I'm

only human. Having this powerful man between your legs, begging to show he can make you feel better than any other is enough to get a saint to sin. So, and I'm not happy with myself, but I allow it. I allow him to touch me, to kiss me.

He takes off my panties, makes me see stars with his tongue, and before I know it, I've led him to the bed, undressing him like my life depends on it. It's been a while since I've had him inside of me, and when he pushes in, it feels like heaven, even the slight burn feels good.

He groans in my ear as he pumps inside of me, bringing me pleasure with each stroke. "I love you," he growls in my ear, and I feel a tear slip from my eye.

"I love you so much it hurts," he says again, his thrusts never slowing despite his whispered words.

"I missed this, missed you so much," he mutters into my neck, sucking marks on the flesh.

"I am nothing without you, little dove. I love you, I love you, I love you," he confesses over and over again. His thrusts become rougher, and I can't stop the screams that are coming out of my mouth. It feels amazing, and his confessions are making it feel even better, despite my rational side that knows they complicate things even more.

"Please say it back, please," he begs, this powerful man on top of me who

could probably crush me with one of his hands is begging me to tell him I love him. I can't do it. I've built walls so solid around my heart that even his confessions can't break them down. I don't want to admit it, but that incident made me terrified to love again.

I shake my head at him, and he buries his face in my hair, his thrusts still keeping the same fast tempo. "It's okay, little dove, I will love you enough for the both of us," he groans as he cums inside of me, and the feel of him in me makes me follow him right after, clenching hard on his length from how strong my orgasm is.

I feel his hand play with my hair as his arms engulf me. I feel suffocated. He claims he loves me, and I don't know what to believe. I need to breathe, I need space, and this is nothing but a mistake.

I push him off of me, tears streaming down my face as I order again, "Get the fuck out, August Steele."

Layla



My mind races, and I find myself wanting nothing more than to escape the situation, to erase the mistake I have made. With urgency, I turn to face him, seeing him still there despite me ordering him to get out; my heart pounds with self-loathing.

"Out! Out!" I scream again, my voice guttural. I push him away from me, his face etched with hurt, but I ignore it. I gather the jumble of clothes from the floor and toss them towards him, desperately attempting to rid myself of his presence, of the suffocating emotions that threaten to consume me.

I watch as August begins to dress, his movements mechanical, his face still contorted with pain. I can't find it in me to care about his feelings in the state that I'm in.

With anger, I seize his shirt that I had missed from the floor and fling it toward him. It lands at his feet, and he picks it up and puts it on.

But it isn't enough. It isn't enough to simply throw his clothes. The fury inside me is a tempest that demands release. Tears blur my vision as I advance toward him, fists clenched. I launch myself at his chest, the impact of my blows probably not affecting him at all. Over and over, I strike him as hard as

I can—my hurt, my betrayal, and my longing colliding. With each punch, a mixture of sobs and screams tears from my throat, the sound raw.

"I said get out!" I scream, my voice cracking with a vulnerability that I hadn't intended to reveal. And then, fueled by a surge of adrenaline and a desperate need to reclaim some semblance of control, I push him, using every ounce of my strength to propel him out the door. He just moves numbly with me.

As the door slams shut, I lean against it, my breath ragged, my body trembling. Regret gnaws at my insides, a relentless ache that seems to stretch into eternity. Every word I have uttered, every emotion I have unleashed—it's all a chaotic mess that I can't seem to escape from.

"I need fresh air," I mutter to myself, my voice trembling as I move with numbness. Dressing in haste, I fumble with buttons and zippers, the urgency to get out of my apartment becoming almost unbearable. As I rush to the door.

The moment I step outside, the cool breeze hits my face like a balm, a welcome reprieve from the suffocating atmosphere. Yet, despite the fresh air that surrounds me, the heaviness in my chest remains. I walk through the streets aimlessly, the cold biting at my skin. My heart feels like it's going to explode, August's "I love you" repeated in my head over and over again like a broken record. The truth is that I still love him, still care for him. I know I shouldn't, but that doesn't stop my heart from beating his name.

And then, amidst the whirlwind of my own thoughts, a sudden brightness catches my attention—a blinding beam of light that cuts through the darkness of the night. The sound of a honk follows, piercing the air like a warning. My heart skips a beat as I turn toward the source of the sound, my eyes widening in shock as a car careens towards me with alarming speed.

Fear paralyzes me for a fraction of a second, the world slowing down as I try to comprehend the danger that's hurtling toward me. And then, in a collision of metal and sound, the car crashes onto me, the impact stealing my breath away. Pain radiates through my body; everything feels like it's on fire.

My consciousness drifts in and out, and amidst the fog, I can hear August's voice, his shouts piercing through the darkness like a beacon. My name is a desperate plea on his lips, the anguish clear in his voice.

His hands, strong and trembling, pull me into his chest; I can feel his tears on my skin. In my half-conscious state, I can't fully grasp the gravity of the situation, but his presence alone is enough to anchor me, to remind me that I'm not alone.

As I drift in and out of awareness, his words reach me like distant echoes. "Do not leave me, little dove," he implores, his voice breaking with a vulnerability that tears at my heart. "I will die without you," he continues.

"I love you so much, please fight," his words are a plea, a fervent request, and I try to oblige, try to open my eyes, but I can't. I can hear the sounds of sirens

loud and clear, and I fight some more to try to awaken.

Through the haze, I feel hands on me, people working urgently to provide aid. The world seems to spin around me, a flurry of movement and voices that I struggle to comprehend. But August's presence remains a constant, his determination unwavering.

I hear him speak to one of the EMTs, his voice desperate. He's coming with me, refusing to let me face this ordeal alone. The pain I feel is intense; it feels like knives are plunging all over my body.

Through it all, I feel his touch; his hand finds mine, his fingers intertwining with mine. And then, a soft press of his lips against my hand, a gentle kiss that conveys more than words ever could.

As the darkness threatens to claim me completely, I hear his sobs, and my heart feels like it's being ripped apart. "Please, please do not leave me," his voice cracks, the weight of his fear and love intertwined in every syllable. And then, like a whisper carried away by the wind, his plea fades, and the darkness finally fully captures me.

August



Entering the hospital feels like stepping into a nightmare. The sterile walls and the scent of antiseptic only accentuate the chaos swirling within me. The image of Layla lying motionless, her life hanging in the balance, is a thought I can't bear to entertain. The idea of a world without her—without her smile, her voice, her touch—is an agony that clenches my chest like a vise.

My heart pounds in my chest, each beat a painful reminder of the stakes that are at play. The possibility of losing her, of being separated from her forever, sends a wave of panic crashing over me.

The thought of her slipping away from me, of never again seeing her eyes light up, is a torment that threatens to consume me whole. The walls of the hospital seem to close in on me, the air suffocating as the weight of my fear bears down on me. A scream of desperation claws its way up my throat, a guttural roar that escapes my lips before I can stop it.

"If you don't save her, I will dismantle this hospital over your fucking heads!"

The words erupt from me, a primal cry of anguish. The intensity of my emotions seems to reverberate through the corridors, my desperation echoing

through the walls.

A flurry of activity surrounds me as hospital staff rush to restrain me. Strong arms encircle me, their grip firm but gentle as they attempt to bring me back from the edge.

As the haze of my anger and panic begins to subside, I find myself sitting on the cold, sterile floor. My head is in my hands, my fingers tangled in my hair as I struggle to catch my breath. The realization that I may lose Layla is killing me from the inside out.

Guilt mingles with my fear, a bitter cocktail that churns within me. The ache in my chest makes it hard to breathe.

I take a shaky breath, the taste of regret and desperation lingering on my tongue. The hospital staff around me have managed to calm me down a little, but the storm inside me still rages. I close my eyes, willing myself to find some semblance of composure. I can't afford to lose myself in this darkness—not when Layla's life hangs in the balance.

I fumble for my phone, my hands trembling as I type out a text message to Dante, knowing he will inform Lily. The words are raw, a stark reflection of the chaos that is unraveling within me. "Layla's in the hospital. Car accident." I hit send, following my text with the hospital's location.

Ten minutes later, they rush inside the hospital. The sound of Lily's sobs seems to pierce through the sterile walls of the hospital. I watch as she

crumbles in Dante's arms, and he holds her tight.

My gaze meets Dante's, and I see his pain as he looks at Lily. He knows how close Lily and Layla are, knows that Lily would lose it if Layla doesn't survive.

Lily's sobs seem to carry a weight that could shatter the world. She is inconsolable, and so am I. I sit there, feeling helpless.

As she kneels in front of me, her arms wrapping around me in a hug that is equal parts comforting and fragile. I close my eyes, allowing myself a moment of vulnerability, allowing my own tears to flow freely.

I inhale, the scent of Layla clinging to Lily's clothes, and my heart aches even more. The fear of losing her is a tangible weight, a reality that looms over us. Lily's sobs echo in my ears, and mine follow soon after.

"I can't lose her, I just can't," Lily's words are a desperate plea. And as if in response, a wail escapes me—a raw, guttural expression of my own anguish. Dante stands nearby, his gaze never leaving Lily. His protective stance is evident.

Hours pass like an eternity, we sit in the cold, sterile waiting room, our thoughts consumed by Layla's well-being. We are all tense and anxious.

And then, finally, the doctor appears—his tired eyes and weary demeanor contrasting with the news he carries. He approaches us with a gentle smile, his words hanging in the air like a lifeline.

"The surgery was successful," he says, his voice hopeful. "Layla is resting now. She's stable, and we're optimistic about her recovery."

The weight that had been pressing down on my chest slowly begins to lift, replaced by a rush of relief that leaves me light-headed. Lily's breath catches, tears welling in her eyes, as she releases a shaky sigh.

Lily's grip on my hand tightens, her fingers interlocking with mine as we cling to each other. The doctor's words are a balm to our frayed nerves; Layla is strong, resilient, and surrounded by people who care deeply for her.

As the doctor informs us that Layla will need to rest and that we can see her tomorrow morning, a mixture of exhaustion and relief sweeps over me. Lily's exhaustion is evident in the lines on her face, and Dante's weariness mirrors my own.

Despite the news, I find myself hesitating to leave the hospital. The thought of Layla sleeping, of being so close yet unable to see her, is a source of unease. And so, I make a decision—though it is met with protest, I can't bear to be anywhere but here.

"I'll stay," I tell them, my voice firm. "I'll be here when she wakes up."

Dante's gaze meets mine, his understanding evident in his eyes. He knows the weight of my emotions, the depths of my concern for Layla. Lily, though reluctant, is eventually convinced to leave the hospital—Dante carrying her gently in his arms as she clings to him.

And so, the waiting room gradually empties, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I settle onto the uncomfortable hospital chairs, my eyes fixed on the corridor that leads to Layla's room. Sleep seems elusive, my mind filled with thoughts of her.

As the hospital quiets and the hours tick by, I find myself unable to rest. Morning's first light seeps through the window, and still I have not slept. I launch from the chair where I have spent a restless night and enter Layla's room. My heart pounds in my chest as I take in the sight of her lying in the hospital bed, connected to various machines, and sporting visible injuries. The sight is a reminder of how close we had come to losing her.

I approach the bed cautiously, my eyes fixed on her delicate features. Her presence fills the room, and the mere sight of her brings a mixture of relief and pain that I can't put into words. She is here, she is alive.

As I sit down beside her, I reach for her hand, my fingers intertwining with hers. I can't help but shower her hand with soft, tender kisses, each one carrying a silent message of my love and relief. And then, as if in a dream, I feel a gentle touch on my hair. I look up, my heart soaring as I meet Layla's gaze—her eyes are open, and they hold a mixture of emotions that I can't decipher.

Her fingers continue to play with my hair, and a smile tugs at the corners of my lips. "You're awake," I whisper, my voice laced with emotion.

Layla's gaze never leaves mine as she replies, her voice raspy from disuse, "Yeah, I am."

My heart swells with gratitude and love, and I feel a rush of emotions that threaten to overwhelm me. As Layla gestures for water, I don't waste a moment. I grab the cup that is within reach and help her take sips, my eyes locked onto her every movement.

"I love you," I murmur.

Layla turns her head away slightly, her expression vulnerable. I take a deep breath, a sense of resignation settling over me. I can't blame her for her hesitance, for the walls she has built around her heart. But I am determined to break through them, to show her the depths of my sincerity.

Kneeling in front of her, I hold her hands in mine and press a soft kiss to each of them. "How long is this going to last, little dove?" I ask, my tone gentle but earnest.

Layla's lips curve into a small smile, and a soft chuckle escapes her. The sound is soothing to my soul.

"Are you finally starting to forgive me?" I ask, a hopeful glint in my eyes.

Her nod is accompanied by a soft chuckle, and as our gaze locks, her eyes finally stop harboring hate for me, and I smile wide.

Layla



It has been week of me lying in my hospital bed, under the watchful eyes of the nurses and doctors to ensure my smooth recovery. The accident has shaken me to my core, woke me up to how fragile our existence truly is. It has taught me that life is too short to hold onto grudges, to let past mistakes dictate our future.

And in the midst of this revelation, I find myself forgiving August. The weight of resentment that has burdened my heart for so long has finally lifted. I am not even resentful of the driver that crashed into me; it was an accident, and she has sent flowers to me every day since I have been admitted to the hospital.

During the days in the hospital, I have had ample time to reflect on my feelings, to analyze the way August has cared for me.

He has been by my side, day and night, refusing to leave even for a moment.

He has tended to my needs with his usual eagerness—he has washed my hair,

dressed me, and fed me while in the hospital, too scared that I would hurt myself or the stitches.

He treats me like I a china doll, and while it gets overbearing at times, I know it is driven mainly by his love and fear of losing me. The realization brings a warm glow to my chest, a sense of comfort that I cannot deny.

Lily's visits have been a bright spot in my days, her presence offering a sense of normalcy amidst the medical routines. She has come to share stories, to laugh with me, and to express her concern. The only time August would leave to change his clothes and shower is when Lily is in the room with me.

He caters to my every need, making sure I lack for nothing.

The doctor enters the room, a warm smile on her face, breaking me out of my thoughts. She delivers the news I have been hoping for, confirming that I am finally cleared to leave the hospital. However, her next words come with a caveat—another week of bed rest awaits me at home.

With gratitude, I nod in understanding as August's concerned gaze remains fixed on me.

As I slowly get dressed, I notice August's unwavering attention. He is by my side instantly, assisting with each movement, his touch gentle and caring. He helps me slip on my shoes and even takes the time to braid my hair, his actions melting my heart.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm actually going to miss having you do my hair," I quip, a small smile tugging at my lips.

He smirks in response, his eyes warm with affection. "Well, I will style it for you whenever you want," he retorts playfully. With a chuckle, I swing my legs over the edge of the hospital bed, standing up carefully with his help.

I mention that I'd call Lily to pick me up, but August's scowl catches me off guard. He shakes his head, his expression serious. "You're not going home alone," he declares firmly.

I arch an eyebrow, about to protest, but before I can say anything, he scoops me up over his shoulder. I gasp in surprise, my hands instinctively gripping his back as I laugh despite myself.

"August, put me down!" I demand between laughter and mock indignation, playfully patting his back.

His chuckle rumbles beneath my grasp, and he carries me out of the hospital room. Once we are settled in the car, he makes sure I am buckled in securely before taking his place behind the wheel. The engine hums to life, and we start our journey.

Carefully stepping out of the car after we reach, I glance around in anticipation, only to be met with a sight that leaves me speechless. My mouth hangs open as I take in the scene before me—the old house, the place that has held memories both good and painful, is now replaced by a new and

brehtaking home.

Turning to face August, my shock mirrored in my eyes, I stammer, "When did you do this? Why?"

He approaches me, his gaze unwavering as he whispers into my ear, "Did you not say that every corner of the old house reminds you of the deceit?"

Tears well up in my eyes as the enormity of his gesture sinks in. He has listened to my words, understood the depth of my pain, and taken action to heal it. I find myself taking cautious steps towards the new house, its grandeur and beauty enchanting me. The pristine walls and sparkling windows seem to shine with promise—a fresh start, a new beginning.

I turn around to find August kneeling before me, a small box in his hands. My heart races as he looks up at me, a mixture of vulnerability and love in his eyes. As he speaks, his words wrap around me like a warm embrace, each syllable reaching deep into my heart.

"Layla, I know I messed up. I am so sorry," he begins, his voice filled with sincerity. "But you are the most amazing thing that has ever happened to me. I love you more than I ever thought I could love anyone."

My emotions surge, a mixture of overwhelming joy and bittersweet memories. This man, who has once been the source of my pain, is now asking for a future with me—a future where we can rewrite our story together.

He opens the box to reveal a stunning ring, its brilliance catching the

sunlight. My heart swells as he looks up at me, his vulnerability on full display. "Please, will you marry me?" he asks.

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Layla



Three months later

The day of our wedding arrives, a swirl of excitement and nervousness fills the air. My heart beats rapidly in my chest as I stand before the mirror, my reflection adorned in a stunning white gown. Lily is behind me, carefully adjusting the intricate details of the dress.

"Can you believe it?" I whisper, my voice tinged with awe as I look at my own reflection.

Lily chuckles, her eyes shining with happiness. "You're getting married, Layla!"

I twirl around with giddy excitement, the layers of the dress floating gracefully around me. "I know, it's unbelievable!"

She grins and playfully spins me around before carefully securing the veil in my hair. "You're a stunning bride, Layla. August is a lucky man."

The thought of August waiting for me at the end of the aisle sends shivers down my spine. The man who had once been a source of pain has become my partner, my confidant, and the love of my life. It is a journey that has its share of twists and turns, but it has led us here—to this moment of pure happiness.

As the time comes for us to head to the ceremony, my excitement bubbles over into dancing around the room with Lily. We laugh and twirl, the energy between us contagious.

"You're going to give everyone a show before the actual show," Lily teases as she catches her breath.

I grin, the butterflies in my stomach flapping their wings even harder. "I can't help it, Lily. I'm just so happy."

With a knowing smile, Lily takes my hand and leads me to the door. "Well, get ready, bride. It's time for your grand entrance."

The door opens and I step into the aisle, and my heart seems to skip a beat. There, at the end of the path, stands August, looking as handsome as ever in his suit. His eyes are fixed on me, and in that moment, it is as if the world around us fades away.

Lily walks me down the aisle, her presence reassuring and comforting. As we move closer to August, I can see the emotions playing across his face—love, adoration, and a hint of obsession.

As Lily gently places my hand in his, August's fingers close around mine, the

touch grounding me in the reality of this moment. Our eyes lock, and I can feel the weight of our journey—the pain, the healing, and the love that has grown stronger through it all.

As the ceremony begins, and the vows are exchanged, the room seems to be filled with a sense of magic. Our love story, one that has seen its share of ups and downs, is culminating in this moment—a moment of promises, of hope, and of two hearts entwined in a bond that has weathered the storm.

The joyous rhythm of the music swirls around us as we dance, our steps perfectly synchronized in a harmonious dance of celebration. Laughter echoes through the air. August's arms are wrapped securely around me, and his gaze is filled with tenderness.

As the night continues to unfold, we twirl and sway, lost in the moment, lost in each other. The celebration is a testament to the journey we have undertaken, the challenges we have faced, and the love that has triumphed through it all.

With every twinkle of the fairy lights and every note of the music, the world seems to fade away, leaving only August and me in our own magical bubble of happiness.

The evening winds down and August scoops me up in his arms, his strength effortlessly lifting me off the ground. Our guests cheer and clap, their knowing smiles lighting up the night. With a playful grin, he carries me to the

waiting car, my laughter ringing out like sweet music.

Once we arrive home, he gently carries me over the threshold, a tradition that feels even more special in this moment of new beginnings. He sets me down, and I can't help but grab myself a cup of water. Making my way to the kitchen, I quench my thirst, but the sounds of the aviary that August also included in our new home catch my attention and lure me to it like it always does.

When I approach it, I notice something different. The beautiful dove that I always felt resembled me in so many ways is no longer perched there. Confused, I turn around to find August standing behind me, his warmth radiating against my back.

"What happened to the dove?" I ask, a mixture of curiosity and concern in my voice.

His gaze softens as he looks at me, his fingers brushing a strand of hair behind my ear. "It healed, so I set it free."

His words hold a deeper meaning, one that makes my heart swell with emotion. It is a symbol of healing, of letting go, of embracing the future while still cherishing the past. In that moment, I understand the message he is conveying—the dove, like us, has been through trials and has emerged stronger.

Tears well up in my eyes as I hug him tightly, his embrace providing comfort

and reassurance. "I love you," I whisper, my voice filled with sincerity.

He holds me close, his arms wrapping around me protectively. "And I adore you, my little dove."

We stand there, wrapped in each other's arms, I know that the journey we have embarked on is just beginning. Our love story is one of growth, forgiveness, and a bond that has only deepened with time. With the dove now flying free, we too are ready to embrace our future with open hearts and a love that knows no bounds.

Thank you,

I would like to thank you for reading my book, I really hope that you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.