

A BILLIONAIRE BOSS ROMANCE

Bossy Grump's
SECRET

SYLVIA RAE

Bossy Grump's Secret

**An Enemies To Lovers Pregnancy
Romance**

Sylvia Rae



Bossy Grump's Secret

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For more information, contact Sylvia Rae

SylviaRae@SylviaRaeBooks.com

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Prologue

I OPEN THE DOOR and peep. Left, then right. No Dylan.
I'm free to go.

My movement is rapid, and I thank goodness no one sees me for the task at hand. Seeing a housekeeper hurry so badly with detergent in one hand and a pile of misplaced laundry in the other would raise questions.

What am I? A laundry thief?

The hotel now feels like a busy San Francisco intersection. If you're not careful, you could get run over. Only in my case do I need to be run over. I just have to set my eyes on him.

This kind of addiction should have medical treatment.

I stop to think, not having considered my options. Is it the supplies room or the room that needs the sheets? Logic sets in. It'd take ages to find the space that needs the laundry done. Besides, the supply room is just a few feet away. I am opening the door, stowing the chemical substance in my hand on its appropriate shelf, when my eyes land on him. He hasn't seen

me yet, so I have about a second to turn around and get out of there.

But I don't. I stay rooted to the spot like I'm in a trance - because maybe I am. Maybe there really is no reason to run from all this and accept it for what it is. He takes his time, looking at his clipboard. He knows someone has entered; he doesn't know it's me.

"Okay, I don't know if you came here to do anything, but work's waiting..." He turns.

He sees me - as I do him - and his throat bobs as he takes a huge gulp. I'm almost salivating at the sight of him.

"You're here," he croaks.

I nod. I move to the shelf where the detergent rack is - coincidentally just beside him - and place the soap down, stretching my arms and revealing my right side. He wastes no time.

He grabs my exposed torso and kisses me from behind. Before I can taste him, his saliva has already coated my neck and face. Once it does, it instantly familiarizes itself with its new friend. His grip gets firmer as he presses my body into his, and I can feel his turgid groin.

Well, now I want that too.

Kisses from behind have never hit me so sensually. My neck arches to take in as much of him as anatomy allows, and it doesn't help that I'm not that much shorter.

I rub my behind against him, further stirring up the moment.
“You were supposed to stay away.”

“No...” I pant. “You were supposed to avoid this floor.” I smile and push into him, making him grunt. His hands leave my waist and stretch to my thighs. First on the surface of my dress, then under it. I feel scorched.

“I can’t,” he huffs. “I have to do my job.”

His hands’ trail where I want to be touched. I moan pathetically, my whole body giving in to the sensation.

This is really getting out of hand.

“You think I am here to play?” I drawl.

“Well...now you are.”

Fair enough.

Here, nudity is a definite no-no, but satisfaction is not off-limits. The likelihood of being caught increases with the unlocked door, which only adds to my exhilaration.

He raises my dress entirely above my waist and caresses my bare bottom.

“Dylan, there’s no time.” I groan.

His grunt affirms he understands. When I hear the deep hissing sound of his zipper, my mouth waters.

“You’re dripping.” He removes his hand from my flesh and shows it to me.

I am dripping.

“You’re so sensitive...so wet. I can’t control myself...” he utters.

“Don’t,” I tell him.

I feel his tip nudge my entrance. Here we go again. The thrust doesn’t take me by surprise. It’s the pleasure that does it. An intense, far-reaching, explosive pleasure that makes me squeal.

“Shhhhh!”

But I’m far gone. As his movements become more rapid, so make my synchronous moans until I feel a heavy cloth wrap around my mouth.

“You’re going to get us caught, Candy.”

I moaned under the strain of the sheets he used to muffle me. This is getting out of control. Seeking a better position, I take the sheet from him and wind it properly around my mouth, like a bridle. I give him the ends to hold on to.

He uses them well, riding me to where I see nothing but the destination he wants me to go. He moans, grunts, and curses as he thrusts frantically, but they’re more controlled than my perverted moans underneath the gag.

In quick spasms, white flashes tear through my vision as my climax rips down my spine and floods my brain. Every nerve in my body strains ever so vividly, and he floods my insides with his seed. Our uniform grunts of pleasure and satiety subside, and he holds me close, not even coming out of me.

“This was a mistake,” he breathes.

“Again,” I agree.



Ava

“THERE’S NO WAY...” LILY gawks as we exit the car and approach the building. I’m in a similar shocked state. Maybe if I wasn’t the one paying the taxi driver, it would’ve been my mouth hanging open, not hers.

“I, too, find it hard to believe, Lily.” She bent it almost ninety degrees to the rest of her body just to get the full height of the magnificent structure in one take.

“All I see is luxury...” she whistles.

“All I see is the chore of getting between floors. This place is huge,” I mutter, trying to rid myself of the excitement so I won’t appear agitated when meeting someone. If not, all I really see is what she observed.

Luxury.

Lily huffs and tells me that there are sixteen floors in this place, excluding the underground, as we walk blindly through the entrance floor, not knowing where we are heading. “We

don't even know which floor the RDM's office is," she whines.

"Don't worry, we'll ask around," I reply. We were lost the moment we rounded the corner, despite the receptionist giving us directions.

"Oh, let's ask that handsome guy over there." Lily suggests, and sure enough, when I look in the direction she's pointing, a handsome young man is about to enter the stairwell.

"Hey? Good morning!" I call just before he disappears through the door. His full body vanishes, but he pokes his beautiful head out. I can swear that it is purposeful. "Sorry," I mutter, and hurry toward him. "Can you direct us to the Rooms Divisions Manager's office?"

He maintains eye contact, and I stare back. He slowly takes his eyes away from me and exits the stairwell in full view. "Interviews?" he grunts.

"No, they hired us."

He takes another look at me, then at Lily.

"Huh."

"Just for the summer." I need to add, to which he responds with another grunt. Friendliness doesn't seem to be his strong suit. Too bad for a guy this cute.

"Follow me." He says after taking a quick look at his iPad and walking in the opposite direction we came from. He is walking, but we have to jog to keep up. The long leg of his.

I realized I would have a lot of memorization to do. All it takes is a stairway. I get completely lost.

“I thought the receptionist said it was on this floor,” I say, mainly to the guy, but he ignores me. Lily gives me a cringy shrug and moves on.

...so that's how it's going to be...

I say nothing more - just follow behind him until standing in front of the manager's office. To be honest, it's not that difficult to find. Apparently, I didn't ask my brain hard enough. He knocks once. I don't know if he heard permission to come in - *most people don't wait* - but he enters. The office before us is one of the most cozy and luxurious I have ever laid eyes on.

“Universities don't do their professors fair,” I mumble. Lily must've heard me, because she nodded in agreement as she stepped beside me. A woman sits behind of desk who looks like she has a few mansions. Flawless makeup...

Or is that her natural skin?... Her mesmerizing azure eyes stood out, but the overwhelming presence of the oak furniture obscured the rest of her, though her ample figure seemed to occupy the space effortlessly.

“The new summer intern, aren't you?” she speaks with apparent confidence with the ease that comes with being in charge.

“Y...yes, ma'am,” Lily stutters.

We agreed I'd do the talking!

“Welcome to Belfrost Hotel! Call me Mrs Greane. I am the manager of RDM. Human Resources forwarded your transcript and all. Figured it would be nice to have fresh hands and willing minds. Especially as it’s the summer. Busiest time of the year.” She stated.

“We’ve interned last year,” I say fast before Lily messes everything up with her nervous chatter.

“Where was that?”

“Holiday Inn.”

“Hmmm. Quite impressive, ladies. The experience you are gaining here will enhance your career.” She smiles at us, and I smile back in response, not knowing what to say.

A part of me is slightly annoyed at how little control I have over the conversation, but I don’t dwell on it. This lady could have me out of the building by snapping her fingers. What’s not to respect? She keeps glancing at her computer, making me wonder if she is checking our files.

Her next question answered my curiosity. “Oh. You both are still in school?”

I open my mouth to answer, but she throws in a “not bad... not bad” a split second after.

It was a rhetorical question. *No need for smart talk, Ava.* I scold myself. I always take pride in my ability to talk my way out of unfavorable situations and into favorable ones, sometimes even talking my way into unfavorable situations. It

was my ultimate weapon. I felt quickly compelled to use it at the slightest provocation. Because why not? But I have to know when to keep my mouth shut. That's gonna be an enormous battle for me.

“Ok. Ladies, are you ready rocking and rolling? This is Dylan.” She points at the guy who led us in here and who, surprisingly, hasn't left. His focusing back into my vision almost startles me.

“He is the Executive Housekeeper. Practically the boss of the department I just put you in. Since he's here, you'll just go along with him.” She smiles, and Dylan immediately starts walking out.

“Dylan?” she calls. He pauses and turns around, almost mechanically, like he's controlled by someone or an algorithm. “Take it easy, please. Show them their rooms and get them prepared for tomorrow. Light tasks today. Just observation.”

He nods and leaves the room. Leaving us hurrying after him.

“Well, you'll lose him in the hallway if you keep staring at him like that. Go, go!” The manager prods us, “He's a handsome one, I know. That doesn't mean you should be hypnotized.” I hear her laugh just as we thank her and close the door.

“I like her,” Lily squeaks as we hurry after Dylan.

“Yeah, me too.”

“Surprisingly !” Laughing and panting, Lily tries to keep up with me and Dylan as we jog lightly,

“You’re being harsh on me, Lily,” I huff.

“It’s true. You don’t like people easily.”

“I do. It just takes a while for them to notice.” I murmured.

“Whatever. I just want...”

“Ladies?” Dylan’s voice from behind startles us.

How did he?

“There’s a stairway here. We’ll take it,” he says, continuing without further conversation. Determined not to let him out of sight again, we keep up this time. So, after about three downward flights of stairs later, we exit the staircase and come out at what I assume is the staff’s living quarters.

In comparison to my mundane college experience, this place is a definitive winner. Everything is clean, and in proper order, as well as a few utilities you’d never see at San Fran State. It was like living in a house with shared rooms and stuff. Like we were all just a big family or something.

“Make your preps as fast as possible, and meet me at the ground floor in thirty minutes. This is your room,” Dylan orders, startling us again. He opens the door to his right and reveals a generously spaced room.

The beds are more sizeable than the ones I’m used to. I can imagine myself missing the bed when I am ready to leave.

“iPad cutie said we have thirty minutes, so we had better get to sorting. I imagine it will be a torturous set of days, so I need my personal life organized, to say the least.”

She is right.

“iPad, cutie?” I cast an amused face.

“What? You don’t think he’s cute?” She shrugs and starts sorting through her suitcase like her life depended on it. We came in with suitcases but had to leave them at the hotel reception. I am surprised to see them arrive so fast. A luxury hotel indeed.

...or just organized.

Anyway, we meet Dylan on the ground floor in thirty minutes. I feel like a genius for getting to the reception area in just one try.

“Hey, so uh. Mrs Greane said no tasks today. You’re on observation. What you’re going to do is simple. Watch.” He looks dull and tired of the job, making his face look slightly silly. “Who to watch? You see anyone wearing these greys?” He points to a guy with a cleaning trolley.

“Yeah. That kind of guy. Anyone wearing that attire you’re allowed to shadow as long as it satisfies your curiosity. I want you to be well aquatinted with the building too. It’d be a shame if you kept getting lost when I asked you to finish something fast.”

That doesn’t seem like such a hard task, but our biggest mistake was judging the building’s size by the exterior, forgetting that all we saw was the front. We walk so much by the end of the day; we conclude that merely moving around is a job.

The best part of the day for me comes with collapsing headlong into the soft bed and falling into a deep slumber.



Ava

I COULD KILL WHATEVER made that sound.

I fiddle around my bed and check my phone. It's not vibrating. The sound is coming from somewhere else. I realize where I am. I open my eyes and stir the rest of my body in line with my waking movements. I bring my phone to my face to check the time.

5:00!/? Such an ungodly hour! I snuggle under the sheets, hoping to catch a five-minute snooze. So far, I haven't heard a stir from Lily. Unsurprisingly. She sleeps like the dead. The door to our room springs open, and I groan. Yup. Our doors can't be locked from the inside. Company policy.

"Hey! If you don't get out now, you won't be ready for the assignment early enough. They assigned the roughest tasks last cause they're discovered last." The person who opened the door whisper-yells but bails out instantly. I don't care. Maybe I'll sacrifice the dirty work today and get some extra sleep.

I don't know how long I slept in, but I am sure it wasn't long because waking up by whatever in God's name that sound was, I still felt my eyes seal shut.

“If you're not out of that bed in the next five minutes, an hour's pay will take out of your salary.” His voice was croaky from the morning, but it was unmistakable. Dylan.

That did it for me. The extra ten minutes of sleep weren't worth sixteen whole dollars. I stood and shuffled over to Lily's bed to wake her up. Five minutes later, we were both groggily preparing for the day. I make a pathetic notion of brushing my teeth without my toothbrush. How I eventually arrive at a clean mouth, don't ask.

I don't feel ready after a bath and full body preparations. Neither did the day. It is still dark! But the fact everyone is buzzing around like it is midday genuinely amuses me. The idea of adapting to this in the near future elicits feelings of accountability and self-respect within me.

“Are you ready, Lil?” I ask before we step out of the room.

She shakes her head vehemently. “Definitely not.”

“Good. Me neither. That's a good start; let's go.” I pull her by the arm, tugging her out of the room, and follow the path of the workers who look ready. Can't believe some folks still weren't ready even if we slept in.

““Where the heck did my apron go? ” A guy yells into the air at no one in particular. It feels like I am in a house of many siblings, and we're all rushing off to school.

Like school kids, we file up the stairs in an organized fashion. Our only clue is to follow. We arrived in what seems to be a general room where Dylan is waiting for us. He looked sharp with his neatly combed dark hair, standing tall, cleanly shaved, and ready to take on the day!

He addresses us once everyone's accounted for.

“Good morning, everyone.” His voice is less croaky now. “Some of you already met our summer interns. Their names are...” He gestures to me and Lily.

“Ava Pearson.” I raise my hand in greeting and manage a smile.

“Lily...Lily Crowe.” She imitates my gesture as much as her timidity could allow her.

“Ava and Lily, welcome. At Belfrost Hotels, our goal entails one thing: *only the finest*. This puts a lot of pressure on the staff to be as near to perfect as possible. The dishes, the service, the environment...in every one of our branches is the same. We try to ‘wow’ our customers and guests as much as possible.”

I could have passed out at all the lecturing, but I'm not gonna lie; a speech given by such a guy with his level of professional eloquence hits a little differently. I didn't expect my supervisor to be this young and temptingly alluring.

“What does this mean for you?” he asks rhetorically, continuing his boring speech. “It's pretty simple. The sheets must be as white as possible, the toilets and bathtubs spotless,

and for practically anything you're given to do, put in at least one hundred percent. It's that simple," he concludes. We nod in understanding.

"So, what task do I give you? Greene will wring my neck if I put you guys into cleaning immediately. You follow Matilde over there," he points to a woman just behind me. "She'll give you laundry and show you the works. I trust you learned a lot yesterday."

I wonder what his response would be if I said we didn't, but I don't push it. It's too early to make a mess of myself. Worse yet, if I get ignored or something like what happened at the stairway yesterday.

"When you're done with that, just come back here and wait for me. I'll assign you another task. I should come up with your routines in about three or four days, and I hope you're flexible," he instructs almost as fluidly, I would say, as the RDM. Lily and I exchange looks.

"This is where you tell me whether you're cool with it," he utters with a side stare from his iPad.

There was a battle in my head whether to reply sarcastically, but good won and my demons rested. "Yes, definitely. We completely understand. I didn't think we had much of a choice either way." I laugh a little. He doesn't find it funny and only grunts in response, reaffirming my conclusion of his character.

Either he is having an awful week or a terrible life.

His grumpiness shouldn't be directed at me, since I'm not involved in either of these things.

We follow Matilde to the laundry room, a floor below the living one, laden with stores for non-consumables and other things I choose to pay no attention to.

The entire laundry process seems light compared to what I'd expect a hotel this large to operate. There are rows upon rows of industrial washers. It divided them into compartments for washing different materials.

We dedicate a section to the guests' individual clothes for a long stay and the one that washes general things like sheets and pillowcases that could place in any room. Matilde help us understand that cleaning different materials is more a brain than a physical task. I do my best to sort the clothes of the respective guests by material and colour to avoid mixing them with those of other guests. With their clever sorting system, it's relatively easy.

What isn't easy is when Dylan comes down to observe us.

"That...give me that." He snatches the fabric from my hand, more out of a hurry than a lack of character, but I'm still offended. "This is seventy-five percent cotton, so it should go in here. By the way...Matilde! Guests having less than ten articles about washing should use the self-service laundry room. How many times have I said that?" He has to raise his voice to be heard over the roar of the spinning machines.

"I do not know, Dylan. I met them here and just started sorting." Matilde raises her hands in defence.

“When you see an article selection like this, the next time is to keep it aside. Whoever brought it in would reply to a query. It’s one job. Count the items. If I haven’t done it before, I’d think it to be a hard task.” He huffed and stuffed the selected items in the washer as a demonstration.

The rest of the laundry time is peppered with Dylan making subtle corrections here and there. They are harmless but still piss me off. I feel my breath unhinge when he leaves. After our laundry shift, we reconvene in the reception and wait another thirty minutes for a reassignment.

“A much-needed rest, don’t you think? Shaming it’s over.” Lily nods in a direction, and sure enough, when I turn my head, I see Dylan approaching us. He moves fast, and even though he’s checking something on his phone, he doesn’t trip or stumble.

He must know this place by heart.

“I’m sure they trained you guys well for the next task,” he says nonchalantly.

“Yes, we are, sir.” Lily smiles at him, and he flashes her an awkward look in return.

“Everyone just calls me Dylan. I’m not that old.” The first time his lips spread into a smile made me appreciate his beauty even more. A pity he doesn’t do it often.

Just then, a crowd of people descends from both elevators. He brings his hands to his ears to answer a call and nods as he takes instructions. He turns to us when the call is done.

“Change of plans... follow me.” He turns and flies toward the stampede that killed Mufasa seems to charge. After wrangling through the crowd and saving Lily from being crushed in the sea of bodies, we finally arrive at the hall they had just left.

“We need to tidy this up. Another conference is this evening, so the event decor needs to be here in approximately three hours. I’ll bring help.”

Lily gasps. I’m in shock too.

“Mrs. Greane said light tasks.” This is too much! The hall seats two hundred at least...and they eat and drink.

“I said I’ll bring help,” Dylan asserts. “All we’re doing is removing the old decorations and trashing items. Sanitary will do the rest. Start with the tables, alright?” His phone buzzed, then he hurried off.

“If he just shut up, this would go much faster...even without the aid.” I huff and starting removing the decorations and stripping the massive tables clothes off the table.

Extra crew members dispatched. Next hour went by like a blur.

“Not too shabby, Lily. I hope that grump’s happy now. Such waste his look, he needs to smiling more, if you ask me.”

“Ava...”

“What?!” I eye Lily’s direction. Lily is visibly shaking .

“What?” I ask her again. She nods quickly to the left and pans back to face her work.

Snap! Dylan is back, Too loud. Ooops.

“I’m s...sorry.” I croak in embarrassment and brace myself for a scolding. Instead, Dylan just stares at me for a second before turning to the gigantic pile of the tablecloths on the floor.

“Chop, chop! You should be done by now,” he barks.

“Can’t talk, busy chopping!” I grumbled.

We work in awkward silence for another ten minutes before Dylan looks up. “Reina, Maria...please go to the sixth floor. Housekeeping.”

The two ladies leave wordlessly, leaving me gawking at their retreating forms. “We need them,” I say, gritting my teeth at Dylan.

“On the sixth floor,” he replies simply and repeats, “Housekeeping.” He ends his statement with a smile.

This was punishment. But I apologized!

“I’ll be leaving now. Major work has been done, and you know what to do. Remember, two o’clock.” He tapped his watch and left.

“There is not enough time!” I whine.

“Oh, you will.” He disappears through the doors.

“Ava, you’re just the best,” Lily says sarcastically when nobody else is around.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know he was going to flip so bad.”

“He’s the boss. Of course, he’ll flip.” She angrily stomps around, trying to get to another table. I watch her small frame waddle around the pile of tablecloths on the floor.

“You need longer legs, Lily.” I chuckle.

“Maybe if you give me yours; we’d finish faster,” she pouts.

She looks so cute when she’s mad.



Ava

“**I** THINK I’M GETTING the hang of this...” I mutter to myself.

Bed making is a relatively simple task, and as a hospitality and hotel management student, this should be a walk in the park; however, when I am shown how a typical bed made here, my anxiety peaks a notch.

It won't be a walk in the park.

Bed making is simple. Clear the bed, pull off the fitted sheet, add the top sheet, get a comforter on and arrange the pillows with whatever accessories you see fit to add. That’s practically it. But combining that with the luxury of a five-star hotel and the extravagantly enormous bed, it looks downright tedious. Pairs only for working in the rooms.

Just masking the bed with fitted sheets is hard enough. If I had to keep struggling with this one tricky corner for three months, I’d be outta here.

“I didn’t build for this. ” Lily huffs while we are putting on the fitters.

“Don’t worry, Lil,” I groan as I straighten my cracking spine. “This is the tough part,” I assure her. I call her “Lil” because aside from being an abbreviation, it also represents *little*, which she is, making it the perfect nickname. It takes some time before she eventually gives up pestering me not to call her that. Short people never admit to being short..until it suits them. *Humans*.

“We have twelve rooms on this floor!” she moans.

“Well, the sooner we finish all of them, the sooner we rest. Grump-ball said so himself. Besides, I doubt all the rooms are vacant.”

“Who’s grump...” She tilts her head in confusion before realizing who I am talking about. “Oh. You have a very provoking nicknaming scheme,” she mutters wryly.

“I know, right? I love the look of irritation on people’s faces. Now let’s do the top sheets,” I plead with her. She hesitantly gets up from the soft cushion carpet and grabs the end of the fabric I throw at her.

We walk several steps to each corner and do the super-sized corners that should lock the top sheets properly. The fitting sheet was the most challenging part, and the rest was relatively lighter work.

Once done, Lily wheels the trolley to the toilet to begin work there.

“Hey, Ava, I think we forgot bleach,” Lily yelled from the bathroom minutes later. The supply room is in the staff quarters at ground floor, and we’re on the ninth floor.

I took a look at the cleaning trolley to confirm what she said. She’s about to leave, but I stop her.

“You stay here. I’ll go. I can’t have you running marathons in this place,” I teased, and step out of the room.

Except for a few floors I haven’t checked out yet, all the living spaces are the same on every floor. So, they’re pretty easy to figure out.... I go straight through the hallway to the elevator.

Once down, I try my best to avoid Dylan, but he is everywhere I don’t want him to be.

“Ava? Ninth floor, you; Ground floor, here, why?” he asks in one-worded sentences that are easy to understand, but I feel it’s proof that he doesn’t take me seriously.

“I forgot bleach,” I confess simply and continue.

“Uh. Two minutes to get down there and be back on that elevator,” he threatens, and I dismiss him with a quick close to the stairway door.

Staff quarters are off limits to guests, elevators won’t take you there. When I open the door, I make a beeline to the supplies room, grab the bleach. It’s just chilling on a ledge where Lily probably left it when she got our trolley ready.

We can use an alternative route to access the stairs. I realize my mistake when I take three turns, and more turns lead to

more halls.. but no staircase door anywhere in sight. In fact, I don't think I'm in the same section of the building.

“No, no no! I'm lost, come on!” I huff and sag my shoulders. Dylan's being a pain and gave me a time limit. I'm screwed.

I'm trying to trace my steps back to the front, but I keep finding new places.

“Why in the world is this place so dang huge?” I moan at no one in particular. No one was in the hall, anyway. I spot a wooden door waaaay down the hallway and I'm thinking that's the way out.

Out of this section, at least, I reason and head for it. Behind the wooden door reveals a beautiful room that almost tricks me into thinking I'm back on the upper floors.

“I'm super lost!” But something about this room makes me not want to come out immediately. It has a smell I can't quite place but is oddly familiar. I glance around the place and eventually conclude it belongs to a man. The colour is neutral, and the wall has little to no decorations.

For the few months Lily and I have been staying in our shared room, there is always a poster and assorted pictures of our favorite celebrities. Besides, a PlayStation on a computer set-up just screams, *Testosterone!*

“Nope!” I say out loud, shake my head, and turn around. What am I even doing here in the first place? The last thing I want is to see someone coming out of the bathroom, clothed as the day he was born, engaging himself in some weird fetish.

I rush out the door to get away and BAM! I bump right into someone in front of me.

“What are you doing here?!”

When I jump and let out a high-pitched scream, I’m surprised I don’t hit the ceiling and freak everyone out.

“Dylan, what is wrong with you!? Why in the name of Abraham Lincoln are you everywhere!?” I yell when I see that he’s the one.

“Why am I in my room? Am I the one supposed to be asking that question?” He folds his hands across his chest.

“This is your room?!” I ask in exasperation. Still feeling jittery from my heart racing.

“Is it yours?” he asks with restrained annoyance.

“I thought it was for someone else, but honestly, I don’t give a damn! You almost gave me a heart attack!” I place my hand on my chest in a not-so-bright effort to mellow its frantic thumping.

“There is about to be an actual arrest if you don’t tell me what the hell you’re doing here,” he announces without missing a beat. He isn’t playing.

When I realize that I’m at fault and he’s not taking it as a joke, I lower my voice to meet apologetic standards. “Okay, I’m sorry. I got lost looking for an alternative route from the supplies room to the stairs.”

“And somehow, here you are, my wardrobe open and you glancing feverishly through my collection. How can I be sure you are not stealing something?”

What the...

“Hey, that wardrobe was open before I got here. I touched nothing.” I wave at the wardrobe set up with an array of expensive clothing - now that I can properly observe it. I’m not a sucker for identifying expensive things, but costly clothes have a look...especially when they’re expensive.

“Wait, this is all yours?” I asked incredulously. “You are kidding me, right? I mean...look at these!” I pick up the watch cask and attempt to wave it at him, but he rushes to me in the next second and stops me.

“Hey, stop, okay. Just stop. Sheesh!”

No wonder the smell was so familiar. I’m close enough to catch a whiff of vanilla on his neck. *So awkwardly close.*

“This is your room,” I say with conviction now.

He stares wide-eyed at me. “Well, what gave it away?” he hums since we’re too close for him to talk with normal intensity.

It is a rhetorical question, but I have an answer to it. “Vanilla with a touch of musk depth. That’s the room scent. That’s your scent. It’s hard to miss.” I say without missing a beat, not caring if he thought I was a weirdo for recognizing his scent. *Odd how I like it?*

I'm too close to him to care. He's so close, I can feel his breath on me, and it gives me tingles down below. He moves his face closer to mine and angles it, giving me a better view of his approaching lips.

Is this really happening!?

I don't fight it, no matter how hard my morality is screaming for me to stop him. He's more in tune with his morality and suddenly pulls away from me like he's been pushed.

"You're supposed to be on the ninth floor, right?" He widens his eyes at me. I hold his gaze for a while before stomping and leaving the room.

"You forgot your bleach!" he calls from inside. I stormed into the room, grabbed the bleach bottle without missing a beat, and left feeling both annoyed and unhappy.

"I don't get it, but..." That's all he says before I slam the door in his face.

I take a few steps and cursed, waiting for him to come out. He looks at me like I've grown five heads when he did.

"What are you still doing here?"

I give him a once-over, trying to decide if I should just call him an amnesiac or find a slicker way to say it.

"I'm pretty sure I mentioned I was lost." I'm not in the mood to draw verbal blood with a superior, although I find it incredibly difficult to restrain myself with this one.

Dylan's pissed-off expression eases up once he realizes I wasn't bullshitting. He found my pathetic state amusing and started laughing softly. I can't help but roll my eyes and smile at the same time.

"Are you usually this funny on purpose?" He shakes his head amidst the chuckles.

"I dunno," I say and shrug. "I just seem to put myself in precarious situations...and peril can get hilarious."

"Just follow me." He shakes his head and begins walking in the direction I came from before getting to his room. "And keep your eyes peeled. You're too old to keep getting lost."

It's been three days. Brace yourself, Ava.

He guides me through some corridors until I figure out where we are. I pass him and slam the stairs' door right before he walks in.

"I'm the one assigning your tasks, aren't I?" I hear him laugh from the stairs. I offer a grub apology. I'm not even sure he heard and continue my way. He should have just kissed me.

When I get to the room we're cleaning, I saw Lily, snuggled in some spare sheets, sleeping soundly. Suddenly, all the heat from my previous engagement with Dylan dissipates, and a warm smile creeps across my face.



Ava

WE BOTH LAY IN bed that night, unable to sleep.

I couldn't sleep. Lily would probably pass out now if I gave her a chance.

“There was definitely something fishy about that Dylan guy. I knew it. I knew it! He’s lucky I’m no snitch; or we’d have seen what RDM had to say about that.” I shake my head.

“Whoa, whoa! I don’t think we need to involve more people in this, Ava. You did the number one good thing by telling me first,” she drawls.

“I know, but what do I do next?” I ask her.

“I’m glad you asked. Tell no one,” she commands straight up.

“What?”

“Let it die with you.. with us. Do him a favor and keep his little secrets,” she tries to convince me.

“Lil. He might defraud the hotel or, worse... stealing from clients! We have to at least see it stops, somehow.” I assert.

“If it turns out to be his, then what? “

I melt into the bed to think of an answer. I hadn't really fathom that scenario. No. No way those things belong to him. He's gotta give a better explanation if it's not true.

“I'm sure he has to make it one hundred percent clear to the higher-ups,” I huffed, not directly answering the question.

“No, not him. This time, you dweeb. I'm talking about you. What happens to you? Is your social sanity for the rest of your work here worth the humiliation?” she asks.

I'm in a bit of a pickle since I can't answer that question, so I'm left hanging. Lily knew what she was saying.

“Leave him alone, Ava. Trust me, nothing good will come from meddling in his business.”

I agree without hesitation, for the first time. I figured I'd let her crash and I could think for a bit.

I take at least three more censuses in my mind, and everyone says the same thing. The only reason I'm considering going back to investigate is to sneak a peek at him shirtless. I realized how insane it sounded.

I fall asleep after a long deliberation.

“How.long.were.you.a.sleep?” Each word peppered with a massive push of my chest like I'm a patient needing CPR. Lily's waking me up in the morning.

“Three minutes? What are you doing?” I ask her.

“It’s tomorrow, if that makes any sense.” She smiles sarcastically.

“Here we go again...” I huff and sit up.

Here we go again.

My perception of time and depth is messed up, making me see everything warped until I’m fully conscious. I wait for this to even out. Morning routine, this time... I try to clean my teeth with a brush and take a proper shower.

... and it feels worth it.

I examine myself in the mirror. Despite my initial intention to dress casually in a shirt and jeans, I have a sudden urge to make an impression on Dylan with this outfit.

The dress is a perfect fit. It isn’t elastic, so it doesn’t emphasize my curves - like my hips and cleavage. The material is accessible enough for my body to jiggle, even slightly.

I was never too conscious of my body until college, when I started getting compliments from even the girls. High school was tormenting because I was the tall, thin girl, but on the bright side, I developed thick skin and an audacious persona. I learned how *not to care* what others’ opinions, so when I added some flesh to my body, my confidence rose to an almost toxic level. Only Lily helped me keep my balance.

“Girl, when he sees you, he’ll drop the clipboard for sure,” Lily says while putting on makeup.

“You think? If he even notices, that’ll be a plus.” This makes her laugh, but it’s true.

Nobody knows his weakness.

I joke, “He might not be into women,” but Lily shakes her head.

“With his grumpiness, we have it easy. You should see him chew out the other guys. The only thing he doesn’t do is hit them,” she cackles.

“Really.”

He’s even more terrifying now, but his bullying won’t intimidate me. I decide that very instant.

As we prepare to leave, I glance in the direction of his room. The lushness is incredible...even in that general area. This doesn’t add up; he can’t have all that just from being the Executive Housekeeper. Going back to gather more information would be ideal, but the possibility of getting lost and then being caught by Dylan is enough to make me hesitate.



Dylan

WAKING UP EARLY IS a habit that has been instilled in me since birth, something that few people knew a spoiled brat like me could do.

Luckily, no one here knows I am a *rich, spoiled brat... except Mrs. Greane*. The existential identity is being challenged by a girl who has been on my mind since she started working here. I wait anxiously to get it all out. Getting used to commanding people, who were sometimes twice my age, and ensuring they completed their daily workload was a challenge.

Ava made me like it. Her stubbornness piques my curiosity, and I look forward to seeing her daily to find out the alternative paths she takes instead of following my authority. Either way, a nice or tough guy is a dead end when I sense resistance, so I just ignore it.

... and Ava does not know how excruciating work can get here.

They get two floors of complete room-keeping duty. *Lucky them.* Matilde is in charge of the laundry, and you should see how crazy it gets on weekends when the hotel is the most crowded...and then on summer weekends. I have to send help most of the time, and even with that, I still see her a bit overworked.

A bit is okay, considering I'm overwhelmed most of the time. To be honest, if not for Ava and Lily's recruitment, I'd probably be growing an extra tendon in my legs, arms, and brain from exertion, and even then, I gave them two floors! Two floors for just over half the day. I must be entering simp mode.

They are about four floors beneath me, where the normal suites end. They're supposed to do the executive suites, the last three floors to the top, before a final extravagantly-furnished event room.

I take that from them...*and do it myself.*

If Mrs. Greane finds out, she will go ballistic on me. She told me to take it easy on them, but that was only for the first day. I can still make that excuse, but it won't hold up for much longer. She'll probably just call my mom and she's likely to call my mom and be upset over how I've overworked myself again.

Yup. She's not just my manager in the office; she has a long-standing relationship with my family. It took me some time to get used to addressing her as Mrs. Greane officially instead of

Auntie Sylvia, though I would use the affectionate version when no one is around .

It would be such a catastrophe if she did one of her blue moon patrols and see me with my sleeves rolled up, lathered sponge in hand, running over and over the bathroom tiles. It's unlikely since no big event was happening today, but still... there have been occurrences.

The executive suites are beautiful; even with my years of exposure to luxury, I would say that much. Despite having a billionaire father, my sister and I were raised modestly and pushed towards excellence. This meant we got few luxuries, save for the big family home. In fact, every expensive thing I own is either a gift for my birthday or a very big accomplishment, like my Lamborghini Huracan from Dad after graduation.

...the rest I have to work for. I believe I'm doing this as I scrub the bathroom tiles. This isn't my first time doing this... or second...or tenth. I began the company at the grassroots level and built it up to where it is now. Promotions weren't sped up because I am the hotel owner's son. I have been here for eight years and have only gone up two ranks.

After about four hours of non-stop work, having cleared all nine rooms in the executive suite - gaining a really toned back from all the bending - I check on the first people that come to mind. Ava and Lily.

Ava.

I place a mental bet that they won't be done with the first floor I gave them, so that's where I go first. I was right. I hear a customer yelling as soon as the door to the elevator opens, and I immediately rush to see the damage. It happens with every newcomer.

"I said get out, bimbo! You'll do the rest when I check out of this horrible place," I hear a man bellow. It's muffled, so the sound is a little soft. Besides, rooms are soundproof, so I doubt if any guests would be disturbed.

I'm really worried for Ava and her straight-up sass. It could get her in trouble that I can't save her from. In this kind of place, you are only rude to customers on your last day of work, when you have collected your paycheck. Aside from that, you had to stomach everything. although I had broken that law a few times when some nasty customers were borderline.

"Ladies, what the hell is going on? Four hours, five rooms?" I ask, putting on all the boss persona I can muster. With Lily, it's pretty easy. She cowers under only a little pressure. Ava, who is significantly harder to intimidate, just flicks her gaze at me like she isn't scared. Well, she isn't.

"Two ladies," she adds at the end of my sentence.

"And what's wrong? That I gave two ladies such little work?"

"How do you expect us to work so tediously!?" she whisper-yells.

You got to be kidding me...

“Because you’re being paid frivolously!” I try as much as I can to keep my voice to the same tone as hers.

She makes a face. “Is that even a thing? Paid five...”

“Get to work!” I grind my teeth deep, but she shakes her head.

“Listen. If this is about yesterday, then I’m sorry, okay?”

I don’t have anger issues...never did, but Ava made me develop one and teach myself control at the same time. I would usually implode at this point and back off, giving one last command: a dare to disobey me and walk away. Still, I just asked, “What do you mean yesterday? What happened yesterday?”

“Yeah,” Lily says, “what happened yesterday?”

I turn to see her hands akimbo on her tiny waist. Cute? I could have chuckled if I didn’t feel like strangling her best friend.

“I shouted at you when I was in the obvious wrong and slammed the door in your face. It was out of character, and I’m sorry,” she said in one breath.

Oh. I completely forgot what I was angry about.

“Okay. Apology accepted, but I still do not understand why you think this is hard. Do you know what I’m doing now? Me alone. Executive suites on the top floor,” I say and shrug.

Her eyes widen to say, “What!?”

“Yeah. I’d have called for help, but I don’t want you guys to break anything. They’ll take it out of my pay.” I lie, not wanting them to think I’m doing it chivalrously.

“This is oppression.” Lily’s voice broke.

I really want to pat her head.

“No, this is real life. And this is summer in Belfast!” I say and take that as my cue to leave. “Oh, you have to be done by three, right?” That is my last command as I walk off. They rarely stray far from it.

I scoff on the way back up. “Oppression?”



Ava

I REMEMBER TELLING LILY that Dylan wasn't out to torture us when she complained about getting two floors to revamp.

... *yeah. I take that back.* He definitely was out to scar us. The next week, he makes sure everyone is present before he starts.

“Good morning, everyone. So...” He clears his throat. “We are going to be shuffling shifts.” Something about how the staff are relaxed tells me this is a frequent occurrence.

He distributes shifts, mostly putting people in pairs or trios.

“Lily Crowe, you go with Matilde Cardoso...”

I chuckled and said, “Um, excuse me...”, but he ignored me and kept reading the names. He teams me up with a much older woman and starts the task assigning.

I see the perfect opening to talk to him only after he is done.

“Um, hey, Dylan. About the pairing...”

“No,” he replies instantaneously.

“You didn’t even hear me out,” I insist.

“You want me to pair you and your friend back together?” He gives me a pointed look. My eyes lock onto his. That’s exactly what I want!

“No,” He turns around and walks away, repeating “no.”

“Listen, honey, we had better get to work. The sooner we finish, the sooner we’re done. I could really use some rest right now.” The woman I’m paired with - Jane - tugs me by the arm, and I have no choice but to follow her. I look frantically around the room for Lily. I spot her walking off with Matilde.

Her eyes are still on me as she moves, and the poor girl almost trips.

I break free from Jane’s hold and approach Lil, taking her hands. “You’ll be okay. Don’t worry, I’ll talk to Dylan about it.”

“Pfft. You don’t worry yourself too much,” she says, trying to sound indifferent. “I’ll be fine. I know Matilde...we had a good flow when we did laundry together on the second day, remember?” Even though her face reeks of confident poise, she is shaking. I can feel her hands becoming moist as a slight trepidation ripples under her skin.

I let her go with effort, feeling my blood pressure rise just by not having her by my side. I’m sure that her anxiety is at its peak. I’ll try to swing by during breaks and keep pushing until Dylan changes his mind.

Today, Dylan put Jane and me in the hotel's public areas, so the work area is dauntingly wide. It involves constantly sweeping and dusting to rid it of visible stains without causing too much of a disturbance to the surrounding guests.

This means we are practically on our feet for the entire shift, moving and dusting any surface left idle for too long. The positive side of the work is that I can move freely, plus the scenery is beautiful. Since this shift has at least ten staff members, nobody would notice or care if I was gone for a bit.

... *except Dylan*. But I'm going to risk it, anyway. I need to see Lily...make sure she is okay.

The story behind our bonding is unique. Lily suffered from physical and mental abuse when she was a child. Her mother has been suffering from depression since her father left and took out all his negative emotions on her.

She stayed quiet about her experience with her mother's abuse, believing it was not the woman's fault.. Lily suffered this plight even into college. It was a unique case, and her petite size both damned and saved her. Even though she was over eighteen, the abuse never stopped, since her mother was much bigger. A child services official stumbled upon her crying on the pavement outside her house, unaware that she was in college, and intervened although she was an adult.

In school, she avoided talking to anyone and flinched when attempting to interact with people.. I saw this firsthand multiple times; being a victim of bullying myself and overcoming it, I sat beside her at the cafeteria table. Seeing

that I was genuine and never wanted to take advantage of her, she never left my side from that day forward.

I didn't want her to leave, either. I practically gave her a voice and a face in the school, helping her realize that she, too, was beautiful. And she is, actually. I would say more facially appealing than I am. Her big eyes, cute nose and pink, full lips blanketed by pale, smooth skin were attractive despite many scars if you looked close enough.

The first time I saw her without a shirt, I almost cried at the number of scars such a delicate body concealed. I wanted to protect this being, and Dylan would take her away.

No way.

I observe her from afar as I approach the laundry area. She doesn't look uncomfortable, and I hope she hasn't been here all this while. As soon as she sees me, she relaxes her shoulders and walks towards me.

"How are you holding up?" I ask softly, to which she just shrugs.

"Is Matilde giving you any trouble?" I ask again.

"No," she laughs. "Even if she was, I wouldn't tell you. Everyone needs to leave here with complete organs."

That makes me laugh out loud. Behind this broken soul was the sweetest, most humorous being I had ever encountered.

"Dylan show up here yet?"

“Twice. He’s not so bad, Ava. He just seems to prioritize work over everything else.”

“To me, he’s not,” I scoff.

“What did he do to you?” She frantically searches my body and leans up to check my face.

“Nothing yet. Emphasis on the ‘yet’,” I told her. She gives me a look.

“I think he’s the one I should be concerned about physically,” she says, chuckling. She was probably right.

“Hey, um, don’t worry about me, okay? We still stay in the same rooms, and you must get back to work. Shoo!” she says and pushes me off.

I had probably overstayed my visit, anyway. I leave her in the laundry room and return upstairs to the blinding light of luxury and wealth. Still, as for the luxury, I was not enjoying it.



Dylan

I HAVE OFFENDED AVA. and I don't care...as long as it's in the company's interest and not damaging the staff. When I notice she's gone, it's obvious she went to see Lily, but I let it slide. It's a worthy compromise, and I give her a warning stare when she comes out. She shouldn't abuse the privilege. When the shift is over, though, I go to her to make peace.

"How was today's shift?" I ask as non-confrontationally as I can.

She shrugs and emits a disgruntled huff.

"Did I say something wrong?" I ask. I know work wasn't that hard today; it was continuous, with no overstated breaks when they worked the bona fide housekeeping shift.

"You separated me from my best friend..." she says, and I roll my eyes. *This again...* "and you're asking me if I'm okay? I'm fine." She shrugs with passive aggressiveness.

Do I really have to deal with this?

“Listen, Ava. It’s company policy. It helps the staff master all the skills before we sort everyone into their long-term positions. And even that isn’t permanent.” I explained.

“You don’t understand. Lily needs to be by my side... always.”

I take a long, unblinking look at her. “You two are in a relationship?” I arch a brow. *That would be unsurprising.*

“No! It’s different...you...you wouldn’t understand.”

Of course, I wouldn’t.

“Well, help me understand then ,” I encourage her.

“Just put us back together or ...” Ava begs, but her tone doesn’t even sound pleading.

“Ooh, I’m scared,” I say sarcastically and walk away, but she tugs at my arm. It’s subtle enough to force me back like an elastic band let go after a stretch.

“Let me go, now,” I demand.

“Why don’t you listen? My friend is struggling, and you’re acting like it’s nothing.” Her voice is strained, like she’s doing all she can to keep from yelling. *She’d better do her best to keep it so.*

She seems very much like the one going through the breakdown, however. Lily was doing fine when I checked on her earlier.

“Only on the outside,” she counters.

I give her a dry look and hum.

“You’re not being a fair person,” she says.

Ha!

“Me? No, no, no. You’re the one that isn’t fair. You have one thing to do.” I shake my finger at her. She finally got me angry enough to show it. “It’s that simple. I’ve given you the least amount of work. I’ll be queried if I’m seen doing the amount of work I do to cover up. But I do it anyway because overworking the staff is not where I see productivity. Yet here you are bickering about me not being fair for taking away your emotional support companion.”

“She’s not my emotional support, whatever it is you might think. I need to protect her.” She wants to say something but holds back and pinches the bridge of her nose.

“Protect yourself from your own entitlement first,” I say, because that’s all I see here. The company owes nothing to her feelings. I am responsible for Lily’s safety and I don’t understand why Ave paints Lily as helpless and in dire need of her companionship.

If looks could kill, I’d be dead, but luckily for me...or her, it just looked. Nothing more. “No problem, sir. I’m sorry I brought up the matter in the first place,” Ava says and takes a huge swallow before trying to move around me.

This is passive aggression, and something about her agreeing with me doesn’t seem right. If she has a grievance, we should talk it out. Hence, I won’t let her get far. I’m the one to stop her now. Like it or not, I don’t like my subordinates being

aggrieved. It makes work burdensome and every future conversation awkward.

“Listen, Ava. You understand that I have to do it, okay? You guys will be together again in a few weeks. “

Even though she nods silently, the words don't seem to have an effect. She gently pries my hand from hers and continues her journey into the hall. At least she didn't make a scene; that would've been worse.

Well, that isn't how I expected the conversation to go...



Ava

WHEN I WAKE UP, the first thing I do is curse him silently in my mind. By doing this, I can mentally prepare myself to have less resentment towards him when we meet for our duty assignment. or perhaps to mask the resentment.

Either he is oblivious to my malice towards him or he is being sarcastically mature by giving me a tight-lipped smile when I acknowledge his presence.

The less we communicate, the better it is for me. Missing out on such a great opportunity to beef up my resumé would be dreadful if I got fired. Or worse still, they may punish me with grueling work for my misdeeds. Lily and I glued to each other until it's time to separate after the briefing.

“You know,” she smirks, which doesn't suit her face, “I reckon you're more affected by my absence than I am by yours.”

That's what Dylan said earlier.

“Maybe I’m too worried about letting you out of sight.” I tighten my grip on her hands, making her roll her eyes.

“Yup. She’s in love with me.” The tiny girl huffs animatedly in beautiful sync with her cute face.

“You bet,” I laugh. “See you later, then. I’m doing hall duty today.” I give her distance, moving backwards.

“My break is two, so... see you then.” She waves me off and turns to catch up with Matilde.

On my way to the elevator, I ponder what she said. Now, I feel like a mother having to let her preteen go to summer camp. I may need to lower my protectiveness and channel that energy into productivity.

On that note, my work today is simple. Every other hallway. The entire building. Take the cobwebs off the ceiling corners, report stains on the walls for re-coating where necessary, and many other minor tasks that combine into one hellish job, especially given that I am to do the entire building over the day.

It’s just going to be me and my thoughts. That has definitely been a while. *Ava* and *Ava*. Alone. When I start out, a little goes on between us, not until Dylan does his routine patrol to ensure I stay awake in one of the guest lounge chairs.

He’s something. Ava says.

“Of course he is. A glowing sign that says ‘*Avoid!*’ to everyone,” I snort.

Don’t you want to bring him to his knees? She asks me.

Definitely.

‘Don’t you just want him to look at you from that position, grab his hair roughly, and tilt his head with it so sharply it almost disconnects his skull from his vertebrae?’

I am thinking weirdly rough. I love it!

Don’t just want to force his mouth open and make his face rub against yours...

“Okay! That’s enough!” I shut my thoughts up.

There’s no reason for me to think that far. I hate him.

Do you?

“Yes,” I seethe under my breath. I must look like a crazy person talking to myself, and I am lucky no one has noticed me.

“Hey, lady?” I hear a voice draw from some doors down the hallway.

Speak about not being noticed. I turn around and peer down the hall to see a man poking his head out of his room.

“Good evening; how may I help you?” I ask as politely. I make my voice a tad lighter and beam a gracious smile. This part of me should be hidden.

“I just need a ‘lil something done for me here. Made a bit of a mess.” His thick southern accent is a definitive part of his recognition. I kind of like it, though.

Feeling relaxed by his friendly appeal, I hastily approach the room. He opens his door fully to let me in. I see food spilled

on the floor.

“Okay then, this shouldn’t take long. Let me just grab my cleaning equipment outside.” I turn back with a smile, only for it to vanish. He has a really creepy stare.

“Of course, sweetheart.” His stare follows me outside, so I grab what I need from my trolley and go back inside, leaving the trolley at the door. “Ya real pretty, y’ know? Could see you going places with that height too.”

That is supposed to be a compliment, but his creepy, perverted stare ruins it.

“Thanks?” I have to make my appreciation pronounced to emphasize my discomfort.

I rush to clean so I can leave.. All the while, I can feel his burning stare at my back. I turn around to confirm my suspicion and make sure I’m not just being paranoid. There he is, with a big belly, semi-bald head, creepy walk and a confident look on his face... just staring at me!

“You know,” he says, halfway between my cleaning. “I have a spare five hundred just lying in my bag...” He walks leisurely to me, and I angle myself to face him in a defensive position. “... was thinking of buying a new pair of shoes or sum, but now that you’re here, you know...” He tries to pry the broom out of my hands, but I keep my grip firm.

“I’ll just finish the cleaning, sir; thank you.” My voice is low, and I’m trying not to sound offensive. He hasn’t officially

said anything implicative, so it'd be unwise to react, even though his intentions are readable in a big, bold *Calibri* font.

“Huh? Not easily bought, are ya?” He moves confidently to the door and taps a card on the knob. The lock activates.

What have I gotten into?

“A thousand dollars change ya mind?” he smirks. If only he knew how ugly he looks trying to pull off a thirst trap. “Two?” He perseveres when I don't answer.

“I'd like to leave now, sir,” I say sternly, keeping my voice calm. His face scrunches from the former proud gleam to a disappointed leer.

“You're a real stubborn one, aren't ya?” He is laughing at my immediate panic. “Five thousand. For a lady this mediocre, you're about to become my highest expenditure for sex.”

“Let me go. “I make a beeline to the door and turn the knob, but it doesn't budge. And immediately sandwiched by a body and the door.

He groans hungrily and begins grinding himself on my behind. I feel like throwing up.

“Let me go, you sick son of a...” My head rams on the door before I complete the statement.

“Ya need to show some manners, darling. You'll have no one pay you this much for whatever you offer.”

My head is spinning from the haze of being dealt such blunt force, and my heart and brain pick up pace and activity; I

realize I'm in danger.

Fight or flight? Flight first, I pound the door and scream ruthlessly for help until he covers my mouth with his massive hands.

Then fight. I feel my hands as far away as my tendons and ligaments will allow me to retract them with as much force as possible. My elbows connect with his stomach hard, pummeling skin and organs. He wheezes as the air gets knocked out of him, but that isn't enough to get him to let go.

Instead, he grabs me and throws me across the room. I land in every part of my body but my feet.

"I'm going to enjoy taking you rough." He smiles maniacally and approaches me. Again, I let out another scream instinctively. Still, my brain's logic reminds me of these rooms' soundproof capabilities.

Before I can stand and get away, he is right above me, kicking me hard in the stomach, knocking the fight out. I feel my brain get too lazy to keep up with this horrifying consciousness and want a nap.

Not now... It would be horrible to go down without a fight. He is atop me, grabs my arms, pins them over one of his, and then uses his legs to shift my dress upward as he undoes his buckle with the other hand.

Before he can bring out his grotesque member, a pair of hands grabs him by the shoulder and wrenches him off me. "GET OFF HER!" someone yelled. Dylan?

“You know, you really shouldn’t interrupt a man’s meal, but...now that you’re here, maybe we can share.” The assailant laughs humorlessly. I’m sure he knows that it’d be a snowy day in hell before he can get any random person to agree to joint raping a girl...especially if that person is a hotel staff member. I know what the man is trying to do. He’s building up his rage... *and it works.*

“You...animal...” Dylan spits, blinded by fury, but the man seems even angrier. I think I see it coming before Dylan does... the man’s hand flies toward his jaw, and another scream erupts from my throat as the blow connects. Dylan throws a counter punch that hits the man squarely, and just like that, the two begin a gut-squashing brawl.

The scary thing about this fight is that there’s no one to stop them... just me and my puny strength against two bloodthirsty men.

Fortunately, Dylan appears to have the upper hand because of his youth and agility. luckily He can land more punches until the man backs off. Dylan stops as the creeps are obviously defenseless... I’m surprised the man still stands after the last barrage of fists. Dylan has also sustained significant bruises.

“You motherfucker! I gonna bring your down! This is hotel down ! ” The man laughed with his badly beaten face, barely able to pronounce words accurately.

“You broke my bloody teeth. Goddam...” the villain rapist roars as Dylan pulls me out of the room. It is just as the man

tries to rear up again. Dylan slams the door in his face, knocking him back down to the ground.

“Seventh floor, room 204. Assault of staff. Sexual and physical.” He gave the description in a visibly shaking voice. Five minutes hardly go by before I hear footsteps - security guards.

Based on the sounds of it, the security is experiencing almost as much trouble as Dylan did in first subduing the creeps. Finally, relatively silent. I peek out to see the man pinned on the ground, cuffed by the men who had pounced on him early.

I can now give Dylan my full attention.

“It’s my fault.” I hear him grunt.

“Wha...”

“I shouldn’t have let you wander the halls alone.” He takes a big breath and adds, “This is supposed to be a two-person job.”

“It’s not your fault, so don’t blame yourself. “

“What was I thinking!?” he moans. The blood dripping down his eyelids paints his light grey shirt crimson.

“You need to go to the emergency room,” I breathe. “Now.”



Dylan

I SHOULD HAVE BEEN more rational... more judicial with my assignment of tasks. Why on earth would I allow one woman to wander the halls alone?

“Dylan? Dylan, listen to me. We need to go to the emergency room! Now!”

Look at her head. There’s a cut there and a swelling. I could have prevented that. If I had done the hall patrol, shifted myself or gotten Maverick to handle it...

“Dylan!” I shook my head and brought myself into the present bubble.

“We need to close this opening.” Her hands shiver as they near my face. I let her touch me, and her soft touch brings me some weird calm. She withdraws and shows me her hand coated in viscous crimson metallic-smelling liquid.

“Lead the way.” I croak.

A sharp pain in my side causes me to flinch on the first step. Her face turned pale. She seems more affected by the

predicament than the person objectively experiencing the pain...*which is weird but quite endearing.*

I separated Lily and her. Lily is the small one...the timid one from my observation, yet she hasn't shown a bit of spite toward me or hesitation to change my decision. Ava took it upon herself to express the vulnerability that Lily felt. I get beaten up badly, but she's the one wincing.

"I should pair you and Lily together," I say as we hobble.

"No, you shouldn't," she replies.

What? Wasn't that what she wanted some time ago?

"Policy is policy," she says and shrugs.

"Is this Ava talking?" I chuckle, but she dismisses me with a sigh.

"Besides, I can't bear that Lily might have been in that mess. We'd probably have split up to cover more ground, and she might have ended up there instead of me..." Ava shudders.

"On that note, can you do me a favor?" she asks when I remain silent, pondering her words.

"Only if it's within my power."

"Can Lily not be on hall patrol... ever? We'll just be here three months... if you can..."

"Yeah, yeah. She won't." I give her my word, feeling like a corrupt politician for agreeing to the compromise. *But only because I'm learning from my mistakes and don't want to repeat all this.* I tell myself this more than her. I'm more

terrified that I might not have gotten here in time to prevent the ugly event that might have happened but for my regular patrols.

I think back to the many patrols done solo by ladies previously. Might they have encountered a similar fate? I feel like I deserve the beating I received because of the guilt I feel.

The hotel is in shock at my current state as I move through the halls, especially when a cuffed maniac comes a couple feet away with more people holding him than me. Some of the staff offer to relieve Ava and support me. You can feel the sympathy radiating from the hotel customers and mild concern for their safety.

A post on the official hotel blacklist would keep them up to date about everything they need to know.

“This is definitely going to need a few stitches,” one nurse says and goes to retrieve the equipment.

In the background, Ava is musing, “What I said”.

“You should get yourself checked as well,” I advise her.

“Pfft. I just got a kick to the stomach and a head bump. I survived far worse in high school,” she scoffs. “I will, but only after you finish.”

“You want to watch me in pain while I get stitched up?” I narrow my eyes at her, and the smile that tugs at her lips confesses all.

“Well, it is going to be more enjoyable for me than for you,” Ava informs me and shrugs.

Despite the warnings and advice of the doctor, Even though the doctor advised against it, I returned to work immediately after the stitching and dressing were done, missing out on a few hours. Fortunately for me, the workflow seems to be smooth sailing.

The next day comes, bringing the next phase of work — give a police statement from both of us. It’s clear to me that Ava is feeling emotionally drained about this. So am I. No one wishes to come across the same person who could have been responsible for a lifetime’s most traumatizing event. Mrs. Greane accompanied us and regretted not being there when the man was taken away.

Ava might find it odd that the RDM is so fixated on my injuries, but she keeps her thoughts to herself. I’m glad she does because she talks a lot.

When she gave police the statement, I hear it the first time about what went down and I understand why.

The most devastating part of rape and other brutal violence is the feeling of hopelessness. Knowing what will happen to you but being unable to escape is a devastating realization. You can only prepare your mind for whatever your assailant has in stock for you.

At that terrible moment, your life depends upon the mercy of a person who wants to do nothing but hurt you. I can see in Ava’s eyes, as she mentions the part where I stepped in, how

grateful she is. It's like she's reliving it but with the ability to feel the full weight of the emotions this time, not the numb subtlety that adrenaline gives.

“Don't worry, Miss Persson. We'll ensure this man gets the full sentence for his crime against you. I can assure you of that.” The detective of Special Victims Unit (SVU) comforts Ava when she ends her last statements in tears. “If he doesn't confess, there will be a hearing, and we will summon you. Can you be ready?”

Ava nods wordlessly. I gently pat her shoulder and whisper, “You'll be fine,” She nods. It took a little longer before we finish giving statement.

On the car ride back to the hotel, she whispers, “Dylan, you saved me.” “I didn't think there'd be any way to escape that situation, but there you were.”

I hold her hand and give it a firm, understanding squeeze.

“I owe you. Thank you,” she sniffs.

“I was just doing my job, Ava,” I insisted.

I feel her breath on my shoulder. She emits a slight chuckle. “Even though you got more beat up than I did?”

Her laughter is contagious and I join in.

Over the next few days, I returned to the clinic to redress my wounds. It heals well, especially the one on my head. But my sides, a little slow, mainly because of the exertion I place on them during normal work.

But I can't stop. I try to limit the amount of physical labor I choose to do now. Just walking upsets my side wound...*and I must walk.*

"Dylan, you're bleeding." Ava points to my shirt, and I can see a fresh, dark stain. I look at it before the pain prevents me from craning my back further.

"Wow, that's...horrid," I grunt, and take my time to assess it. But there's work to do. A lot, and we're on the twelfth floor. The hassle of going to the clinic just to change a dressing annoys me.

"It happens sometimes. Most times, when I'm asleep. The doctor said it should close up fully enough to stop these mundane bleeds in a couple of days," I explain.

After giving her an awkward salute, I try to move out of Ava's way, but she stops me. "Yeah, see, I'm uncomfortable with that," she states firmly. "Something has to be done about it."

"I'll go change my shirt, then." I huff.

She shakes her head with discontent. I know what she wants, but I don't like it. I don't want to change a coat that will still be a red hue five minutes later.

"You don't have work to do?" I try to run the subject off the table. Tough luck. She folds her arms and looks at me like she sees right through me.

"Fine," I give in. "I'll do it by the end of the day," I promise.

“Come on, let me get the first-aid kit on this floor. It shouldn’t take long,” Ava volunteered. Since the offer presents itself, it’d be dumb to decline.

“You’d better not.” I threaten her, knowing it is useless, but I follow her. We go to the mini supplies room. I sit on a metal ledge, waiting for her to prep the kit.

“Even your biology is a hassle,” she mumbles while dressing the wound on my back. “The nurses did a good job on this one, yet you still make it seem like it’s a fresh medical emergency.”

...even?

“Pfft. What other part of me is a hassle?” I chuckle. She gives me a raised-brow look. Whatever. Does she know how much work *she* is?

“I wonder how you know so much about medical care,” I sigh.

“It’s part of the syllabus for housekeeping. First-aid,” she explains.

“Huh.”

After we cleaned the wound and replaced the band-aid, I told her that changing the dressing the next day would be necessary for consistent results. I can go to the clinic, of course, but I can’t resist the sensation of her touch.

“I know,” she shrugs. “Now, let’s do your brow. ” Ava reaches out, and I instinctively lean into her hands, giving her

more of my head than she wants. Why do I suddenly crave her touch!?

She freezes for a millisecond but doesn't object to the touch. She runs her hand over the side of my face, brushing stray strands of hair to place the band-aid, but she doesn't do it professionally. Nonetheless, it's a smooth, graceful sweep that ends with her pinky slightly scraping my cheek.

I'm not supposed to be getting the growth I'm getting inside my pants. It's just a touch! On my face!

I don't feel a thing as she redresses the wound on my face. All I'm doing is looking at her and analyzing why it wouldn't be a good idea to hold her slim, delicate waist and pull her closer to me. I feel really proud of myself when I can fight the urge, but I can't help it when she strokes my face one last time.

I catch her hand just as it's about to leave my face and hold it there for a few seconds. I see her breath hitch, noticing the unsteady pace in her chest movements. I must be making her uncomfortable. She nearly got raped a few days ago!

Before I let go of her hand, I run it through mine, and she offers no resistance. They look lovely together - my hand and hers.

"You have soft palms," I say awkwardly, to justify this weird contact.

"Thanks?" she says and cringes. I don't blame her. I'd feel the same way, too.

"Now, let's get back to work," I huff and bounce to my feet.



Ava

EACH DAY BRINGS NEW ways to keep butterflies in my stomach. If I continue like this, my legs will be jelly before the week runs out. I look forward to seeing him. If I plan everything right, we always cross paths an average of three or four times every day, making direct contact more than half of those times.

This has been happening since the day past our orientation week. I want to see him more... and that scares me. Why!? What makes me excited about changing his dressing every day? I feel an irresistible urge to touch his skin - Why?

Though not hunky-built, every time he takes his shirt off, I'm struck by his marvelous form. His body is a literal Easter egg. You never know what is inside there until you look. Whenever I get a chance to feel the contours of his muscles, I do it within the bounds of propriety.

One time, I got shameless enough to lie about a swelling needing to be eased toward his stomach just to get a feel of his

abdomen and satisfy my curiosity about whether it was soft or hard. Sure enough, it's rock solid.

I can only imagine him standing shirtless. Does he have abs? How toned is his chest? I will answer soon these questions. I just know it.

Sunday is our day. The work here maybe is tedious, but it is completely doable. Lily and I don't see the need to do much this Sunday. All that's left is to wander the catacombs of the magnificence behind the hotel walls in non-uniformed clothes to give ourselves the "guest" vibe.

"There's only one place left to explore, Lil,' I drone, bored out of my mind. Lily probably is too, but she's too scared to agree with what I suggest.

"Uh-uh," she shakes her head vehemently. "There's no way I'm going to the parking lot with you. We'll die, and no one will know we left this world screaming."

I roll my eyes. "Lily, you watch too many horror movies," I laugh at her.

"Yes. I'll be wise about the places I shouldn't go. The parking lot... yeah. Definitely and comfortably on the top of the list." She reaches into her pockets to grab her phone and begins typing. She proceeds to almost push the thing into my face. "See!?"

I push the phone out of my face, irritated, and ask her, "What am I supposed to be looking at?"

“Two million crimes...in parking lots...every year...in the United States alone,” she gloats.

“You’re right, baby,” I say, patting her head. “You can sit this one out. I’ll bring videos.”

Usually, whenever I told Lily to sit out an adventure, that would be the breaking point to get her to follow me... but not this time. she skittles around me and toward the main lobbies. “Bring me the ones of you running in blind fear,” she mocks.

“Chicken,” I mutter and enter from the back of the kitchen.

The parking lot looks small from this end... until I come out of the kitchen offloading unit. The floor alone is huge, and the mere size of the place would trigger both someones with megalopolis and claustrophobia at the same time.

I walk to the end of the parking lot and see that it has more levels than I thought... I move the only way that all horror movies increase the tension... down. I make a few trips down into the chasm of the lot, taking notes of the fancy cars parked on the various floors.

I must be a very slow learner. I was about to be raped some time ago. Here I am, putting myself in the homing beacon of danger. But I’m better prepared this time. My switchblade is still in its place - in a tight grip from my hands inside my hoodie pocket.

A room here is a thousand, five hundred, so if anyone but the staff drives a Toyota, it’d genuinely come as a great shock.

The hotel itself is exotic. Guests should be too, so there is no surprise here. Still, I let myself get carried away by the Ferraris, Lamborghinis - and a lot more. Although I'm bad at naming cars, I can recognize some of them.

Luckily, I finished my tour without getting robbed or mauled. Before I begin my ascension, I take pictures of cars. I aspire to make full video catalogues of the rarities, especially Lamborghinis. I love Lamborhini. The car just has this signature sharp body design that screams it's a supercar.

When I have enough videos to keep Lily and me occupied in a discussion for the rest of the night, I take a last look around and begin heading back. But as soon as I turn to go, something moving in the shadows causes me to reel around and pull out my pocketknife.

He's a little farther from me, but I recognize him uncannily.

"Dylan?" He looks up at me and just continues walking when he sees it's me. "You should be at work, Candy," he grunts.

'What? A new nickname?'

"Today is my day off, remember?" I shrug him off but still keep my eyes on him. Something is off. Just as I'm about to dismiss it as one of my many perverted lusts, he staggers. That's when I realized he was drunk.

"Dylan, you're drunk," I affirm my suspicion when he replies.

"Oh, you can tell?" he asks. Well, I deserve that one.

I folded my arms across my chest to question him. “Where the hell are you coming from? Do you know what time it is?” I widen my eyes to emphasize my seriousness.

He is currently holding onto a van to keep his stance steady.

“You’re asking the wrong questions, *mi bellissima principessa*,” he mocks and smiles at me.

“You’re not Spanish either, so quit flexing on me.” I roll my eyes. It was a rare occasion to get Dylan to do something fun. I really wanted to know the exact club that put a genuine smile on his face, albeit drunken.

“To be honest? I don’t really care. How do you get to your room without being called out... by a superior or maybe Mrs. Greane.” To this, his eyes widen. I continue, “.... we’ll see what she says about a drunken staff on her premises. ”

“You don’t have to involve the authorities in this,” he drawls. “We can settle this... some other way.” He throws a coy look, like he’s holding back a fart.

“Let’s get you to your room, okay?” I reach out to him, but he slaps my hands off.

“I can get there myself.” He scrunches his face.

I nod convincingly and take hold of his arm. Oddly enough, he lets me this time.

Together, we trek to his room, where he becomes undeniably annoying. First, he lies face down on the ground at the threshold of the room, making me drag him all the way in. When he’s finally in, I expect him to fall asleep, as is with all

the drunk people. Instead, he picks himself up and sits on the bed, throwing me a lazy smirk.

“What is it again?” I blurt, keep my arms akimbo.

“This shirt...” He tugs at the hem, repeatedly missing the buttons, “... can hardly breathe. Help me?”

His eyes glisten with tipsiness, and I feel obliged to help him. It'd be a waste if he threw up on that nice shirt. Besides, I want to see what he looks like under it.

I hurry to him and begin tugging the buttons out of their holes. Just as I do the third button, he snatches me by the waist and pulls me closer, making me yelp. I can only scream for so long, though. Just as soon as my body hits him, my lips hit him, and we ease into a kiss.

My chest reverberates loudly. He tastes of alcohol, but high quality...like he didn't have too much and still got a drunk. Tequila maybe.

I don't stop him from kissing me. I sink deeper into it and let his careless, frantic hands rummage around. His one hand stays on my waist while the other one goes to my rear, and he gives that a squeeze.

I moan at the deliciousness of his touch before I open my eyes to reality. *This man is drunk! He'd probably forget all of this by tomorrow.*

With that realization, I get up quickly and exit the room before he says something other than a long groan. He'll be

fine. Getting back to my room, Lily still in bed. When she sees me, she sits up.

“You’re finally back. Got any pictures?” she asks, and I immediately whip out my phone and show her the images and videos I took. We’d talk about the kiss some other day.

“... huh?” She sniffs the air around her and finally my clothes, which gets my heart to resume pounding. “You smell... familiar.”

“Fine! Let me just tell you then. I met Dylan in the hall.” I then told her everything that transpired between us.

“Well, with everything, I really hope you can ask him to give us less work,” she chuckles.

“Lil, he was drunk. I’d be surprised if he remembers tomorrow morning.” I laugh, shaking my head for making myself too cheap and hoping he didn’t remember... even though my heart, a willed organ since the beginning of time, wished desperately for his presence, even a little, to ease it.



Ava

MORNING CAME. THE FIRST thing I notice as I walk up the stairs is his eyes. I feel them stuck like glue at the back of my head. This is too awkward.

Since I am on housekeeping duty and assigned certain floors with my partner, everything should be a piece of cake from here. We start off light. I find her methods of cleaning a room effectively. This is where working with someone more experienced than you matters. You get ideas you could only develop after years of suffering...

“Listen, girl. This place doesn’t need to be vacuumed every single time,” Robbie says and hits the carpet. “Just turn the machine on and give an impression. Many of these customers never make a mess... far too many. “

She kicks the lever, turns on the machine, and does a brief sweep around exactly as she said. Once she’s done in less than five seconds, she turns it off and looks at me proudly, having shown off the trick.

“Thank you,” I say.

“From this moment on, your life will be easier,” she affirms. She just gazes at me with a dull look before her face forms a smile.

Just then, Dylan peeks into the room, and the temperature instantly rises. So does my inner thighs.

“Morning, ladies,” he greets, even though his gaze is pasted on my forehead like a big red X. To avoid giving off the impression of breaking a law, we both respond casually, especially me..

“Work coming along well?” he asks in his severe usual work voice. Robbie and I both give affirmative answers. He doesn’t linger long, which I’m grateful for because it is the most uncomfortable thirty seconds of my life. Never have I felt so nervous and so turned on at the same time.

Robbie notices it because she asks if I’m okay when he leaves. Then says something about me, almost giving him reason to suspect foul play... but, of course, she knows nothing of the offensive play between Dylan and me.

We do our work as judiciously as possible, with Dylan checking in on us two more times to make sure we’re still fired up. That’s more times than usual . Each time, he makes our interaction more awkward than the last.

“So, you guys are about to finish here?” He is standing by the door of the last room we have to do.

Robbie regards him like he has grown an extra arm, but I know why he is here. He is probably seeking answers to what happened yesterday. Either that, or he is just enjoying an unconscious affinity to me from the ripple effect of the kiss.

There's no way he remembers...no way he should...

"Yes, uh. I guess it is a piece of cake once you get to do it a few more times," I say, and shrug.

He nods.

"You seem tired." He tilts his head to observe me further.

"I just did a day's work in less than six hours. Of course, I'm tired," I chuckle.

Robbie and Dylan exchange a look and burst out laughing, but with Dylan, it's a more vocal smile than actual laughter.

Now that I think about it, I understand why he had Lily, and me separated. We are the perfect representation of the word "*distraction*", and now that we are off each other's backs, I can perform much better.

"Hey, Dylan, don't you have anyone else to monitor, or are we just getting special treatment now?" Robbie jokes.

Dylan just smiles and looks at me. Immediately, a red hue creeps over my cheeks at the realization that he's very aware of what had happened the night before.

I have never needed an amnesiac more in my life. When it is time for our lunch break, Lily and I muse over our meal and catch up on the latest occurrences.

“Hey, how often did Dylan arrive at your station today?” I ask her.

She shrugs and says, “I don’t think I’ve seen him since our assignment.” I’m sure she forks a piece of pie will not fit into her mouth. “Why?” Her voice is muffled as she asks.

“He’s been in mine three times already.” I nod in realization as she gets it.

“He remembers?” She scrunches her face in confusion.

“I’m sure of it,” I affirm.

“Well...” she laughs at me.

“Now you’re in proper trouble. Ava Pearson... sleeping with the boss.” She announces it like a news headline, but loud enough for us both to hear. That doesn’t stop me from almost suffocating her with my hands.

“Would you be quiet!?” I give a low growl. “Besides, we haven’t even slept together yet.”

“Yet. So you’ll do it, eventually.” She picks at my words expertly to use them against me. Still, I am the one that made the blatantly implicating statement, and I cover my mouth in shock when I realize it.

She jiggles her eyebrows at me suggestively, and for the rest of the meal, she makes inappropriate jokes about Dylan and me. Even more shameless is that I mentally indulge in the scenarios she creates. When we’re done with lunch, I have nothing to do, so I either patrol the lobby with people on duty or return to the staff quarters and catch a well-deserved nap.

You guess which one I picked. Working with Robbie is fast-paced and tiring, so when I hit the bed, I hit it hard and completely black out until a tap on the door jolts me awake. My eyes open groggily and I see Dylan standing with a first-aid kit.

“Hey!” I greet him with more enthusiasm than I should have.

“Hey. Am I interrupting anything?” he asks.

“Do you want an honest answer for that?” I rub my eyes.

“I’m sorry. Maybe later...” He nods in apology and turns to go.

“No, no, no, no... It’s okay, I guess. Come on in.” I invite him, and he turns as swiftly as I say the first “no”.

Without hesitation, he removes his shirt and walks over to the couch. I watch him move with my mouth salivating. His body is honestly one of the most deliciously sculpted masterpieces I have ever had the pleasure of witnessing. He’s not much taller than me, so he doesn’t have that tower effect, that doesn’t stop me from wanting to run my hands over his smooth skin, chiseled pectorals, and toned abdominals, with everything in proportion enough to create a numbing desire in my lower abdomen.

“Ready when you are, Candy,” he says when he is fully seated and has had his fill of me gawking at his body for at least five extra seconds. I don’t have any defence, so instead of a snarky reply, I try to hide the embarrassing redness on my cheeks and begin the process.

When I inspect the wound on his back, I am genuinely pleased by the results of an entire week of constant care.

“Well, if all goes according to plan and you don’t go dipping yourself in a pool of bacteria, this should be the last dressing that I or the clinic will apply,” I announce, mentally regretting the fact that I won’t be seeing him on this pedestal anymore.

“So, this is the last time?” he asks as if adding salt to the injury. I wonder why I feel that about losing my favorite toy.

It was just one kiss, Ava. One kiss! My mind utters to cheer me up. But then again, But seriously, when was the last time I got kissed like that?

“You can swing by for a check-up and see how it’s healing.”

“I’ll try.”

My interpretation of his statement is that he is not making any promises, and I perfectly understand him. When I’m done with the dressing on his back, I stand to take care of the one on his head. Other bruises were inflicted on him on the day of the fight, but most of them would have completely dried up by now.

“The head wound is doing well,” I announce, and I hear him curse under his breath. “You said something?” I ask, but he shrugs it off. The head wound has completely healed and doesn’t even need a new dressing. Still, I’ll let the nurses decide, so I apply for one.

While I do so, he reminds me about what I want most in the world to forget.

“You know that guy who assaulted you?”

I don't have to nod or reply. My gasp says it all. *How can I forget?*

“Well, the DA called the hotel today. He said he pleaded guilty during arraignment, and there will be no need for a trial,” he divulges.

“Thank heavens.” I let out a sigh of relief. I really wasn't looking forward to seeing his demented face again.

“Four years in prison and a fine of thirty thousand in total. Twenty for you, ten for me.”

Wow...

“I suppose I should get myself into another situation like that sometime,” I joke. “Because that's a lot of money in it!”

Dylan just shakes his head at my jokes. His entire watch case probably cost that much, but this is new to me. He should allow me to enjoy it.

Once I'm done sterilizing the area, I give his face one last swipe before I let go. As my hands leave his face, a pair of muscular arms wrap around my waist. My body tenses at the surprise touch, and my arms try to retract, but I immediately put my hands on them to keep them in place.

“Yesterday,” he starts, immediately sending my poor, already restless heart into a near shock.

“I did it on purpose,” he confesses.

Wait...what?

“I was drunk, but...it only aided my confidence and lack of regret.”

He pulls me closer as he talks, and his hands move.

“Stop me,” he pleads, “let’s not do this.”

But I do the exact opposite. Instead of pushing him away, I wrap my hands around his head and smother him with my lower body. His hand moves to my rear; he takes shaky breaths and squeezes me lightly...ever so sensually. His massage is tender and erotic...and now, that numbness in my pelvic region translates into wetness in my panties.

There’s so much going on in my mind, but I just let myself feel. I’ll worry about the emotionally tumultuous parts later. He continues his feline touches on my backside, rumpling the flesh slightly.

“This is so...wrong,” he groans. I can hear through his voice just how strained his breathing is. There’s a lot that he’s restraining himself from doing...a lot that I don’t want him to stop. The wetness pooling inside me might just keep getting worse. I reach beneath me and begin stroking his bare back, feeling him release knots upon knots of tension.

“I want this,” I whisper to let him know he isn’t the only one with this outrageous craving. “I want you.”

As if that was the confirmation he needed. He stands up and takes my mouth into his in one smooth motion. Our lips tangle for a while; his soft, delicious ones are mashing mine, creating

a heavenly need. His hands stay on my butt, and he pinches it harder this time.

“I love this so much,” he laughs and grabs a huge chunk of flesh. I know I have a well-shaped bottom; I just didn’t think he’d idolized it so much.

“How often do you stare at it?” I tease him.

“As often as I can without getting caught,” he returns.

“Pervert.” I slap his bare chest.

He slaps my ass in response to say, “Aren’t we all?”



Dylan

YESTERDAY I ENJOYED THE most magical moment I have had in a long time. Suddenly, waking up doesn't feel as dreary as it used to because I have something to look forward to...someone to look forward to. I make my daily preparations and head on to our waiting point.

Very few people beat me to the waiting area, and only during specific times, but there she was, with her best friend, who was unhappy to be here so early. They are both conversing, so they don't see me coming. While Lily looks like she'll waste no time shoving a bullet down her friend's throat if she had the opportunity, Ava seems either not to notice or is purposefully being this lively to make Lily want to kill her more.

"Oh, look, there he is," Lily immediately announces as soon as she sees me. Ava's attention switches to focus quickly.

"With all due respect, Mr. Dylan, sir, you need to tell Ava to take a chill pill," Lily complains. Getting closer, I see just what an ill mood she is in. Her face is swollen, and dark bags are under her eyes. This girl must really love her bed. Ava

looks the complete opposite. She puts more effort into looking better than the average person.

Her sandy blonde hair is up in a pristine ponytail that I'm guessing Lily helped her do, hence her grudge against the model-worthy figure I am looking at. Her dress is in as good a condition as it can be, and her skin has an entirely different glow.

"I'm sorry, Lily, but you should know your friend well by now," I offer to pacify her.

"Hey," Ava says and nods in my direction.

"Good morning, " I sit on the bench beside Ava, who is beside Lily. "Sleep well?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Yeah. I mean...I slept at least...." I mutter. I'm horrible at idle conversations, so I don't know how to proceed.

"Do you ever smile?" she asks suddenly. I turn to see her looking at me in an amused manner. I think next to her perfectly shaped butt, I love her smile next...or switch the order. Smile before ass. I love both anyway.

"You mean...just out of the blue?" I muse.

"Yeah."

"Like a psychopath," I scoff.

"What? You think it's wrong?" she probes.

"What? No! I never said it was...I mean, I think it's weird, but...you know...to each their own," I defend myself.

“You think people are psychopaths for smiling often.” She brings back my former statement. This might be her definition of play or teasing, but I’m not enjoying it.

“I didn’t mean that,” I say bluntly.

“I don’t believe you.” She rests her chin on the palm of her hands, resting on her lap. Looking down at her legs, I see Lily napping peacefully. I still think this girl differs from the age on her resume.

“What do I need to do, then?” I huff and ask, “...for you to believe me.”

“Smile,” she says, sporting a cute one herself. The face makes me stir in my briefs, but I resist it. People were coming out individually, and I needed to quell it. I force a smile, and the one on hers disappears. “That was so fake,” she complains.

“I’ll work on a better smile,” I promise her. She must think I’m such a socially awkward nerd...in which case, she’d be right. “But now it’s time to work.” I stand up to address the people already waiting for me. She does too, and a disoriented Lily follows her. That little girl needs serious protection.

“Good morning, guys,” I announce as I finish greeting however I can individually.

“So, new week, new allocations. I have developed a whiteboard, so I don’t have to do the calling manually. Just look at it to get your various tasks and pairs. Let me know if you have questions. ”

My eyes instinctively trail Ava, and I can see a change in her demeanor when she sees her quota.

Sigh. I expected this.

Anyway, when everyone returned, I passed a warning. “So, this goes to everyone, especially those doing hall patrols. If you noticed, I changed the hall patrol number of pairs instead of singles. Agreed, it’s easy enough for one person, but easy doesn’t exactly translate to safe. I’m sure y’all have been seeing me in band-aid adornments....” That draws laughter from a few staff members.

“I’m appealing for extra security consciousness. Robbie, you and Rhodes are on hall patrol today. On no account should the both of you become separated. Entering the room of a present guest without anyone knowing you’re there is strictly prohibited. Am I clear?”

I get a reassuring affirmation from the group, dismissing them to go on to their various points. Ava leaves as well, with Jane, who I paired her up with again, to work on room keeping. Not a goodbye, not a wave...not even a blink in my direction.

Sigh.



Ava

LILY HASN'T STOPPED LAUGHING at me. My face is scrunched in mild annoyance at how much she's laughing. Still, it pales compared to the disappointment I feel thinking about him. Housekeeping? For the third time in a row!? I thought he liked me!

“Well, now we know he loves your homemaking skills more than your ass,” Lily squeaks. She snorts loudly, trying to suppress her laughter. “Oh my... relationships are definitely not for me,” she snorts again, another futile effort to quell her guffaws.

I just sit there observing her mock me to pieces. At least it's funny and even made me rumble in laughter. More at her own than the subject, however. She cleans away the tears at the corner of her eyes and looks at my disgruntled face.

“You put so much effort into looking good today.” She shakes her head .

“There, I know I messed up,” I agree. “What did I think? That I was going on a date?” I ask myself more than her, but she takes it upon herself to answer the question.

“Maybe extra work is his way of professing love. The date venue is the room, and the vehicle is the cleaning trolley...” She can’t say anything further: her laughter won’t let her. I let her have her fun, though. There’s only so much in my life to laugh about. Besides, my ill fortune is definitely not her fault.

We finish lunch way longer than we usually do, partly because of Lily’s small eating pattern and somewhat because she laughed herself almost into oblivion through the entire meal, making fun of me with every corny joke she could think of that fits my situation...so, entirely Lily’s fault.

I resume the work Jane and I are to be done in silence, listening to her drone on and in about her kids. It is interesting in some parts. The boring parts, I just clip out. If I were working with Robbie, we’d be done by now. That woman is a complete machine. Jane believes in cool, calm and collected work spread over time.

Usually, we finish earlier than the close of the overall shift, and I prefer it. With Robbie, we’d be done by half the day, and even that is a gamble. If there’s an uncommon event going on, we’d be called in as extra help. If not, the rest of the day was ours to kill.

I see Dylan pass by a few times as we work, but he never stops by.

Yeah, you better run!

Just as we are in the last room to tidy up, I hear his voice in the hallway. “All well here, I see!”

Jane answers back, but I remain silent. He pokes his head into the room. “Jane, Ava... well done,” he pronounces. I know that was targeting me, so I continued with my work, ignoring him completely.

“Ava?”

Why does he have to be so pushy!?

I don’t want to disrespect him in Jane’s presence, imagining correctly that a relationship between two people isn’t looked upon kindly in the same work environment, especially when one is superior. I just mumble a greeting, which he accepts, *fortunately for me.*

“You know, Dylan is nice once you get to know him personally.” Jane says, offering to mend our “rocky” relationship. *So much oblivion in the air these days.*

I simply nod and accept her push to *mend* things with Dylan. She probably will get a shock, knowing the type of mending that needs to be done. Once I’m done with my shift, I head straight to my room to cool off. Lily is there watching an anime series on her laptop, so I don’t disturb her. The evening is going quite coolly with me, playing a game on my phone until I hear a knock on the door.

“Who’s there?” I ask with irritation. Lily simultaneously brings her headphones down, asking the same question to me...*like I would know.*

“Dylan.”

“Go away.”

He takes that as his cue to open the door.

“I said go away.” I swat at his figure from the bed like an annoying fly.

“I’m assuming she knows it all.” He waves to Lily, who waves back meekly. I swear the two of them have a better relationship than me and him.

“Enough to not be surprised you’re here,” I say with irritation still oozing from my voice.

“You’ve been avoiding me all day... someone has ever interrupted you and you’re still mad.” He collapses on the bed beside me.

“You only stopped by once. Trust me, Papi, you’re the one avoiding me.”

“Huh,” He grunts, folds his hands over his head, and gives me a look.

“And you just interrupted a multiplayer game. So trust me, I’m more irritated at that.” Which is true. *Have you ever been interrupted in a ranked multiplayer game? I’m going three ranks down...at least.*

“Oh,” he laughs. “I’m sorry about that one.”

Only Dylan would laugh, but his face doesn’t crease to show happy emotion. Not even a fake one. Weird lad.

“What about this morning, then? This week, actually.”

“That I’m not sorry about,” he shrugs.

“You’re not sorry about two weeks of housekeeping duty in a row?” I throw a pillow at his face and push it down, threatening to smother him. I’m not even angry anymore. I’m actually happy that he’s here.

“Work is work,” he says when I take the pillow off his face. “I can’t compromise it for our relationship, or that would prove the stereotype about why relationships are not allowed at work, especially between two ranks.”

I perfectly understand that. I sit back and look at him - how mature he is. He speaks his mind and logical reasons, not minding who he hurts. Kind of like me, but remove the logic part... and I have way more sentiment.

“So, am I forgiven for doing nothing wrong?” he says, snuggling beside me.

“Whatever, boss.” I shove him playfully on the shoulder.

“Now, Candy, let’s see you get these guys good.” He picks up my phone and hands it to me.

I have a better idea. “How about I get you good? Take out your phone,” I command, and smile.



Dylan

ONE WEEK INTO THIS journey, I already feel like tapping out. Not because I don't like her...I just don't feel like it's my place, especially when we must do everything secretly. Not even other staff have to know about it, much less the management. We try to make it up to each other as often as possible by the end of the day with her in my room.

We made a bold move to keep the sounds of the rocking beds and moans from being heard outside. *Because I'm sure I make her moan loud enough to wish she was quiet.*

Still, there's nothing like being alone with each other. It's something we haven't been able to accomplish much since the wounding incident, no matter how much I wish for it. And it's not like I can just cut out during work time. Again, my professionalism matters gravely to me. As I walk down the hallway, looking for where to help, all I can think about is her. This doesn't feel right.

... it doesn't feel wrong either, so...

I sincerely hope this does as little to my productivity as possible, but even I know it's a losing game. At some point, whenever I work, there's this part of my brain that wants to sit and think about what I could have done better with Ava the last time we met.

...and seventy percent of the time, I actually daydream...like a teenager!

While it annoys me once I catch myself doing so, my brain goes back into fantasy mode.

Do you think Ava would look better in a tight, stretchy dress? Maybe you should buy her one.

And just like that, I forget everything about productivity that I scolded myself about two minutes ago as I imagine Ava in different clothing in sexy poses. It even irritates me when I catch myself smiling at the fantasy!

“Get. Your. Head. In. The. Game!” I say and head-butt myself... To avoid losing my focus on power-work, I'll push through for another thirty minutes before taking a break.

“That's it,” I exclaim and drop the iPad. I refrain from documenting what I have in the inventory. I'll get to it later. I need something to keep my brain perpetually active. Something that will give me no room to think of Ava... *and I'm sure that's not an impossible accomplishment.*

Someone to scold, perhaps, or to teach someone something...

Aha! I moved Lily into a new division, ignoring the partner I paired her up with or how far she had gone in my absence. *The lobby is a very challenging area to handle.*

I don't know whether it's by design or life wants to test my libido. As soon as I step away from inventory, I see Ava going into another section of the building... *and she sees me, too.* I don't have superpowers, but I can tell from her body cues that she wants me to follow her. I do so subtly and watch as she heads into the supply room on this floor. My head spins with wild thoughts.

Each time I am about to enter a critical situation, I go through different simulations in my head in split seconds, feeling that if I take the best approach, I won't later think about what to say later. It never works.

"Hey," I breathe when I finally enter the supplies room. Ava arranges some materials in their compartments and turns to look at me.

"Oh, hey...you came."

...like she didn't know. Sly girl.

"Thought I wouldn't?" I tested her. She turns to me, leans on an open ledge, and smiles.

"I knew you would."

"How's work?" I approach her slowly. It's our first time alone since this morning.

"Good. Yours?" She bites her lower lip. I wish I could unsee that, but sadly, I can't and the man inside sees it too and wakes

up to the call.

“Hard,” I shrug.

She looks down at my pants to ensure that wasn't an innuendo and rolls her eyes.

“You think you're sleek, don't you?” she chuckles.

“I know I'm not. I know you're here,” I say, stopping right in front of her.

Just like that, we waste no time tearing each other up with our mouths. I dig myself in as far as possible, trying to taste as far down as her darn pancreas.

My addiction to her... *is maddening.*

I know little about kissing. Heck, I've only been in three relationships in all my life till now, but I know one thing, it never feels this good before.

...it's not supposed to.

I stretch my hands and touch her, trembling slightly as my hand hits her soft, warm skin. Something about her body invites both a fierce urgency and an equal measure of tender delicacy.

While you combine these two contrasting concepts mentally, understand the shock my mind goes into when my hands are finally on her. I keep them on her waist and push myself into her, feeling my hardness graze her tender underbelly. Our clothes limit the frictional pleasure of our merged bodies.

I wish the materials were thinner... *I wish there were no materials.*

“Tell me anything that tastes better than your lips and tongue. I’ll keep kissing you till then,” I hum as I deliver pecks and lightly chomp on her mouth to give us the opportunity of a light conversation during our petting.

“Have you tasted gummy bears?” she chuckles.

“You taste them. I’ll taste them from you,” I respond. I’m on top of my game today.

Suddenly, she pushes me back and yanks a container from the cupboard before throwing it on the ground.

What the...

“What are you doing!?” I grunt and immediately see exactly why. Jane comes in right at that very moment.

What pristine sense! All I can think about is how she’d taste with gummy bears stuck between her teeth.

“If that thing is damaged, it’s certainly coming out of your pay,” I huff and try to turn the mild panic into boss aggression.

“I’m sorry,” she plays along. “My hands are slippery. Got a little wet sometime back.”

I hold my laughter... just barely.

“You alright?” Jane asks and helps Ava up.

“I’ll be,” she sighs, keeping the container in its right position. “I’m sorry again,” she tells me, walking off with feigned aggression.

I swear, when Jane murmurs something about her trying her best not to get me angry, I hear her mutter, “I know. It’s just... he can be a little hard sometimes...”

Really, Ava?

The funny thing is, this isn’t the first time we’re nearly caught by someone... by even Jane! In her and Lily’s room once, I hide under the bed to avoid being seen by who I guess is Robbie, and I end up being there for over an hour.

The last time we were alone together, we hadn’t even started kissing when Jane walked right in, panting to Ava that she needed her to help clean up a child’s mess...one that even I eventually joined in, wondering what the nine-year-old ate that made him vomit so malevolently.

I spent about an hour showing Lily how to time herself when picking up trash and mopping floors as the place is in a twenty-four/seven mode; hence, its operation can’t be halted; I decided that I’m mentally fit to handle the boredom of inventory taking without being molested by memories before heading back.

The route through Ava’s working floor is short, so I deem it easier. Two elevator floors and five steps later, I pause outside a door, seeing Ava folding new sheets on a bed.

... bad idea.

I walk into the room when she notices me and peeps both ways to see if Jane is with her. She isn’t.

“This is our last room for the day,” she tells me while my head pokes in at the door. “The sheets are the last thing, so I told her she could go.”

... almost as if she knew I’d come back.

“Well, a good thing?” I raise a suggestive brow.

“We’re alone now,” she tells me and moves to the bed to take a seat. “The owners of this room just checked out an hour ago, so it’s one of the last ones to be given out and only if there’s a rush.” Her body slurs as sensually as her words. I close the door behind me and click the deadbolt for double safety.

“It’s just us,” she lets out before I pounce.

It’s like a battle of carnivores on the bed as we struggle for dominance. One moment she’s on her back, pressed below me, and I’m taking charge of the moment, while the next moment, I’m the one below as she shows me how dominant she can be. I don’t mind it. The position gives me enough real estate on her body to grope.

Suddenly, groping is not enough: I want to feel. As if she hears my thoughts, she deftly throws her uniform over her waist, chest, and head. I stay frozen for a while, looking at her.

“You’re beautiful.” I have nothing else to say.

“I know, now kiss me,” she growls, pulling me to her body. Slowly, with a little more work, she helps me out of my clothing.

*... I think we may cross a line here. But I'm far gone to care.
I want her now.*

Ava grants me my wish without saying it and removes the remaining item covering her. The light dusty hair... beautiful ocean eyes... soft pink lips. I can testify to a taste of heaven.

My time must have finally come. I reach out and cup her swells. They barely fit in my hands. The perfect size. I hold them dearly and massage them as she grins on my thighs and moans, expressing another need. One I'm reluctant to give... but that was when I was logical. To hell with logic now.

We are going to give each other the sensual sensations we need. I become sure of it when I see my thighs glistening where she's been rubbing herself.

"Take it off," I demand. She heeds me without verbal retaliation, just a moan, when she unsheathes me.

"You're going to enjoy this." Her cupid lips spread in a smile as she sinks down on me slowly, sealing my bond to her with every inch.

Her eyes close, and her face releases a smile. With parted lips, she moans as she begins her journey of pleasure; I hold her waist to guide her. Her two mounds bounce deliciously in my face, inviting me for a snack. I dig in without hesitation, causing her to moan further.

We're going to enjoy this.



Ava

THE ENCOUNTER ENDS WITH us gasping raggedly in each other's face. That was the most exciting thing in my life all year... and the last.

"That... was crazy," Dylan pants voraciously.

"You are crazy," I let him know.

"Not as much as you," he chuckles and turns to face me.

Whatever... I know I'm insane. But he's the driver. He's the one driving me crazy... for him.

"You know, there's something zesty about doing it when you're afraid you'll get caught," I laugh.

"That's your kink?" he asks. Hell no. That's not even a kink!

"If you know what I want to do to man's body, you'll stay far away from me," I mutter darkly.

"Yup," he chuckles. "Definitely not interested."

"I'll take that as sarcasm."

We stay like that for a couple more minutes before logical thinking trickles in. I don't know who it hits first, but we both get up at the same time.

“Someone would come knocking if we're here over five minutes,” he huffs.

I agree. We put on our clothes and straighten each other to the best of our ability. He touches my hair, but I doubt he did it well enough. I'd finish it up in the mirror later. He scoops off the sheets. I join him and drag them from him, despite his insistence.

“Make yourself present now, but I don't,” I reason with him. “Go.”

He nods and gives me a kiss before disappearing out the door. I follow him shortly with the sheets in my hands. It doesn't take long for the feeling of guilt to trickle in. Five steps in, I feel I've done all the right things wrong.

I should have waited till we were reasonably out of checking view. We should have done it in the staff quarters. What if someone saw us and heard us?

WE DIDN'T USE PROTECTION!

Birth control is simple, so I'm not too worried about that. The crucial question in my mind is the relationship. Should this even be happening? Dylan has already told me it shouldn't. I know enough about morality to understand that a boss and a staff member should have nothing to do with one another, especially if they work directly together.

There are reasons to see the official viewpoint as tenable. While I resonate with them, I find it impossible to keep a straight face...*and underwear on* with Dylan. I'm going to have to avoid him from now on.

For the next two days, it doesn't seem as hard. He's easy *to spot*. I see him and duck before getting the hell out of there. The rules help me keep him at bay... or myself in control. I do not know at this point. I think I crave him as severely as he does me, maybe even more.

The only time I don't bother avoiding him is when I'm working with my paired partner or at the end of our shifts when Lily is in the room with me. Then, we can't get into the situation we found ourselves in the last time.

On the third day, however, he catches on to my ploy and actively begins staking me out. What is supposed to be a peaceful day at work becomes a horrific nightmare. Every time I ran into his shadow, I turned in the other direction, but I lost him only once. The next time I ran into him, it was close. Too close. I know I should give up this time, but *Ava* has yet to learn the life lesson of knowing when to call it quits.

Even when he spots me and begins coming toward me, I blatantly dash for the nearest exit, praying that he just gives up. I have no idea how terribly wrong I am until a force seizes my arm tight. I know it's him, but that doesn't stop me from letting go of a wrangled yelp.

"Jesus, Dylan!" I hold my chest in relief.

"What?" he asks with furrowed brows

“You scared me, duh.” I try to relax my pacing heart. Even though I had known I wasn’t in any real danger, the thrill of having avoided him for so long and being this close to getting caught triggered a level of adrenal release tantamount to being chased by a tropical spider the size of a human hand.

“You’re scaring me,” he grunts.

It’s my turn to say, “What?”

He looks around before looking into my eyes to mutter, “You’ve been avoiding me.”

My face twinkles in confusion, and I scoff.

“Pfft, what!? I’m not avoiding you...you’re not that scary.”

“Yesterday, twelve fifty. You were in the hallway, and I saw you. You turned three corners and turned off the lights,” he accuses steadily.

“The light wasn’t me; come on. I know nothing about the switches here,” I lie smoothly. “Besides, you probably caught me in a hurry.”

“Yes, I did,” he mutters dryly. “Then why were you running away from me just now?”

These are the questions that it sucks to answer because the answer, embarrassingly enough, is to remain silent and accept that you have been caught. Still, I won’t give up!

“I thought you were coming to yell for not finishing the work on time,” I defend myself.

“Huh.” I can tell he doesn’t buy it. I sigh. Better to get it out now.

“Listen. I think we may have crossed the line a little on Tuesday,” I tell him with closed eyes, not wanting to see the disappointment on his face. “Do you know how many times they could have caught us? It just scares me, to be honest.”

“You know, they say pleasures are best enjoyed when they’re not supposed to be,” Dylan laughs.

I shake my head to say, “Finally, something fun coming out of your mouth.”

“Wait till you know me fully,” he chuckles.

Oh, I will wait.

“But seriously, we must do this...to control our urges. I don’t think it’s worth getting fired.”

To this, he just shrugs casually and says, “We won’t.”

I don’t know whether he’s bragging about his immunity... because I know I have none, or it’s our sheer coincidental luck not to get caught. Either way, I do not want to find out.

“Yes. I know,” he clarifies. “We actually did what we shouldn’t have done. I’m not saying I regret it... I’m just saying, but we should try not to do it again.”

Wow.

“I don’t think it’d be that easy,” I chuckle.

“I looked for every way to tell you and even thought of not telling you at all.” He scratches his head sheepishly.

“So, we have a deal?” I stretch out my hand for a shake.

“I guess we do, in that case.” He takes my hand and shakes it earnestly. We keep our hands bobbing up and down for an abnormal period for a shake, looking hard at each other, probably to catch an emotional loophole or a whiff of sarcasm before we finally disband.

“So, uh. See you in the evening, I guess?” I shrug as I step backward. He does the same thing.

“Ditto,” he croaks and makes a heart with his fingers. “Now, get back to work.” He flashes the most beautiful smile that humanly exists and disappears around the corner.

Well. In every scenario, that went really well. Too well, in fact. So much so that as I continue toggling linen, all I can think about is whether he is being sarcastic.

It’s still a win for me, I guess. Another reason to avoid him is if he catches me again and tells me he was only joking, I’d say I’ve lost my ability to differentiate between sarcasm and straight talk.

Staff takes intermittent lunch break at various times to ensure that the grounds are not completely vacant of workers. However, Lily and I still ensure we are on the same break schedule. Today, I feel it’s safe enough to tell her everything.

“Hold on!” She stretches her hands out and pushes the air in front of her with her eyes closed. “You guys... did what?”

I look around to making sure no one’s listening. The lunchroom is loud enough for everyone to be out of earshot,

but still, I lean in and repeat myself, “Yes, we had sex in one of the guest rooms.” Then I sit back and watch her freak out.

First, her face turns tomato red, and then she pants. I should have confessed this in our room, where we’d be alone, and she’d have the liberty of raving.

When she finally calms down, she looks at me again and insists, “Tell me all the details. Did he touch your...” I cover her mouth before she can utter anything grotesque while eating.

“I don’t know what you want to say, but no. He didn’t touch me...” I left the statement open just as I made her leave hers.

She relaxes and goes back to her meal. “But you’ll give me the details later, right?” she asks again.

“I can’t corrupt you with such ruthlessly erotic knowledge, baby girl,” I purr. “You’ll have to get your own experience first.”

I know she’d sooner get swallowed by a whale than allow herself to get approached by a guy, but eventually, she will have to. I’m going to make the...as much as it kills me. As far as I know, she’s had a few crushes. She has clarified that she wanted them to remain crushes, but she has the devil as a friend. One of these boys will get lucky soon.

“How many times have you done it?” she asks with a full mouth.

“Once. We made a deal not to do it again, though.”

She nearly spits her bolus out.

“You got to be kidding me. Why!?” she cries. Her face looks like she just screamed at me, even though her voice is not more than an exaggerated whisper.

“Why not? It’s not a safe ground,” I shrug.

“We have a room.” She folds her hands and reclines in her chair.

I’m deprived of the pleasure, and she’s getting angry. What’s the logic?

“With you in the room!? There’s no way,” I laugh.

“I’ll leave. You’ll call me when you’re done.”

“Lil, I think it’s better this way. If you think about it enough, we’re not even supposed to be a thing. He’s my boss.”

She smirks.

“Boss? Heh. In fact, I bet three days of work that you won’t be able to stay without him, and you’ll do it again,” she challenges.

“You think?” I laugh but actually think about it. What if I’m not able to overcome this maddening addiction to him?

Is it possible to like someone this much, or is it all in my head? *Ava* is a natural-born competitive machine. If there’s anything I exist to do, it’s to break bets. There’s no way I’ll let her win this one. Besides, it’s a cheap bet. Three days... on something Dylan and I had already agreed upon.

There’s no way I’ll lose. The best thing to do is to map out my avoidance strategy. Since Dylan is in on it, I will share it

with him when he comes to the room this evening. The plan is simple. Wherever he sends her, he will avoid it. All I have to do is make sure I'm always in her company as much as she will allow me to be...

“Hey, if we keep it like this, the celibacy plan will last longer than three days.” Dylan rests his lips on my ear, which turns me on more than he knows.

By the time the night is concluded, I'm sure there's no way Lily is winning the bet.



Dylan

IF I GO WITH Ava's plan, I'm sure I'll survive the summer.... if I can survive at least the next three days. It doesn't seem that hard. Just bury myself neck deep in work, speak to no one... especially her, at least not till the evening when Lily is around to keep us apart.

One day, I find myself in her room, and we talk ourselves into oblivion until we're thoroughly lost in each other's words. There's no one else in the room, not even Lily, who is just a few feet away.

"So, you liked cartoons as a kid?" she asks with a scathing chuckle. I know I'm dead serious at times, but come on...

"Everyone loved cartoons as children. To be honest, if I'm given the opportunity, I won't refuse the offer to indulge in a properly animated film show with a well-set-out storyline," I reply.

Ava contemplates it for a while. "So... in that case, every cartoon then."

I laugh because she's right. Animated shows have way cooler storylines because you can do more stuff, especially when you can't tell what's real and what's not.

A chicken can become a roast one moment and be scuttling after a bouncing can the next in perfect condition. It gives the writers much less to think about. It would be exactly the same if our love life was animated. We could do whatever we wanted, and people would walk by, not noticing us.

Maybe we'd have the time of our lives in a toilet, and a staff member would come in. All Ava has to push me into the toilet and press *flush*. I'd be gone in the blink of an eye, waiting for her on the other end of the pipe some miles away, where our business would continue promptly despite my filth.

"Sometimes, I wish I didn't grow out of childhood so fast, you know," she muses while I stroke her arm. She's cuddled next to me. "All the responsibility is on you to be the one the world looks up to, only..."

"If I tell you I don't understand what you're saying, I'd be the biggest liar in this hotel," I croak loud enough for her to hear. I understand her perfectly.

"Time suddenly seems not to be on my side anymore. There's so much *I should have accomplished by now*, but here I am. In the arms of some... boy." Her voice assumes a tone I don't recognize until I realize she mimics someone. A parent, maybe. I should ask, but then again, I'm terrible at conversation. Instead of saying anything, I let her stroke my

thigh and tickle her arms in return till we both fall asleep in each other's arms.

The daybreak finds us together...me scrambling for an easy way out. Luckily, I have Lily on my side, and she quickly makes a disguise that I used to leave their room unnoticed.

My petite hero. I owe her one now.

Once I took the bath, get dressed and conquer every morning activity, all that left is to do myself-apportioned quota of work and avoid Ava for the next ten hours.

Keeping away from Ava alone is a deathly task. But I should survive if I steer clear and go only to the most probable places she would not be. It would be either the kitchen, gate post or anywhere but the hotel, the RDM's office. Of course, I'd want to see my other favorite person.

Once given clearance, I burst into the room, giddy like a child. I get an instinctive feeling from the expectation of seeing her from when she was still my nanny. Nothing pleased me more than hearing the phrase as a child, "Auntie Sylvia is back!" when she returned from her weekend break.

"Auntie Sylvia," I greet when I see her face. She's much older now, with slightly more rounded features, but no less beautiful.

"Here's my Dylan!" she coos. "How's work?" she asks, looking up from her computer.

"It's...work. I guess. I'm saying that I'm helluva tired right now." I collapse on the couch.

“Oh? You definitely need rest, Dylan. Don’t move an inch, alright. I should call someone to get you a glass of water or something.”

I appreciate the gesture; when the bottle arrives, it’s fruit juice instead of just water.

Typical Auntie Sylvia. We talked about the entire staff and I mentioned how stubborn Ava is. She kinda picked up on the fact that I like her.

She must be a spider woman...but again, that’s just her: as observant as a CCTV camera and conclusive as a professional crime detective.entire staff

“Hey, Auntie, I better get going. There’s a lot for me to do,” I tell her after I’ve had my fill of good old childhood endorphins released while talking to her.

She tries to cajole me into staying, but even she knows it’s always a losing game against my stone will. The best she can do is get me to return after hall patrol.

“You’re the son of the boss. One day of a break will not tear down your father’s company. Certainly not your integrity,” she advises me.

I take her words seriously, but there’s so much applied to the standards I set for myself. I replay those standards as I leave her office and head straight to the supplies room to grab some equipment. Dad built all this from nothing. If I’m going to be worthy of his status one day, I will have to work as hard as he did... if not more.



Ava

I OPEN THE DOOR and peep in. Left, then right. *No Dylan. I'm free to go.* My movement is rapid, and I thank goodness no one sees me for the task on my hands. Seeing a housekeeper hurry with detergent in one hand and a pile of misplaced laundry in the other would raise questions.

What am I? A laundry thief? The hotel now feels like a busy Francisco intersection. If you're not careful, you could get run over. Only in my case do I need to be run over. I just have to set my eyes on him.

This kind of addiction should have medical treatment.

I stop to think; I've not really considered my options. Is it the supplies room or the room that needs sheets? Logic sets in. It'd take ages to find a space that needs fresh linens. Besides, the supply room is just a few feet away. I open the door, seeking to place the chemical substance in my hand on its appropriate shelf when my eyes land on him. He hasn't seen me yet, so I have about a second to turn around and get out of there.

But I don't. I stay rooted to the spot like I'm in a trance - because maybe I am. Maybe there really is no reason to run and accept it for what it is. He takes his time and looks through his clipboard. He knows someone has entered; he doesn't know it's me.

“Okay, I don't know if you came here to do anything, but work's waiting...” he says and turns.

He sees me as I do him, and his throat bobs as he takes a huge gulp. I'm physically salivating at the sight of him.

“You're here,” he croaks.

I nod. I move to the detergent rack - coincidentally just beside him - and place the soap on the shelf, stretching my arm and revealing my right side. Dylan wastes no time.

He grabs me through my exposed torso and kisses me from behind. My neck and face are coated with his saliva before my tongue tastes him. Once it does, it instantly familiarizes itself with its new friend. His grip gets firmer around my waist, and he presses my body into his so I can feel his turgid groin.

Well, now I want that too.

Kisses from behind have never hit me so sensually. My neck is arched to take in as much of him as my anatomy will allow, and it doesn't help that I'm not much shorter.

I grind my behind on him, exciting the moment further. When our lips detach, he remarks, “You were supposed to stay away.”

“No...” I pant. “You were supposed to avoid this floor.” I smile and push into him, making him grunt. His hands leave my waist and stretch to my thighs. First on the surface of my uniform, then under it. I feel scorched.

“I can’t,” he huffs. “I have to do my job.”

His hands’ trail and touch me where I want to be touched. I moan pathetically, my whole body giving in to the sensation.

This is really getting out of hand.

“You think I am here to play?” I drawl.

“Well...now you are.”

Fair enough. Clothes stay on, but we can still have fun.- hence the increased probability of being caught - only gives me a bigger thrill. He raises my uniform entirely above my waist and caresses my bare bottom.

“Dylan, there’s no time,” I groan.

His grunts affirm he understands. When I hear the deep hissing sound of his zipper, my mouth waters even more.

“You’re dripping,” he announces, removes his hand from my flesh, and shows it to me.

I am dripping.

“You’re so sensitive...so wet. I can’t control myself...” he mutters.

“Don’t,” I command.

I feel his tip nudge my entrance. *Here we go again.* The thrust doesn’t take me by surprise. It’s the pleasure that does

the job. Sharp, far-reaching explosive fun makes me squeal.

“Shhhhh!”

But I’m far gone. As his movements become more rapid, so make my synchronous moans until I feel a heavy cloth wrap around my mouth.

“You’re going to get us noticed, Candy.”

I moaned under the strain of the sheets he used to muffle me. This is getting out of control. Seeking a better position, I take the sheets and wind them properly around my mouth, like a bridle, and give him the other two ends to hold.

He uses them well, riding me where I see nothing but the destination he wants me to go. He moans, grunts, and curses as he thrusts frantically, but they’re more controlled than my perverted moans underneath the sheet gag.

In quick spasms, white flashes tear through my vision as a climax rips down my spine and floods my brain. Every nerve in my body strains ever so vividly, and even Dylan floods my insides with his seed. Our uniform grunts of pleasure and satiety subside as the high mental clears, and he holds me close, not even coming out of me.

“This was a mistake,” he breathes.

“Again,” I insist.



Dylan

DID ANYONE EVER TELL me that relationships aren't supposed to be easy? I wasn't told about the degree of difficulty and how alone I'd be handling the difficulties. Ava and I have already discussed how much I don't enjoy mixing work with emotions, and she perfectly understood... or at least it seemed like she did.

I really want to avoid her today, but it's hall patrol. I wouldn't miss it. Besides, I can't get distracted in this physical state. I have an ipad in my hand... how this makes sense is beyond me. As I trudge the alleys, I find Ava...in a guest room...fast asleep.

Huh? This should be Lily's thing, shouldn't it?

I move to her and shake her awake, calling her repeatedly until she's alert enough.

“What is it you think you're doing!?”

She looks at me like I've just committed an offence. “Jane said she wants to restock the supplies. Thought I might catch a

nap while she's gone.”

“On a guest bed...”

“It's vacant.”

“With the door open!”

“I'm staff, not a thief.”

“It doesn't matter!” I growl.

Ava keeps her hands akimbo and looks at me with disdain.

“What has gotten into your boots this early?”

“This is not a time to be sarcastic, Ava. Be careful.” I roll my eyes and begin walking away.

“I guess I'll try to be more careful even when we're alone together then,” she says loud and clear.

“Really?” I turn back to her to utter, “You're going to bring that up now?”

She shrugs casually to say, “It's not mutually exclusive. They're literally the same sighting. If I could be caught sleeping in a guest room, imagine being caught with a penis shoved inside me in the supplies room.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, and my chest resonates with a low growl. “What have I done?”

“That's right. Regret it. Regret every moment you've spent with me.” She nods her head and looks everywhere but at me.

“We both agreed it was a mistake,” I hiss. “Why are you acting like it matters!?”

“I’d like to get back to work.”

“Ava, you’re not being...”

“I’m sorry...” Her voice is higher than mine, with enough intensity to silence me, “... for sleeping on duty. I promise I’ll try not to fall into that kind of stupidity again,” she says. The passive aggression grates me to the bone. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll fold the sheets.”

She turns away without expecting an answer from me. I open my mouth more than twice to give a response but decide against it. It’s the right choice because I bump straight into Jane as soon as I turn to go myself.

“Sorry, Dylan. Any problem?” she asks, displaying her usual good nature.

“Oh, not at all. I’m sure we understand each other now,” I reply and begin moving off.

We’ll settle this in the evening. I decided I’d end things with her. The whole boss-worker thing just isn’t working between us. From that very moment, I practice my lines.

We haven’t been together long, so it shouldn’t hurt her much.

I try to comfort myself, but that does no good. *What about you? Can you manage the hurt?* I’m sure I can. But she’s like a drug; even the most addictive variation has its withdrawal point. I’ll get over it. But will I because allowing myself to get lost in her eyes reaffirms that she’s not just a onetime fling? What I have shared with her these past few days is something genuine enough for me to want to see it grow.

“You’re not gonna let me in?” I ask warily, standing at her door.

“You can come in even if we don’t want you to, so what’s the point?” Ava rolls her eyes and steps out of the way.

“I can’t.” I feel the need to clarify, “It’s your space.”

She hums. Something about when Ava goes incommunicado stresses me. She should throw the accusing questions, with me deflecting her attacks with flighty answers.

“How was work?” I try. Not knowing what to say sucks... especially when I have planned it all out. Seeing her face-to-face makes everything fly off, especially when she’s not as confrontational as she normally is.

“Fine. I finished before the shift officially closed,” she offers and shrugs.

“Huh.”

“Took your advice and didn’t sleep more,” she mocks and chuckles.

Even Lily can feel the tension in the room. She looks intensely at both of us, not moving.

She’s not holding her breath...is she? There needs to be more familiarity between Ava and me to continue this relationship. Still, I don’t know how to phrase it. Do I even want to end it? I move closer to her and hold her waist. “Well, you can sleep now... with me,” I drawl.

No. I'm not ending the relationship. The way she accepts me tells me enough. She's too beautiful...and too complicated for me to give up like that.

"I'm sorry for the way I reacted earlier. I was in the wrong, but...I don't know. This relationship complicates things," she voices, her breath mixing with mine.

A little too late for that now, don't you think, Ava?

I should open a conversation about ending the relationship now, but I don't want to. I want her. Her warm, soft skin will give me more comfort than I'm worth, and her smile when she's with me is enough to send me sky-high.

There has to be another way. Maybe I'll be more vigorous about avoiding her during work times. Not just to avoid sexual tension, but to prevent any form of argument. I'm ready to take that compromise - for her.

"Now, I'm tired." I try to stifle a yawn. She kisses my cheek and blushes when I give her one back with a smile. There's no better way to end the day than seeing her smiling face opposite mine, drifting to sleep.

I'm awake earlier the following day to get to my room before I'm spotted by anyone, but I don't mind. I'm up earlier than anyone every day, anyway. In the bathroom, the entire plan seems easy to execute. Before, it was just to avoid her when she was alone. Now, it's to avoid her altogether. This has advantages and disadvantages.

The advantages are that I'll miss her enough to be more excited to see her in the evening. If I think of the disadvantages, I'd tell her I'm out of the relationship. But this is the thing with love: it's as blind as a bat. I never planned on prioritizing a relationship over work. Still, certain compromises have to be made, and I have to understand the priorities.

The moment I step out of my room and scan the area - not seeing her - I realize that dealing with the negative effects of not checking up on her is the simple part. I have to deal with not seeing her...at all...and for ten or more solid hours. *Easier said than done* has never been a more vivid reality. It just doesn't have to be this profusely set, though.

For most of the morning, I walk around the halls awkwardly. I have to stifle a massive unabating hard-on that just won't cease. All because I thought of our time in the supplies room.

Not to give it so much credit, that was a pretty uncontested monumental moment and the most erotic thing that has happened to me over the past four years. I don't remember wanting someone so much that I would risk getting caught while pounding into her furiously like a rabid animal.

You know what they say, anything illegal is always sweeter. I experienced it firsthand that day. The way her skin vibrated under my pressure with each unforgiving thrust and her head tilted back...screw it. I need to get rid of this boner. At least temporarily. I'm on the executive floor of the building, so there's only one thing to do.

I grab a handful of lotion and go to the bathroom. The tub would make less mess, so I just unsheathe myself over it. Closing my eyes, I coat myself in the cool slippery substance and then conjure a playback. Each thrust I took then represents a stroke now - and a thrust I could have done better. I wrestle with myself for a while, ferociously tugging myself to her memory until the bathroom tub is splattered with my seed. It's the same color, so I don't see how much I let out. I hurry to clean it up, anyway.

Like I said. Illegal seems so much more exciting. That's when I decide to throw all cares into the wind.

I need to find Ava right now, or I'll lose my goddamn mind!
My mind tells me, and I listen without countering it.

Like a zombie on cocaine, I move swiftly out of the room and locate Ava on the fifth floor. She's with Jane, but I couldn't care less.

"Ava? I need you on the executive floor. Now." I command authority to cue her in the urgency. She takes it fast and catches up before I get to the elevator.

"What are we going to do there?" she asks innocently, obviously slightly disoriented by my blunt demand.

"You'll see," I say, tugging her to the suite I was in when I touched myself. I close the door and pin her against it before she can protest, and I ravage her.

I need her. I need her all!

She's just...

She responds instantly and grabs me by the collar to pull me deeper into her. “We’re supposed to be working.” She laughs when we break the kiss for a short breath. I respond with a feral growl and take her mouth again, reveling in the taste. Now, I’d do things much, much better.

I grab her behind me and lift her up. She gives a soft yelp but recovers fast and wraps her legs around my waist as I take her to the king-sized bed. She’s already grinding on my inflamed groin before I set her down.

“What are you doing to me?” I ask as I stare deep into her eyes.

“The same thing you did to me,” she echoes, pulling me into her. The clothes come off soon after, leaving us in this magical moment: the both of us, naked, kissing each other on the soft luxurious bed on the top floor of a high-rise, overseeing the beautiful city of San Francisco.

“I dunno what I did to you,” I mutter hoarsely as a feral need to make her mind build steadily inside. She’s a magical spell made solely for me. And I fall headlong for the enchantment.

“Dylan, please, take me,” she cries when my fingers linger on her longer than she can bear the torture.

I’m no more patient to have myself inside her than she is to have me; her verbalization is more than enough to tell me. I don’t know how long it has passed. Still, I know it lasts beautifully enough to put her in four positions during our carnal entanglement.

Her body ministers personally to mine, and I worship it like my life depends upon it - my mouth and my appendage. She moves like a goddess, ensuring we ride into the oblivion of sweet lustful satiety. I love seeing her face like this - scrunched up in intense pleasure, crying my name to make me well aware of what I'm doing to her. It gives me the will to last until her climax. Not once, but twice.

Like I said, she's a drug, and it doesn't stop there. As long as I know we won't be interrupted, I maximize the moment as much as possible, giving her time to recover for another go at it. This time I don't use my member. My fingers and tongue do the job...as her mouth does for me.

I taste traces of myself in her, and flashes come to mind of what a marvel it would be if my seed fertilizes one of her eggs. It'd be a privilege. I focus on her sensitive core and eat it silly like it's my last meal; until she screams my name in another climax, muffled by my hardness in her mouth.

Something about her high-pitched wail over my length drives me over the edge, coupled with her pulsing flesh above me. We climax together, a moment birthed by Aphrodite herself. I let her crash atop me, still in the position of our carnality.

I see nothing but her tender flesh nesting on my chest.

Is there a better way to fall asleep?



Ava

I DON'T FEEL TOO well. I wake up with a very persistent headache. But I shrug it off until even Lily notices I'm unwell.

“Ava, is there anything wrong? You look like you fell off the bed and broke your skull or something,” she asks me with concern.

“How much more accurate could you get?” I groan and rub the back of my head, trying to hit it for some miraculous shock-healing hack. It exaggerates the pain, and I wince, “My head is killing me.”

She hurries off to her bag and comes out with a bottle. “Aspirin”? Lily offers, pouring two pills into her tiny hand and stretching them out to me. I accept with gratitude.

“Thanks, although I might need something stronger. Maybe a shot of morphine or an overdose of that.” I reach to grab the bottle, but she hinders me from doing so.

“I’m not going to over-medicate you. Sleep in if you need it. Dylan will understand,” she tells me. “If you go to the walk-in clinic, they won’t prescribe bed rest unless they confirm its something that needs it.”

I shake my head, causing more pain. “A headache shouldn’t be enough reason to sleep in. It’s pathetic, and Dylan won’t take that lame excuse,” I groan. Lily still cannot understand the dynamics of our relationship. That we’re dating doesn’t entitle me to any special privileges.

Concerning his body, it does, but... I digress.

“It’d be insensitive of me to force him to pardon me just because of a headache,” I grunt.

“Well, I just don’t want you to pass out. The floors are made of marble unless you’re lucky enough to pass out on a carpet,” she warns.

“Who passes out from a headache?” I laugh as I take off my clothes and step into the shower. The shower filters out most of the sounds, but I hear her say “me”, and I chuckle.

Of course she has.

The shower does its best to relieve the headache, but before we leave our room, it’s back again... with an agonizing fury. So much so that I don’t know what happens for a few seconds until I hear Lily struggling beneath me.

“What happened?” I steady myself.

“It’s the effect of the headache,” she huffs. “You should see a doctor,” she suggested.

I guess I would.

“Maybe later in the day... Let me give it time to wear off. If it doesn't, I'll use it as an excuse to extend my lunch break,” I smirk lazily and leave the room with her following behind, probably to catch me if I fall again.

Frankly, I'm surprised she could hold my weight. When we get to the lobby, I see Dylan looking worse than I do. Then again, he always looks worse than me in the morning. We're one of the earliest up, so I am considering communicating my condition to him. Still, when I offer a greeting, he responds with his usual stoicism.

I want him to give me a little attention to tell him my problem, but he doesn't. Instead, he talks with another staff member about God knows what. I guess it's the headache that makes me take offence. It's usually normal for him to ignore me throughout the day and come to my room in the evening.

Just like that, when he gives us tasks, I feel offended. I must stress that this is not his fault, but I think he does it intentionally. Whether it is the headache's delusion or something else, I can't tell. I end up leaving without even so much as an acknowledgement. He must feel that gesture.

Now that I realize my public area duty is terrible, I would fare better within the room walls of the hotel. Within the next three or four hours, I register nothing but the incessant dull throb of pain that molests my skull. I have to take more rest breaks, but they must go unnoticed.

Unfortunately for me, today's partner isn't a kind man; he insists he does all the work. I don't even bother explaining my condition. I doubt he'll listen, anyway.

"Listen, lass. I don't think you understand why you're here," he sasses when he feels he has endured enough of the "lone suffering."

Did he just call me a lass? Who uses that term in this part of civilization? Again, my irritation makes me take offence to everything, including a man calling me a lass, even though that's what I am. But my laziness makes me a slave to his insulting chants.

"You're here to work. No one is wearing this uniform sitting down like you are right now, not even our supervisor. So, if you don't want me to call 'em, I suggest you do what is needed and get yourself together," he raves. I look him dead in the eyes and roll my eyes.

Sue me.

I feel like I should reserve my energy for when he finally reported me, which he does promptly. I can see the reluctance in Dylan's walk as he approaches me, but I summon all the energy I can muster and look up at him.

"Ava, come on, you cannot keep doing this. Get up," he says gently but firmly. "I guess no more lobby duty for you, then. You seem to hate it so mu..."

He takes a closer look at my face.

"What's wrong?"

“Nothing,” I insist. I do not know why I say that. I’m supposed to tell him how I’m feeling, but I’m currently feeling angry for an unknown reason.

“What do you mean ‘nothing’? Ava, you look like you’re about to pass out.” He turns to the man that reported to me. “How did you not notice this?”

“Well, she wouldn’t say!” He raises his hands in defence.

“How did *you* not notice it?” I pose the question to Dylan, who looks at me like I’ve grown a horn.

“Ava, there’s like seven concrete walls and ten floors between us. What am I supposed to do? Smell the pathogens?”

“In the morning, Dylan.”

“You looked completely fine in the morning,” he defends.

I feel like slapping him. Unfortunately, my energy fails me.

“You men can be so dumb,” I chuckle, but not enough for anyone but him to hear it. He gives me a stern glare.

“So, why didn’t you just come and tell me? Goddamn this, Ava. This isn’t my fault, and you know it.”

“You don’t care,” I whisper. “You never did.”

He looks around with exasperation and wants to react, but decides wisely against it.

“We need to get you to the clinic. You’re speaking in ancient Hebrew.” He holds my arm and tugs me along.

He’s right. I have no real anger or grievance toward him, but my headache just turns every word he says into a pile of horse

dung I find unnaturally offensive.

Somewhere along the route to the clinic, I shake my hands away from him, feeling too annoyed to touch him, but he holds me firmly back. I struggle against him, but he keeps his grip firm this time. Seeing it a pointless endeavor, especially as it only aggravates my headache, I leave it until I get to the clinic, where he lets me yank my hand away from his vice-like grip.

I sit on the examination bed and avoid his gaze throughout the examination.

“Turns out it’s just an initial stage of hemicrania. Can’t tell if it’ll continue or not. If you rest and take these meds...” the doctor instructs, hand me the prescriptions. “Come back in three days if the symptoms persist or you develop new ones like a runny nose or insomnia, alright?”

“Won’t headaches like this naturally cause insomnia? I don’t think I’d be getting any sleep,” I laugh. He shares my laugh but then adds, “That’s what the pills are for. If it’s really just hemicrania, or it’s a continua variant... we’ll tell from your feedback.”

I don’t understand what he just said, but it’s self-explanatory. Dylan’s eye hasn’t left me since we arrived, and I’m still wondering what’s on his mind. Seeing him today - having to choose between his integrity and me - makes me understand how much the tides are against us in this relationship. It has to stop. If he were just my normal boss, I don’t think I’d have waited this long to get help...and I certainly wouldn’t be feeling this hurt about him not noticing my predicament.

“So...no work for you for the next three days,” he chuckles.
“Tsk. Lucky you.”

I smile at him, not because his jeer was funny, but because I will probably be alone with him this one last time. I have to make it worth the while.

“By the way, I’m sorry I didn’t notice it earlier. I guess I got too carried away with the whole work thing.” He shakes his head.

Just then, the rationality I have been lacking because of the splitting headache returns. I look at him, worrying and fussing over me. Ava Persson is a complete idiot; she looks wise enough... I realize one thing: I can’t do this to him. He is my boss, and I am but his subordinate.

His emotions attached to me and me to him are just not healthy for the workplace. It would be stupid of him to throw everything he has worked for away...and for me to watch him do so just because it’s at my convenience.

He’s not supposed to care that I have a headache...at least not until I tell him; his only responsibility is to that is making sure I get the medication required. Seeing him in a compromised state when he’s supposed to be working and not be by my side makes me a terrible person if I continue to let it happen.

“Dylan.” I look at him, and he looks up back at me, maybe relieved I am finally communicating again. I have to let him down easily.

But is there any easy way for a breakup?

“We can’t...I can’t...” I pause and shake my head at the tears that threaten to fall from my eyes. That was a bad idea, considering I’m trying to calm an aching head.

He waits for me in anticipation.

“You need to work, Dylan,” I tell him. “... you’re not working when you’re with me. I’m not working when I’m with you, either.” I speak while still conjuring up better words. I keep my eyes closed so I don’t have to see the look of hurt in his eyes, knowing I caused it.

He seems to have picked up on what I’m driving at, and I feel his hands hold mine. “Listen, Ava, we can work something out. I’m sure we can. We just have to...”

“We can’t, Dylan. You know we can’t. You can’t keep doing this to yourself. Look at you! You’re supposed to be the boss, giving commands and not inclined to care, yet here you are. I’m deadweight, and you know it. Let’s not fool ourselves and call it quits while it’s still early...and an infatuation.” I force my voice to be strong, even though I am torn up.

He looks at me with pure exasperation; what I’m saying makes too much sense to bypass. He takes a deep breath and runs his hand through his dark, silky hair. I’ll miss that.

“It was fun while it lasted...I guess,” I tell him and turn to face the other way. I can’t bear to keep seeing him in pain.

“I’ll come and check up on you later,” he offers simply, and I know what that means. Resignation. A single tear drop falls

from my eye as I hear his footsteps tread down the hall.

It was fun while it lasted.



Ava

“WAKE UP, AVA. WE don’t have the protection of your boyfriend anymore, so if we get in trouble for sleeping in, this is really it,” Lily whines and continues to shake me as violently as her small hands can rattle me...which is a lot.

“We never had his protection, Lily,” I clarify as I finally stir – a placebo to get her to leave me alone. “...and he was never my boyfriend,” I add.

“Shut up.” She keeps pulling me to ensure I haven’t tricked her, and I am about to go back to sleep the moment she turns her back. My coyness is running out. “All the *love-dovey*? The late-night visits, the hugs and kisses that made me want to puke as your love made my singleness look like an abominable sin and threatened to cast me into the flames of eternal suffering for my atrocious loneliness....”

“What are you even saying?” I scrunch my face.

“Yes, I’m saying nonsense, but if it’ll keep you awake. I’m willing to make a mockery out of myself to do so, ” Lily huffs and with a tough tug, she throws me out of bed and atop her.

“You must feel really proud of yourself, don’t you?” I groan, unimpressed.

“How did you feel when you got your first paycheck?” she asks. “Exhilarated, right? Doesn’t it feel good to make more than a thousand bucks in a month?”

“Yeah, it does. But we have the next thirty years to do that. Now, I just wanna sleep,” I reply.

“Okay, enough talk. Get up and get in the shower. Now!” she commands, I obey without further questioning her pep talk.

It’s a good thing that she knows me well enough. There’s so much *more* trouble than I’d have gotten her into otherwise.

It’s safe to say at this point that I fear the activity of getting ready for work than the actual work itself. There’s just some level of dread and fore-brooding in my mind about how the day’s task will probably take so much energy out of me I’ll pass out before midday. While on some days, it feels like the sun stands still, and work seems to go on forever, most of the time, the day is over before I realize it.

However, the most exciting parts of most days are times like this every morning when we have to assemble before our superior...*when I get to see him.*

It’s the best part of my morning every time I greet him as emotionlessly as possible. But each day, I see crawling

improvements.... but improvements. It's also eventful to look at his face and watch him express the same emotion I feel—nonchalance—when I know that not even deep down is a heart that still cares about me and a body that still craves me. As he assigns us to our daily tasks and bids us to do our work, I can't help but wonder if he knows I care about him too.

The problems, though, are very minor. I revel in the brief contacts we have after the morning. I feel slightly disappointed when he doesn't show up during the workday. Today starts out sufficiently different, however. For starters, I'm placed on the same floor, at as he will mostly conduct his daily activities.

Whatever he is doing at work hardly concerns me. His presence is enough for me to worry about. Although I miss him dearly, it's still an awkward situation to get by every time we meet.

I soon find out after our first encounter.

“Hey,” he nods over at me when I move from one room to another. I nod respectfully back, feeling my voice fail me enough to make whatever would come out of my mouth sound pathetic.

“You're moving fast. I like that,” Dylan says and shrugs awkwardly.

Call me a monster, but I find it amusing how uncomfortable the situation is for him. While I feel even more uncomfortable, the thought of his discomfort is satisfying enough to make me endure a little further.

“You should like it. Makes you look good,” I sniff.

“I suppose so. You can take it easy, though. It doesn’t need so much of a hassle.”

Yup. Sufficiently weird to me, too - weird enough for me to deem the conversation over. I nod to him and turn my back in finality, entering the room to complete my work. We run into each other thrice more in the next set of hours.

“I’ve seen you alone too often. Where’s Robbie?” There’s that accent of bossiness in his voice. Still, I can tell it’s from protectiveness and not the genuine problematic behaviors accruing most superiors.

“Oh, that? If we took the rooms individually, we’d eventually cover more ground and be done with the quota with extra time to relax, ” I answer judiciously.

Yes! No awkward quiver! I mentally commend myself.

He doesn’t seem too happy with the answer, though. He holds his face in his hands, giving it a firm top-to-bottom sweep to express his dissatisfaction.

“Ava.”

“Yes, boss?”

“What did we say about wandering the halls alone?” he asks calmly, but the calmness contains a note of hostility. Still, I feel some of my confidence coming back.

“We should always move around alone and use whatever is at our disposal as weapons in case an attack of any sort should befall us,” I reply, without missing a beat.

He rolls his eyes heavily and walks around me, checking the rooms.

“Where’s Robbie?” he asks.

“Probably on the other side of the hall. That’s where her quota for this floor ends, and I bet she’s already at the end. She has red bull for blood, I tell you.” I shake my head in marvel.

“Huh, well, Red Bull in your veins wouldn’t matter when you’re sacredly tied to the poles of a bed and made slaves to the perverted desires of your captor, would it?”

I swallow hard. “That’s...oddly specific.”

“It is,” he replies and goes off to find Robbie. I have no full certainty of what he tells her, but when he returns, we arrange the room together.

Yup. He still cares for me.

We finish up the day and head back to our respective rooms. Since we are here, I have enjoyed no form of deeper socialization with anyone besides Lily...except Dylan. Maybe one of these days, Lily and I will join a weekend event like the one we missed because we needed to binge-watch an entire *Game of Thrones* season.

The next day, I wake up with the same brooding hopelessness, hoping it will cease sometime mid-morning. We get dressed as quickly as we can and assemble to wait for

Dylan, who comes a little later than all of us for the first time in a while.

The last time this happened was when he overslept in my room and had to wait for everyone to leave the assembly point before making his own preparations. I remember being surprised that he was out so fast and well-dressed to boot, since Lily and I knew he had just exited my room some five minutes ago.

He doesn't look as disorganized as at that last event. However, there is still a mild disorientation in his appearance, showing a rush.

He talks even before he reaches us, "Before he reaches us, he speaks, "I'm sorry for being late.""

"Nah, don't worry, you're forgiven already," Jane says. "Besides, this is just one time against your countless display of timeliness."

"I was going to say that I wouldn't..." he chuckles. "But I see that it's fine with you all already."

He proceeds without further ado to disperse us to our various areas as the timetable sees fit. He does manual swapping, so Lily and I must work together again. You can imagine my ecstasy when I hear, "...You and Lily, room duty, floors six through eight."

It takes everything in me not to let out the most exciting squeal and even more not to jump dive in gratitude, but I control myself. We exchange our over-dramatic gestures of

excitement within the walls of the first room we enter, barely able to contain ourselves. It almost turns our hug fest into a sumo wrestling competition.

“Well, I’d like to consider this a little gift from your boyfriend since he’s got no other way to communicate romantically with you,” Lily pipes up when the excitement dies. The drudge of work sets in.

“What’s that?” I keep my eyes fixated, making sure every surface is completely dust free. I turn to her hands tucked in her uniform pockets while she sways from side to side, batting her long eyelashes at me.

“Me,” she says simply. “I’m his gift to you.”

“You’re disgusting.”

“So, you love it. Good. I’ll tell him when we meet next,” she laughs. She’s right, though. It’s a gift from him. I love it. I love he thought of me to send Lily to me again...whether he believes it is emotional support.

But that just makes me miss him even more. That said, I get too distracted thinking about him to even work. I drop the duster, lean across the table, and take a huge breath with my eyes closed.

“I’m sorry,” I hear Lily say from the other side of the room.

“For what?” I huff.

“For bringing him up....”

I let out another hopeless breath. “Oh, it’s fine, Lil. I’ve been thinking about him, anyway.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I don’t think you made the right decision, but I know it was for the best.”

I nod and allow her to speak. It’s rare for Lily to express a completely candid opinion about something that doesn’t concern her.

“Here...think again about the reason you had to let go. Were they all justified?”

I nod again.

“Then you have your answer. Sometimes, the good things in life are just within reach, yet not everything good is necessary so far. For instance, a black elastic beanie in wool topped with some dope gemstones doesn’t sound like a bad idea, does it? But even though it sounds fashionable, would you buy one? ”

I do not know where that weird analogy came from, but it works.

“Where have you been all the while when I needed advice?” I laugh at her, and she just shrugs.

“You never asked. I’m as wise as Solomon...but only when I feel like it. Everyone is,” she chuckles. “Besides, Dylan was chaos in your life, and you were at least twenty per cent angrier. Now that peace reigns, you find it boring, but that’s life. Now you have to choose boredom....” She stretches out a hand, “... or catastrophe.” She collides with mine.

We continue to work, with me leaning into a new phase of fragmented thinking. My life with Dylan was emotionally chaotic. Without him, it's bland...*but is that okay? Am I okay with the boredom, or do I ride with the chaos?* I stop there and try to block out those thoughts because I know if I'm to answer that question sincerely, my answer will be *chaotic*.



Ava

THERE'S NO USUAL WAKE pattern between Lily and me. Normally, she's the one doing the waking, and this prevails most of the time. The only times she doesn't wake me are when I'm on my period, and the cramps wake me first. I don't need to be woken up.

Today is neither case.

I am practically impossible to wake, and before I get fully conscious, another one passes, and Lily has to threaten to leave me behind. Knowing I'll probably end up in trouble because of my apathy, I adhere to her threats and begin getting ready. Deep down, though, I can tell something is wrong .

"I feel sick," I mutter as I wobble into the bathroom.

"Sure," Lily scoffs humorlessly. "Tell that to your boyfriend when we get out. I'm not the one in charge of prescribing rest."

When I come out of the bathroom, her face maintains its tightness. "What's the matter, Ava?"

“What?” I look at her, confused. “You know I want to sleep in. You just don’t have to make me say it,” I complain.

She shakes her head in denial. “No, not that. Your face...it still looks like shit.”

“Wow, I really appreciate the compliment, Lily. I really do,” I mutter dryly.

“No, it’s not...” she starts, but hisses and comes over before turning me around and pushing me to the bathroom to check the mirror.

I gasped upon seeing my face.

“Yup. You look like they stuck an inflation tube in you and blew.”

I touch my face delicately, feeling it would hurt, but it doesn’t. “I need to check this out with the doctor,” I say, and Lily nods in agreement.

Just as we are about to leave the bathroom, everything feels dizzy...enough for me not to hear or even process anything until it completely goes black. I open my eyes to Lily’s big ones.

“Oh, my goodness, thank God you’re awake,” she says and heaves a sigh of relief.

“I passed out again?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t catch you this time, sorry. We just kinda fell together...and you were out for longer,” she explains. I let out a frustrated sigh. What is wrong with me this time?

“Maybe it’s the hema-something sickness,” she opines.

“I doubt it,” I say to disagree, shaking my head turbulently. “No headaches.” Last I checked, he told me the insomnia was supposed to come with headaches. I had neither trouble sleeping nor headaches to deter me. In fact, it is very much the opposite. I feel like sinking into the bed and becoming one with the mattress.

“We definitely need to check it out this time.”

“...or maybe I’m just low on sugar or something. Cause aside from the dizziness, I feel nothing.”

“Huh. I guess you’re right. We gotta pump you with sugar for breakfast then.” Lily has to agree with me. Breakfast is an unofficial meal on the schedule, meaning we don’t have it on the timetable. Still, anyone can do it when they want to as long as you make it as snappy as a toilet break and it doesn’t affect your work time.

Lily loads me with a cup of hot tea and a full sandwich, forcing me to engulf the whole thing in the same time to pee. She can get annoyed when the circumstances demand it...but I don’t mind. It’s cute.

I finally feel energized, but only for a bit. We’re at work, and the dizziness returns and holds me enough to realize that it’s not a symptom of a lack of energy from too much sugar. Even a sugar high couldn’t rescue me from this one. I find out soon enough when Dylan comes to check on us, and I pass out again, just before I can focus my eyes properly on his.

The events of the morning replay themselves, only in a variant version. This time, not only Lily but Dylan is also above me when I open my eyes.

“...Think she’s super low on energy,” I hear Lily tell Dylan like they are talking far away.

“I guess so. She’s been working like crazy. Yesterday, I had to get Robbie to slow down and do the work comfortably,” he informs her. Their voice becomes clear once again.

“Oh, good. She’s come to.”

“Perfect. You can walk, right?” Dylan asks and tries to lift me up. I respond to his urges after a few seconds of hesitation, momentarily forgetting the functions of my limbs. “Good. You can, Lily?”

“Yes?”

“Take her to the room...” He slings my arm over Lily’s shoulders. “And stay with her for a while; make sure she rests,” he commands. “Come back in two hours, maybe get a little time to rest, too, in case tiredness is contagious.”

I laugh tiredly and amble to the doors away from Dylan after Lily thanks him, and we move on. But there is a graveyard silence between us as we head to our room and an even graver one when we are finally settled. We are not speaking, but we know exactly the reason for the silence.

Before it completely eats me up, I open my mouth and say, “You know, Dylan and I never used protection while we were doing it.”

“Dylan and I...” she starts, piquing my interest.

“Dylan and you what?” I look up at her with alacrity.

“It’s Dylan and I,” she repeats.

“What the hell did both of you do!?”

I can’t believe she’s about to confess something. Whether I’ll be angry or sad at what she will say next depends upon what she says.

“No,” she cries and shakes her head. “I’m correcting you. It’s *Dylan and me*, not *me and Dylan*. It gets annoying when you make that mistake.”

Words can’t express my relief. I don’t get angry at her for correcting my grammar when we’re talking about something so sensitive.

“And yes, that’s exactly what I was about to ask you.”

Another deathly silence fell upon us.

“You think...” she starts, and I shake my head.

“It can’t be... it shouldn’t be.”

Try as I might, there’s no denying that the possibility is greater than getting hemicranias again.

“You know, there’s only one way to find out, right?” she voices my thoughts after several more minutes of grave silence. Both of us know what’s coming. It’s just too outrageous to rush, especially for me, the full bearer of the consequences of my actions.

I nod my head. We're going to have to check. I'm not looking forward to it because I think I already have my results when I put it together.

"I'll get it as soon as I'm done with my shift, and we'll do it together, okay?" she tells me.

"Coo...cool...cool," I respond shakily. This probably has to be the most heart-wrenching moment of the year...if I don't scout hard for more dangerous things that might have happened in the past.

Lily complies with Dylan's instructions and stays for two hours before she finally leaves with a promise to come back soon. Meanwhile, I am drenched in dread about the very near future. I sit there alone, compiling the memories of every time, every moment, every touch, and every sensation - and how they made me feel. His touches were fire to my already heated skin, and we might have created an explosion together.

Gosh, I hope not. The midday bleeds into evening faster than I can process...which is fantastic. Really fantastic. I don't know if she was carried by a flash or was teleported to the store and back, but just around the time I knew the day shift should end, Lily burst into the room and slammed the door like a criminal.

"Relax, Lil. You went to buy a pregnancy strip and not a packet of cocaine," I croak.

"I know, it's just...I ran into Dylan, and he was asking questions. I assume we don't want him to know yet."

Nice intuition.

“Thanks. So...how do we use this thing?” I ask and take it from her, examining the strip.

“We?” she laughs without displaying humor. “No, you...” she pushes the strip in my hands further into me.

Of course, this is my mess.

“I didn’t feel his hands in me or his....”

“Shut up,” I growl.

“Okay, I’ll stop. Sounded weird to me too.” She read me the instructions.

“Forgive my ignorance, but I always thought women peed on the thing,” I huff and go to the toilet. When all the necessities were done, I put the strip in according to Lily’s guidance, waited for however long she counted and took it out. From then on, I left it on the ground like a forbidden item.

Why I can’t handle a pregnancy strip until now is beyond me; I never thought I’d need it. I’m the one that has the sex; Lily’s the one that knows how to check a strip. She’s also the one to tell me the results. I dread to even look in the general direction of the thing.

“Two pink lines,” she announces with a grave, sullen voice.

“What does that mean?” my voice wavers in questioning, even though I already know the answer. I’ve watched too many videos not to know.

“Positive,” she explains.

“What does that mean?” Tears are rushing down my face now, and I shake my head, refusing to believe the reality or hoping that I have been watching those videos wrong all my life.

“You’re p..pr...pregnant,” Lily stutters.

I close my eyes and let out a huge breath, accompanied by a wide stream of flowing tears.

“I’m pregnant,” I repeat the realization repeatedly, with an even bigger fit of tears coming every time. This results from a love that shouldn’t be. I had the chance... we both had the chance to break it up, knowing that the time wasn’t right, and the circumstances were inconvenient; yet we let the physicality of it take over.

It feels tormenting to think there’s a living thing inside me and an even greater pang of guilt when I know that the decision I’m about to take is one that I had pre-planned as the natural course of action should I ever find myself in this situation.

“I can’t keep the baby, Lil. I just can’t,” I sob in my best friend’s bosom as she rocks me.

“You don’t have to, babe. It’s your choice.”

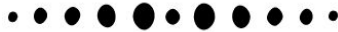
“But...it’s hard. I’m killing a baby,” I cry.

“No, no, Besides, you can just call it a fetus to make it easier for yourself,” she advises.

“I just don’t want it to affect him too much. Someway sometimes, the paternity of the child will be asked. He might

lose his job...and it's not just a summer thing like it is to me."

"Whatever happens, I'll be with you every step of the way," Lily comforts me. Just like that, without directly saying it, I commit an abortion. I still like I'm committing a treacherous crime.



Dylan

THROUGH THE TIME I work, I really don't work. My body does the work. Especially when it's purely physical, my body does it without premeditation. Putting my two hands in front of me gets them to do whatever my subconscious tells them to do - probably the right thing.

Right now, my brain fixated on one thing...one person. *Ava. Is she alright? Does she need a doctor? Should I have told her to go to the urgent care first?* All these questions run through my mind, and then some. Though, the bitter fact is that there's nothing I can do now but worry. It terrorizes me because worrying is tantamount to doing nothing, if not completely worse.

Still, it's all there is to do. I lost the right to go to her room and check on her the day she told me we weren't a match. I have a very strict policy about stalking someone, whoever it may be - friend or foe...or lover. It's always a bad idea to come off as too strong, especially when you know you're unwanted. There's just no use in pushing it. In the end, you'll

be called a creep and still won't get what you wanted...which is nothing!

Imagine going through hell and risking humiliation, looking for nothing...*and still not getting it. It's just that when they want you to be curious, they'll make you curious...*otherwise, Lily has no reason to leave the hotel premises so early—even though she is done with her shift. She never leaves the hotel without Ava. She returns after a while, wearing the same look she had when she left.

That guilty look announces to the world that she's up to something. A look suspicious enough for me to get curious, and very few things spark my curiosity enough to stand before her and block her path.

“Hey, Lily,” I greet her awkwardly, trying to compose myself. I've always had this big brother vibe toward her and would never want to be caught with my guard down.

“G...good evening, Dylan. How was work? ” She says in a hurry, trying to maneuver her way around me, but I stop her. She looks up at me and swallows hard.

“What's that?” I ask with authority, nodding at the plastic bag in her possession that doesn't look like it contains much. I crave the information as fast as possible. The both of them had better not be planning to self-medicate her when they hadn't yet gotten a prescription from the physician.

“I see work was fine,” she says and laughs nervously.

She's been with Ava for God knows how long. Of course, a bit of crass is going to rub in.

"This, uh...this is for me." She gives me a wan smile. I can tell she knows I'm unconvinced because she immediately tries a more suitable response. "It's tooth floss. I ran out," she laughs.

"Let me see." It sounds absurd to even me, and Lily doesn't hesitate to scrunch up her face.

"You can't see."

She moves around me and continues to the stairs. "You can see my teeth, though." She bares and then quickly retracts them. "Well, not now, maybe tomorrow, when I get some good flossing in..."

She bumps into a moving guest; an apology filters from her mouth naturally as the customer expresses disapproval. She doesn't even bother to turn back to me; instead, she continues. I don't stop her, but it's clear that she's either doing something wrong or there is something she doesn't want me to know about.

Her trepid face gave out that much. Whether it has anything to do with Ava is something I have trouble figuring out. The next day, it's very clear that her attitude has something to do with Ava because now it's not just her acting weird around me. Even Ava - who has nothing to hide or doesn't care about me finding out what seems hidden - is acting strange.

I'm a natural-born detective who can sense insecurity, or I would probably not even notice. Whatever they're hiding is something they desperately do not want me to be a part of. Unfortunately for them, where Ava is concerned - and I don't know what kind of natural obligation I have - it inclines me to want to be a bona fide part of it.

I stop Lily dead in the hallway when the awkward silence kills me. Normally, we greet each other, but she seemed very intent on passing me by this time.

"What's going on?" I ask desperately, not even bothering to beat around the bush.

"Nothing!" she says with great assurance. That's my cue. If nothing really was going on, she'd be taken aback. I may be mad, but she had this answer pre-meditated before I had asked it, so I let her go and nodded.

"I'm sorry; I shouldn't have been so brazen. How're you feeling?" I ask. She nods in response and continues on her way...not even trying for extra conversation. We usually repeated a few sentences until one of us decided it was getting too weird and inevitably cut it short. Now? Nothing.

Something is definitely off, and whatever it is, since it pertains to Ava, it piques my curiosity. I will get something out of them. My first inclination is to probe Lily again, but I remember what happened yesterday. Of course, she'll be unresponsive. It doesn't stop me, though, and I give her a good probe, using every technique I can muster.

...it still doesn't work.

I'm sure she'll alert Ava that I'm on to them. The best thing I can do now is to wait until they're less suspecting and tail them, listening to snippets of their conversations to pick something...anything. Something is wrong with Ava, and I do not know why they feel like neither I nor a medical professional should know about it.

I know most people like to handle their problems alone, but isn't there supposed to be a line drawn where they know the problem is way past a conceivable solution?

I guess we're all guilty of this. I mean, it's the very foundation of the relationship between Ava and me. I refused to go to the clinic for my wound dressings. She helped me instead, and we got closer. Maybe this is where I must help properly pay her back for what she had rendered to me. I never got the chance to properly thank her.

I just have to find out what the darn problem is.

In one of my eavesdropping sessions, Ava mentioned that the printed copy of the *appointment* would get her in and out of the clinic as fast as she needed, without suspicion. It successfully piqued my curiosity. Something needs to be done.

I decide to visit their room. I reason it should be a little later, maybe the next day, but then again, whatever appointment they may plan to whatever clinic for whatever medication might be tomorrow, and whatever happens might blow over before I find out. In short, I don't want to regret inaction.

As discreetly as possible, I go into the staff quarters and make a beeline for their room. I bypass whatever locks have

been installed and dig around. How I get into a locked room is completely inconsequential to the actual events occurring.

...a trade secret.

I should look for a piece of paper...” I mutter to myself as I begin a frantic, yet gentle search. *...probably enveloped...* I look into her bags and drawers. It doesn’t take long before I find what I assume is a pregnancy test strip. I recognize the apparatus, and my heart beats frantically. Pieces of the puzzle come— together. No sooner do I find another thing, probably what I am looking for? A piece of paper. Looking at it, I wish I had never had.

“She doesn’t want to keep it.”

My mind is in complete shambles, and the confusion is about to tear me apart. Ava is pregnant—most likely with my child—and doesn’t intend to keep it.

I don’t know which one is crazier.

“What are you doing here!?” A loud, angry roar forces me out of my mental perambulation. When I turn, I see it is Ava... obviously. Lily can never pull out that level of anger and translate it into a voice.

“You didn’t think I had the right to know?” I clench my jaw and present the question, hoping she’ll fall for the argument and forget that I am a criminal.

“You thought you had the right to enter my room without permission?” she prods again.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” I growl.

“Well, you didn’t answer mine.” She comes over to me and snatches the test trip from my hands. “...And I asked first.”

“Ava, you got pregnant, and you didn’t tell me. And you want to end the pregnancy. You’re telling me that a child of mine will be aborted, and I wouldn’t even know.” I make sure my voice conveys the pain I feel in my heart. I don’t think I am that bad a person.

“You don’t understand, Dylan. That’s your problem. You always have your own interpretation of things as long as it suits you,” she says with gritted teeth. I can see how much she’s trying to hold back the tears, and I feel for her. Ava has gone through so much in such a short time...even though I think pretty much criminal to want to kill a baby that also belongs to me...*at least without my permission?*

“I’ll be lying if I said I’m not doing this for myself. I am. But I’m doing this for you as well, Dylan. I don’t want my life to affect you or I’m just a summer intern here. It’d be horrible if you lost your job just because of a summer fling,” she sniffs, and I can tell it’s genuine. It’s a hard decision to make for her.

“A child would completely ruin my life, Dylan. And if we look at how tenacious legal systems get, it might just about ruin yours too. We can’t have this happen to us just because we made a mistake...or mistakes.”

She looks at me, waiting for me to speak...and decide.

“Keep it, please.”

The look in her eyes is confusion, bewilderment, disorientation and almost any other expression you'd expect her to sport...all combined.



Dylan

PICKING UP ANOTHER SHIRT, I examine it properly before tossing it in the bag.

“I need little,” I say out loud, reminding myself not to over pack. “It’s just for the weekend.”

I must go home for the weekend...a strict order from Aunt Sylvia that I dare not disobey. The not-so-fun part is that I can’t even make an appointment. I have to get home first and register my presence because she will keep track of me via phone, probably to Mom or Dad.

Leaving the house shouldn’t be a problem...if I stay there constantly. As a place that hasn’t seen me for the better part of a year, even the walls could begin constricting to hold me back and restrain thoughts of leaving.

Besides, Layla is at home. Unless we both decide to go out simultaneously, which is next to impossible, –I don’t think there’s any reason to stray far from a sister I haven’t seen in months–since she left for school. Usually, the hotel would be

the first place to visit once she returned from school. Still, I pieced together that her not coming was part of the ploy to give me another reason to come home.

I slip my bag over my shoulder when I'm done with packing, making sure I've left no stone unturned while I don't overdo it.

You're going to your home, Dylan. There should be no such thing as over-packing. I remind myself...or under-packing, If you forget all your clothes, you can prowl around your room in your underwear and drape yourself with sheets if you ever feel like coming out without the slightest care in the world.

The mental pep talk is enough. I lock my room door and begin heading out. By habit, I take the pathway to the section of the building where Ava's room is. I only stop and take the stairs when I remind myself - as I always do - that I'm not as welcome there anymore as I once was.

Getting to the parking lot and finding the exact spot where my car was parked used to be difficult, even for me. The only way I can find a long-term solution to the problem is to make sure I park in the same spot every single time so that no matter what time I come out, even if half-conscious, I will locate my Ferrari Portofino with success.

My car isn't exactly quiet, but it's not obnoxiously loud either, so when I rev the engine, it gives this beautiful mid-tenor purr that I love. Only when I'm on the road, I realized how much I miss the outdoors? So much I dangerously leave my hand hanging outside my convertible's door just to feel the

breeze. Until an elderly couple passing by in a camper moving even faster than my Ferrari scolds me to keep my hand inside.

I oblige immediately, feeling a strong compulsion to obey, primarily because they're elderly. When they're gone, though - which I let them by slowing into a comfortable enough distance to give them a good tail - I spill my arm limp over the door again. *I can't help it.*

Getting home is the same as always, and even though I haven't been here in , I just can't bring myself to *miss* it. Dad, with his manly display of affection, greets me with a hug that bumps my shoulders like I come around every other day. Then there's Mom, who practically shoves me back into her womb with hugs and kisses.

Layla, the only person I'm genuinely excited to meet, takes a few steps back and cracks her knuckles to give me the hardest dive hug I've had in a long time - being the last time we met. She knocks the breath out of me and almost sends me to the ground, accomplishing her goal. We made a bet once that she'll never hug me hard enough to send both of us reeling. It's been four years since we made that bet, and she's taken every chance to give me a hug like a rugby defence drill.

"You almost had me there," I huff in discomfort. "You're putting on weight?"

"What? No! You're getting weaker. Ha!" she yells in triumph. "By the next time I get, you'll be on the floor, sucker!"

"Yeah, I missed you too, Lays," I say as I tussle her hair.

My parents follow closely behind, no doubt envying our closeness. There's no deficiency in our relationship with the *parents*; it's just...that's how our relationship is. That standard: nothing too extravagant, nothing too distant. Plus, Layla is here. There's no other person my attention belongs to.

My father is a billionaire who shares that wealth with my mom, I do not understand why neither can agree they need a cook. Maybe it's because Mom is a professional chef, and Dad, personally, just loves cooking. They have been preparing every meal since I knew them unless they weren't around, and Aunt Sylvia had to do it. Then, we came of age. I didn't mind, though. Cooking was one thing that bonded us together as a family. The kitchen bonded the parents, and the dinner table extended the bond to the children.

"So," Dad clears his throat first. Even though it happens every time, it's always mildly uncomfortable when a parent induces talk at the table. "Dylan, how were your last seven months of turmoil?" Everyone laughs.

"Yeah, I'm pleased to sacrifice my life for your humor, but it is fine." I take a bite of my steak.

My parents must have cooked for God before they came to earth.

"You're lucky I didn't meet you before you returned." Layla gives me a side-eye. "I'd have made acquaintance with Ava, and both of us would torture you." That got a few laughs, too, around the table.

“Yes. Ava. How is she?” Mom asks me. I know she’s just trying to be supportive. I remember when I initially told her about Ava. She tells me that a person who would readily entangle herself with a superior would soon ask for a favor that would force the superior to compromise. “That’s the only appeal,” she says, overlooking the fact that her son is a six foot, two inches tall, muscular mass of Belfrost awesomeness.

“Ava,” I repeat, taking a forkful of potatoes into my mouth, stuffing in more when it doesn’t seem enough to fill my mouth adequately.

“Um...is there something you want to tell us?” Dad looks at my overstuffed mouth with concern.

“I’m eating,” I say through the fullness and waste time chewing and swallowing.

“Yup. He sure has something to say,” Layla laughs. I will tell them; the sooner, the better, which would most likely be now.

I take a hard swallow and force the mashed chunks down my throat, regretting why I took so much, That was an exercise in futility.

“So. We are talking about my life in....”

“Ava.” My sister has abandoned her food and is looking at me with the smuggest look I know her to have. “We are talking about Ava.”

“Oh, yeah. Um...about Ava. Remember, we broke up?” Everyone shakes their heads.

“You were dating?” Mom voices her interest.

“Entanglement... situations...whatever. We split up.”

“Huh? What happened? Was it you?” Dad asks.

I clear my throat. “It was her.”

“You’re too good-looking for that!” Dad rages comically, getting everyone at the table to laugh.

“She’s pregnant.” I silence the laughter with those two words. Mom turns into a ghost while Dad’s smile nearly bursts his face open, and Layla is just...stunned. “And she didn’t want to keep it.” I continued,” After sneaking into her room, I discovered the test strip and an abortion appointment. Something about not wanting to ruin my career... she still thinks I’m just staff.”

“Good. Keep it that way,” Mom huffs.

“I’m proud of you, son. How many times did it take? Did you also do it in the...?”

“Harold!” Mom silences him before he tries to cringe at everyone further.

That went well. I guess the official age to get a girl pregnant is twenty-six.

After dinner, I go straight up into my room to cool off. That was too tense; it felt surreal when they quickly let me off the hook. I still sense Mom’s queasiness about it, but brush it off. Mothers are queasy about everything. I try to deal with the awkwardness of the situation as much as possible, not to imagine running into Dad alone in any part of the house. I’m not ready for “the talk”.

I switch on my PlayStation and load up “Call of Duty: Warzone”. It’s breathtaking to see this again after so many months. I have a PlayStation like this in my room at the hotel. Still, I haven’t had the time to sleep properly, much less turn on a screen and remain glued to it for the minimum of two hours such games require to fully enjoy their immersive capabilities.

Just as I’m about to reconfigure the settings to suit my taste after a long while, Layla must have tampered with them. The culprit saunters into my room like she owns the place.

“Whatcha playing, Dilly?”

“Warzone. Don’t come near me.”

Of course, she ignores the warning and takes up a pad, forcing me to work the controls back to a two-player setting.

“So...you’re the next father in town, huh,” She starts when the game climaxes. I knew she would bring this up the moment she walked in.

“Shut up, and let me beat you up in this game.” I grit my teeth and snipe her at a hard angle, knocking her down.

“Well, you beat me in the game of bringing a child into the family, that’s for sure.”

“I shouldn’t have allowed you in,” I replied regretfully

“Well, you’re stuck with me, no,” she laughs. “Auntie Layla,” she says wistfully. At least someone’s mildly optimistic. I’m terrified! I don’t know what I was thinking, telling Ava to keep the baby, but I knew it was right.

“I know nothing about a baby, but one thing is certain: you’ll be a great dad,” she informs me.

“Thanks? You’re being encouraging, and it’s sappily disgusting, but thanks.” I said in appreciation.

“So, what about Ava? You think she’ll make an excellent mother?”

“I know she makes one hell of a mother hen, an immensely protective girl. You should see how she shields this best friend from harm.”

I rant about Lily for the next fifteen minutes, with Layla looking smugly at me.

“You’re so in love,” she says and grins.

“Again, I do not know. My body is drawn to her...like there’s an affinity.”

And it’s true. It’s been over a fortnight since we split up, and the relationship didn’t last long. Why do I still feel this strange compulsion to just...grab her?

“I wish you were done with school. You’d have come to the hotel for me to point her out.”

“Huh, and begin helping with activities there, huh,” she shudders.

“Yeah. Working your way from the ground up, just like I did.” I ruffle her hair again. “Don’t worry, I’ll be soft on you, lazy.”

“You’re really doing a lot of work in that place, I’m not gonna lie,” she muses. “I just hope Dad sees all that.”

I scoff, “Oh, he does. That’s why I have a Ferrari.”

She ends up beating me in the game, but that’s not important now. We become neck-deep in conversations about things that matter and those that don’t - all pointing me to one solid train of thought. I might just need Ava back in my life...*even if she doesn’t need me in hers.*



Ava

“HE TELLS ME...BEGS ME... to keep a baby, then he goes on a weekend trip. Wow. Just wow.”

“I mean, you don’t want him to?” Lily takes the phone to look at the message he sent me and gives me back the device.

“No! We should be here, trying to figure out the entire thing. My life is far from being ruined, Lil, and I just forfeited the last opportunity to clear this mess up.” I hold up the abortion admission slip that I never got to use.

Well, honestly, I can reschedule anytime I want, as long as the fetus is still within its nonviable period per the health laws I read when scheduling the first abortion. If this goes past a certain time and if I can notice a mild swelling, I won’t have the mental capacity to go through with “killing” it.

There’s some connection that forms with observing the physicality of it, and that physicality is beginning to merge into reality. Every morning, whenever I look at my belly in the mirror, my heart falls in love a little more – a love I hope

won't do me any harm when I try to disengage myself from it...*if I have to disengage myself.*

“Like I said, he was only gone for the weekend,” Lily offers, trying to calm me down. “He’ll be back most likely tomorrow evening; you can accost him all you want and force him to carry the pregnancy if you wish.”

Oh, I wish...

“You’re right. I’m overreacting, aren’t I? I think it’s the pregnancy, don’t you?” I look up and then at my body, trying to verify the root cause of my hypertension. “It’s definitely the pregnancy. I should start craving something by now....” I taste my tongue, imagining what I would supposedly desire so badly. I won’t think properly without having sated myself with whatever it is.

All the while, Lily sits on her bed, regarding me in silence. When I finally pause from my anxiety attack and look at her, she cocks a perfectly shaped brow in a humorless questioning.

“It’s literally not up to a month. If you’re developing these signs early, I’m terrified of what you’ll become in the most trying time of my life... you’ll be lucky if I don’t attempt murder while you sleep.”

Wow. I’ve definitely rubbed off too much on this one. Still, I’m determined to prove that I’m stubborn and can whine and cry the rest of the evening, which seems to annoy her only mildly. By the end of the weekend, she must have attempted to suffocate herself with her pillow at least a few times. By the

time Dylan returns, Lily is already transitioning to suffocating me instead.

The only thing that saves her is the irk she feels over Dylan's behavior toward me. As a pregnant girl still in the nausea phase, it is surprising that I haven't thrown up yet.

"What the hell are you doing?" I ask, confounded, when he takes my feet off the ground and massages them shortly after he arrives in our room.

"Shh. They say it helps with circulation," he insists and continues rolling my feet like a ball, one leg before the other.

"Whoever they are, they're creeps," I huff but keep my feet on his thighs. Feeling myself touch this sensitive part of his body makes me realize the pregnant craving I have...for now.

Touch. I salivate when he touches me and rubs his smooth, experienced hands along my feet and ankles, sometimes trailing up just below my calves. And not with the mouth you think regular saliva should come out of. This is a tighter mouth with more viscous, tastier saliva. He stops right before I throw all cares to the wind and stop him.

Honestly, this is the best decision I know he has taken so far...and the luckiest. Lily would have lost her optic virginity today if she hadn't already.

"That almost took my bowels out," I tell Lily, still frozen on the bed, attempting to process what happened.

"Hey, at least I got a massage. Not bad, huh?" I wave my feet at her, and she waves them off.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever. I didn’t know you even needed a massage,” she laughs.

“Yeah, me neither. Hopefully, he’ll be back to his former self by tomorrow.”

Tomorrow comes, and he’s the same nice guy. He tells Lily and me to wait and stand back when he addresses anyone. “Which area do you think is easiest to do?” he asks.

“Anything but the public areas,” Lily pipes up and looks at me before slyly adding, “...If you reduce the intensity of the workload.”

“Alright, Lily, but you’re not getting reduced work along with your friend,” Dylan barks.

“I know, I know...” she mumbles.

“But we’ll still be together, right?” I ask politely.

He chuckles in response, “Definitely. She’s your mother in this scenario.”

“Don’t let it get into...”

I’m too late. I feel her arms snake around my waist as she pulls me close. The grimace on my face cannot be better emphasized.

“My baby,” she purrs at me, and I shudder when her breath hits my shoulder.

Dylan shakes his head to clear it. “That said, how you both would like to assist Matilde again in the laundry department?”

“Yay?” I tilt my head, not knowing what to say. “Now, misunderstand me. I’m perfectly fine. I do not know why you’re doing this.”

“Yeah, you’re fine, but you’re pregnant. You could go from fine to not fine, very fast. You need to be in a place where you can handle yourself if that happens. That’s all I’m doing. No chivalry involved,” he says with a straight face.

“Oh, please. You have little to no idea how to handle a pregnant woman, and I’m sure easing a workload that wasn’t particularly stressful is not the way to go.” I am scathing mad, but he just gives me a dry look.

...the same dry look he gives me when I open my eyes some hours later, working the ‘easy’ laundry department. He doesn’t utter a single word. His eyes do all the judging. Uh-un, as they say, you’re perfectly fine, and I know nothing about handling pregnant women.

I swat his fingers away from my face when he reaches to feel for my temperature.

“You need to cool off for the day. I’ll take tomorrow off so you and I can go to a proper gynecologist to see what we can do to quell the spells...or if we just wait it out.”

“Let’s just continue.” I put as much strength into my voice as possible and tried to stand up, but I could only do so with Lily’s support. “I might as well get used to it now and maybe learn to control it.”

Dylan disagrees. “There are enormous machines here, Ava. You’re lucky you haven’t fallen in one of them,” he chides. There’s no way to get out of this. However strong my will is, I fear an accident.

I let Lily escort me to the room, and I lie down to get some sleep. I’d probably get motion sick of playing video games or watching movies.

So far, so good; I really love being pregnant. The thought is laced with irony. I was getting ready to knock myself out when a sudden knock startled me and Dylan walked in unannounced. He’s holding something that smells fantastic... so I don’t complain until the food is properly unboxed.

“I don’t want shrimp,” I pout. The odor alone makes me want to puke.

“Well, that’s what I got, so you’re going to have to...”

I interrupt him with a retch. He immediately flies from my immediate vicinity. Another retch is enough to send him scampering to replace the meal with something else. I shake my head because he didn’t think his next plan through. Before I put anything in my mouth, he goes wherever he’s getting the food but makes three round trips.

“You know,” I say when I finally stuff my mouth with the only thing that doesn’t make me feel like throwing up - a burger without cheese and extra onions. I continue, teasing, “...I find it cute that you’re doing all this for me. In fact, it warms my heart.” Being alone with him eventually allows me

to ease up around him. There is no queasiness anymore. All I can think of is how to further press his buttons.

“When you’re done eating and have enough energy, maybe you just might resume your shift,” he threatens, but by now, he should know that I am the goddess of threats.

“You don’t think it’s cute? You certainly know how to care for women,” I laugh, engulfing another giant bite.

“I’m only doing this because I’m caring for the baby. I’m sure you know that,” he huffs, throwing his face into another angle.

“Sure? Well, even better. That just means you’re going to make a terrific father! I’ll call the child Dylan junior, even if it’s a girl.” I reel high in laughter and even start choking on a piece of meat stuck in my throat.

He just shakes his head and gives me a side-eyed look. “You seem to enjoy this pregnancy very much.”

“No, only tormenting you with it,” I shrug. Now go get me a yogurt parfait,” I order, and he just sits there frozen.

“Drink water first,” he grunts.

I look at him for ten seconds. He holds my gaze before I reel my eyeballs to the back of my head and retch.

Again, he gives a reasonable distance between us. “I need something to keep it down,” I command.

“Fine, fine. I’ll get you your freaking parfait.” With that, he disappears from the room and leaves me smiling in

satisfaction. He can lie all he wants, but what is clear is clear.
He still can't bear to let me out of his sight.

Well, he is in luck because neither can I.



Dylan

I LET HER WORK for a while, monitoring her every move until I'm sure the others look at me like I'm a creep before running off to do other things.

What are you even doing? I murmur to myself. Watching Ava will do her no good; it just lowers my productivity, not to mention that people would be looking to contact the cops if they notice how seventy-five percent of my time, my eyes are devoted to enslaving her form.

We ended things weeks ago, but her pregnancy unifies us once again. The problem comes in defining the relationship. What is it? Are we friends? Lovers again? Is she just the mother of my baby?

There's only one way to find out how she really feels, and that's by asking. Ava is crass and derives too much pleasure in poking holes in my ego. I'm sure she won't hesitate to tell me off before the question even leaves my mouth...

She might tell me off if she likes me, but it's a matter of body language. There are certain *no*'s that mean *Bloody hell, yeah!* And the line between replies is not that invisible. Before I let these thoughts consume me, I go over to her with mental singularity and interrupt her work with Lily.

“Ava, one second?” I beckon, and she heeds the command almost immediately. When we are in our private conversation bubble, I begin my question only to have her turn to head back.

“Hey, what's going on?” I ask, with confusion.

She turns back to me and shrugs with a straight face, “Didn't you say one second?”

I drop my tense shoulders and cast her a flaccid look in reaction to the bad joke. She maintains her blank gaze until she can no more hold it. She finally breaks into a full cackle as a hint of a smile fails on my face at the light humor.

“It's not even that funny,” I say, shaking my head.

“But you're laughing,” she points out. I try to hold impending disdain. Her laughter is the only thing that makes me keep smiling.

“Laughter is contagious,” I snort, “but I just want to ask you, will you go out with me tonight?”

Her brows furrow in slight confusion. “Where?”

“Dinner,” I shrug. Ava's confusion gets even clearer.

“Or...we could just eat in the cafeteria?”

She knows what I'm asking, but just wants me to say it.

"I want to be more than that, Candy...like something special," I tell her, hoping it's clear.

She nods her head with narrowed eyes. "So, like a date," she affirms.

"Well, if you're going to call it that..." I say and end the statement halfway, leaving it open.

"Okay, so let's assume I agree; where exactly are we going for this...date?" She wonders, making sure we both know that I agree to take her on a date. I roll my eyes.

Whatever...

"Well, I thought we just keep it around here, so...probably the hotel restaurant. We could go to the one on the top floor with a breathtaking view." I aim to widen her eyes, but it does the opposite. Her mouth widens, but her eyes narrow to mere slits.

"You're taking me out...in the hotel." She does that slow nod again that ticks me off.

"If you don't like it, you can just say so," I shrug. "This hotel houses literally the best restaurant in town," I say to ensure she knows. She nods and shakes her head simultaneously.

"Then, everyone will know we're into some kind of...." She entwines her fingers awkwardly. "You know what I mean."

“Yeah, yeah. I get it.” I wave her off. Although we are still uncertain about the future of our relationship, one thing remains clear: I have feelings for her. Knowing that, I want to treat her as best as possible.

“So, where do you want to go, then?” I ask with sincerity.

“I do not know. I know nothing of the environment,” she reveals.

“Huh? What did you come to San Fran for? School and work...and nothing else?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

I shake my head in disappointment. ” There are a lot of beautiful places that I guarantee you need to see,” I instruct.

“I’m sure there are, but for now, I want to work so I can finish on time and actually get to see them,” she huffs and pushes me away, showing the need for me to leave.

Did Ava just express a keen interest in work? I guess miracles happen every day.

I leave her and continue my work schedule. I wrap up as early as possible so as not to be late. Dinner is at a set time. It’d be stupid to make it too late, given what I plan to stuff her with. As long as she has my baby in her stomach, she must keep going with as much food as possible.

However, once I’m done dressing, I wait a while before impatience consumes me. Then I go to the join room to see what the girls are doing.

“We are going to eat, Ava, but not a gala or something like that!” I nearly scratch my eyes from their sockets when I see Lily doing an intricate braid on Ava’s hair. She is doing well... as far as “*attempting*” is concerned.

“We have to get her ready for her big date, Dylan. It’s not to be handled lightly.” Lily speaks for her friend, who has something in her mouth and continues molesting the strands.

She throws me a small wave and sweet smile, to which I reply with an impatient frown. She just chuckles and goes over to the mirror in front of which Lily has been styling her hair.

“This isn’t the most horrible thing that has happened to my hair.” She pats her fancy hairdo.

“I’m glad you hate it. It’d have been weird if you liked it.” Lily smiles as Ava makes the finishing touches on her makeup. “And you had better bring me something on your way back,” the faux hairdresser warns.

“Cross your hands and hope I remember,” Ava says, mocking her. I observe their interaction, but my patience is wearing thin. I didn’t eat before coming here. I planned this date to double as my dinner!

“Tell your boyfriend to write it on his iPad,” she whispers, and both giggle. Lily really is just a clown when she’s in a comfortable zone.

“Hey, I heard that,” I grunt. Their laughter only takes a higher crescendo.

“...and he’s not my boyfriend,” Ava corrects as she approaches me.

“What is he, then?” She throws the uncomfortable question before we leave.

“I do not know,” she shrugs. “Ask him.”

“Don’t,” I growl before Lily can proceed. Ava gives me a pout before turning to Lily, who says, “Well, I hope the food’s too spicy if you forget to get me something.” She sticks her tongue out.

“I will wait at the parking lot where we met before,” I told Ava. It’s best if we don’t raise too much suspicion.

When Ava gets to the parking lot; saw her ride, she cannot believe her eyes.

“You have a Ferrari!?” she strolls around the thing, leaving a trail with her fingers. It gets women every time.

“Surprised?” I cock my brows. I’m downplaying it, but that’s the art of impressing others.

“No, I’m dazzled. How fast can it go?”

I smile at her genuine admiration of my toy.

“We’ll find out another day. Now...” I open the passenger seat and offer, “After you?”

She gets and squints when she nears me. “You’re so cringing,” she notes, but the sarcasm doesn’t last.

“That’s the aim.” I laugh. The engine revs and makes her eyes close in satisfaction. I accelerate it more for further effect

before taking off, ensuring we're moving comfortably. I'll traumatize her with the full speed some other day.

I initially had no particular place in mind, but then I remembered Union Street. The lights, the inviting aromas... the entire one-kilometer stretch of road spell food from aerial observation. I need to drive slowly and stop at the most inviting restaurant...and that is exactly what brings us to Billy Gran's dinner. The wafting aroma had Ava mentally floating through the car window.

"Seventy bucks for a garlic butter steak and potatoes skillet?! I change my mind; let's get out of here." She's about to stand up when I pull her back down.

"Don't worry about it, Ava. Other restaurants are priced similarly, anyway."

"This could feed Lily and me for a full day, all three meals, eating like hogs! With change!"

"Well," I say as I hold her thigh. "This is doing only you today."

She nods in understanding. "It's a lot still, Dylan. You don't have to."

"You deserve more."

"Stop it. I've done nothing to deserve this." I love how cute she looks when she talks between bouts of laughter, just like she's doing now.

"You're doing one of the planet's most complex, miraculous things right now. In lower-life forms like ants, that role

belongs to only one entity - the queen. You're the queen, Ava. You have to start seeing yourself as one." I praise her. I'm smooth, I know.

Still, she doesn't seem contented. She thanks me profusely until I promise I'll get angry if she says it one more time, at which point, she offers, "thank you" seven more times, hoping to piss me off; but after that, she gets lost in thought...really deep in thought.

"You seem to thinking about something. A name for our baby?" I drawl and give her a creepy smile.

"I'm never going out with you. Ever." She keeps her eyes away, and I chuckle at my embarrassing humor. We all have our glory days.

"But really," I ask her seriously, "What are you thinking about?"

"You."

That was easy...and tension-building. What about me?

"You're about to spend over three hundred dollars on a casual dinner... this isn't even...a proper date. We're not ceremonially dressed...."

She's right. She's wearing jeans and a hoodie, and I'm in sweatpants and a basketball jersey. There's nothing official here. I'm just testing the waters.

"How are you able to...spend so much? And you have a Ferrari!" She waves her hands in the car's direction but keeps her gesticulations to a minimum since we're in public.

How on earth didn't I think of this?

I mean...I thought of it, but I was just too focused on impressing Ava that I didn't know when I had crossed the border into suspicion. And Ava is a detective who made the wrong choice to study hotel management. I have to make something up fast.

“uh. It's difficult to explain, but I'll simplify it as much as possible. You're worth any type of treatment and any price of a meal. Don't worry about it. Allow me to cry about the damage later.” I laugh at this diatribe, hoping she goes along with the compliment. A soft blush rises fast to her cheeks, and even though I can see the questions in her eyes, she doesn't go there.

I need to come up with a lasting story.



Ava

SOMETIMES I WANT TO hug my best friend and keep her in my embrace - maybe till we both fall asleep in each other's arms. Sometimes I just want to toss her across the room. This time, I'm badly craving *Lily's brain meat*.

"You are either pretending not to have heard what I just said and deliberately want to annoy me, or you have the brain of a pelican," I mutter dryly.

"And you, my dear, are more paranoid than the average hausfrau on a caffeine overdose. A mafia boss, really!" she screeches.

"You're laughing now until it finally happens. You'll wake up one day and don't see me...then you get a call from me some three weeks later, telling you I'm in Italy as the wife of Dylan Marcallo, the Leader of the...whatever cartel. He'll make me a housewife that has to dodge danger every other week when rival families try to shoot up the mansion."

This time, she's in full-blown laughter. Maybe I'll have some tongue to go with the brain meal.

"From now on, I'm placing you on Xanax. Three pills a day."

"Lily, he has a Ferrari," I stressed, hoping she gets the point.

"You might need to take five now to calm your raging mind. Don't worry. It's not an overdose. I prescribed it." She keeps on playing doctor.

I shake my head and take a huge breath.

"Exactly! That's what you need! See how much better you feel now?"

"What will it take you to believe me?"

"Oh, sweet mother, Ava. I don't think you're hallucinating. He has a Ferrari, okay? I know Ferraris cost two hundred plus grand. My uncle had one. Rolexes can be pretty cheap, relatively speaking...if you accept a thousand bucks as cheap and buy it used. You don't need to read so much meaning into it, like he's a billionaire or something. I'm sure he's not that rich," Lily counsels. Her wisdom astounded me, but I still think she's yet to grasp what I'm talking about.

"What if I show you?" I offer after some moments of contemplation.

"You don't have to do..." she says, but by now, Lily should understand my resolve well enough to know I will make her see what I mean.

“Come on, let’s head to his room. He won’t be in there,” I interrupt her and stand up in the same instant, pulling her up by her hand.

“You can’t be sure. What if he is?” she disagrees.

“His day off doesn’t correlate with ours. He’s definitely working now.” I tug her out of the room and to what is now known as the administrative area. This part of the hotel is usually empty because most of the executive staff have families, so they prefer going home, especially if they live in the city. They work nights, of course, such as for a large gala.

I only saw the place packed with staff at night when a popular singer celebrated her birthday in the hotel and rented the ballroom for a midnight till dawn party. I visited Dylan when we were still in the infatuation phase of our relationship. We cuddled with each other for an hour before he went to supervise the catering activities. He wasn’t back until about four a.m. when the most crucial part of the party was over, and every attendee was drunk.

My respect for him and other managerial staff grew that day when just two hours later, they were up and running like they weren’t about to pass out at the slightest breeze.

“So, how do we get in?” Lily asks me when we arrive at the door.

I take a deep breath and put my hand on the doorknob. “I hope this still works,” I huff and turn it. The doors glide gently open. “Yay!”

“He doesn’t lock his doors?” Lily looks confused.

“He does. It’s biometrically secured. He encoded my fingerprint to have me come in anytime he was not around. I’m surprised he didn’t lock me out after our breakup. The hilarious part is that he had it built into his door after he forgot to lock it and found me inside. It was the first time I was here. That said, he got the security as a measure against me but later ended up allowing me access, defeating the lock’s purpose. ”

“We can both agree that he made a terrible decision not to keep you locked out,” Lily tells me as we enter the room. Her mouth hangs open, unable to shut off its own volition.

“Told you,” I hum smugly.

She keeps to one spot, just two or three steps in, completely unsure of where things should go. I find her astonishment satisfying. She probably realizes that I have been right the entire time.

“This is a haven, for sure,” she muses.

“You gonna come in?” I throw a look at her while already seated in his gaming chair. It’s my favorite thing in his room. Soft, yet so edgy and springy.

...and I thought the perfect furniture never existed.

She takes my invitation as a pass and begins moving around the room. Her expression of surprise gets more profound. I think about going over to her and helping her close her mouth.

“These are Rolexes,” she huffs.

“Ugh, but they can be pretty cheap.” I make my voice animated to mimic her. “Even if they are...say one thousand a piece, which I doubt because they’re obviously not the same. There are seven of them there. That’s at least seven grand on just watches. And you should check his wardrobe. I know little about men’s clothing, but something about the presentation just screams that these things aren’t cheap.”

She listens and opens the wardrobe. Even I can’t get over the sight of the presentation of the fine apparel that lies within.

“This was a custom Louis Vuitton hoodie when they collaborated with Supreme,” Lily says while singling out the particular apparel from the glorious array. “It’s well over five thousand now.”

“You know, I’m just wondering how you know this...and how you keep track of all these expensive things,” I say; she shrugs and smiles.

“You don’t? Everything above a thousand dollars catches my eye. Not that I really want them...just curious.”

I know Lily is obsessed with information, but sometimes, I forget just how far she will look into something. Especially things relating to sociology and psychology...an irony for someone who has trouble getting to know and effectively communicate smoothly with new people.

“By the way, now that I see it, it’s clear that your boyfriend is living above what he’s possibly being paid,” she starts.

Thank you!

“Still.” She raises her hand to still my victory. “That doesn’t account for the fact that he’s a criminal or something. He probably has something he’s doing on the side.”

“Does Dylan look like his time allows him to even eat?” I ask a comment that plunges her into a thinking sphere that keeps her quiet...*luckily*.

“Dylan!” I squeal in surprise when he enters the room.

I am eternally grateful for my friend’s lightening fast reaction as she melts into the wardrobe and closes the door silently but as quickly as it takes Dylan to fully step into the room.

“What are you doing here?” he asks me, just like the first time he had caught me here, just that this time, his voice delivers the question with no aggression.

“I dunno,” I shrug. “I just miss you. I was just about to turn on your PlayStation and wait for you here.” I point to the sleek box sitting proudly atop his desk. I must get Lily out of there before Dylan notices her. “So, why are you here?” I ask innocently.

“Nothing much... just came to get something from....” He makes to open his wardrobe, but I realize the gravity of it.

“Dylan, wait!”

He stops just as he grabs the bars and turns to me. “What is it? Ava? You can play whatever game you want. I need to get back to work.” He swings the wardrobe door open but keeps

his gaze on me. Seeing Lily look as pale as the sheets inside of wardrobe is enough to send desperation flooding my brain.

“I miss you, Dylan.” I pour out even though it’s extremely difficult to say. “I miss us. I miss the times we shared....” I stand up and begin approaching him to make sure I’m better able to control his movements. I don’t want him turning around suddenly. ” I miss everything about you, Dylan. The way you touch me, the things you make me feel....”

I feel like burying myself under a sheet of mud. *I wouldn't feel this embarrassed if all this was a lie.* He takes some steps to meet me, and our bodies collide. As much as I want to, I don’t kiss him yet. I need to get Lily out first. I do not know how wild things could get. I give him a tight hug and let him run his hands over my body as I use my eyes to claw Lily out of the room with my head over his shoulder.

“You have no idea how much I’ve missed you.” He grips my butt, and I fight the urge to roll my eyes in pleasure. Lily is still creeping out, thank God.

Once she is safely out, I unleash the inner beast in me. I was craving Lily’s brain some thirty minutes ago, but now, my taste buds light up for something different. I pull away from the hug and yank Dylan into me by his collar like I could digest him suddenly. Do you know how the female praying mantis usually bites off the head of her unfortunate mate? Dylan’s good fortune is that his full head can’t fit in my mouth. I practically vacuum-suck his entire face.

“Oh, God, I miss you so much!” I cry, and he laughs in understanding. We both devour each other for a while before Dylan pulls away, having to leave for work.

“You can wait here for me. I’ll be back by eight, tops. If you feel lonely, you can bring Lily,” he offers when I pout at his having to leave.

If only he knew.

When he leaves, I wait a little while and run out of the room when I’m sure he’s gone. I burst into my room to see Lily sitting idly on her bed, scrolling through her phone.

“He really seems to like your butt a lot,” she comments.

“Shut up,” I laugh. “That was exhilarating!” I feel like a detective as we laugh hysterically over the incident.

“Now, the both of us can chill in his place before he returns.” I break the news, and she gets up excitedly. “...But first...let me show you his Ferrari.”



Dylan

“LISTEN, DYLAN, I SWEAR to the high heavens that I will do whatever you want for a week if you don’t do this again,” Ava begs desperately. I sit back and consider her offer. Would she really do what I want for a week? I have to find out. I lean over and whisper in her ear. It wouldn’t hurt to try. Before I even finish, she pushes me off and leans against the car.

“Just get on with it.” She clenches her teeth, and I can see the fear reverberating through her face. This is going to be more fun than I thought.

“Okay, you asked.” I shrug and rev the engine loudly, putting it on launch control to avoid a spinout.

“What?! I never as....”

I slam my foot on the gas pedal before she can complete her defence. The sound of my roaring engine becomes one with her terrified screams.

“You have nothing to fear, Candy. I’m the driver. Besides, you’re wearing a seat belt,” I comfort her while keeping the car under one hundred miles per hour.

“What will a seatbelt do when we smash into a building from a hundred miles per hour to zero?! Have you ever heard of blunt force trauma?” she cries out.

“Oh, that? We have insurance,” I shrug.

Ava gives me the most devastating look. “Is that supposed to be reassuring!?” I turn to answer, but she immediately pushes my head back, the force of her hands rivalling that of a slap. “Keep your eyes on the road!” she screams. I will take it as a slap...and get my revenge.

“Well, since I’m so focused right now, you should know this thing can do over a hundred.” I contort my face into a Cheshire cat grin. The look of horror on hers comes incrementally as she realizes what I’m about to do.

“Dylan, Nooooooooo...” Her voice blends with the sound of the engine. “Dylan! Please! It’s dark already. Let’s go back to the hotel!” she begs in tears.

Why do I have to be so goddamn sympathetic?

“Aw, are you sure you don’t want me to drive?” I pout and begin lowering the speed. Even I fear a high-speed drift. Too much tire traction could send us reeling...and we’re in a convertible with no protection from a rollover.

“Dylan...Dylan...Don’t do this...please. It’s late...visibility...” Ava stutters. That there is genuine terror in her

words. The kind I'll have to listen to her. Besides, I see a cop car in the distance. While it's nighttime and traffic is almost completely nonexistent, there's still a speed limit. Crossing it in front of a cop would most definitely be unwise.

I see her point. Drifting in the night is the riskiest thing you can do, especially on a highway. It is terrifying to think I want to try it out one day.

This, my friends, is why women live longer than men!

“Okay, so, the truth is, I didn't just bring you out here to try my luck at sending both of us to an early grave,” I tell Ava as I continue further north up the hilly road.

She calms down when my speed lowers to an acceptable limit. *Still fast...but acceptable.*

“Yeah, you plan on sending only me to an early grave. Not you as well. You think I'm stupid?” she chuckles. Her voice still has an accent of fear, so I crank it up a bit by increasing the speed by a couple more units. “Okay, okay! I'm sorry,” she begs.

Good girl.

“So, we are actually headed for Portrero Hills. Sound familiar?” I ask her.

“No, not really. What's up there?”

“Two things. Just a hill and not crowded in the daytime, which means it's practically empty at night,” I explain as we reach the place.

“This is the part where you push me off a cliff, and everyone is going to think I fell, right?” she laughs as we delve deeper into the grassy park-like scenery.

“Trust me. There’s much worse I can do to you up here.” I smirk at her, sending a message that she understands instantly. We both climbed out of the car and initially settled on the trunk.

“The view is amazing,” she breathes as we look at the city’s horizon. San Francisco is beautiful. The night lights give it a much different appearance from what you’d normally see during the day. You greatly appreciate what mankind has created out of the resources given to us by nature. “Why did you bring me here?” Ava asks.

I shrug and glance at those perfect emerald orbs. “Time alone with you...away from the hotel and work... and all those things. Just you and me.”

Ava holds my gaze before looking back at the cityscape. “We can be a lot of things, Dylan. It’s just that a lot is holding us back.” Ava emits a shaky breath. It’s windy up here, so I plant myself slightly behind her, so the wind can blow her hair up all over my face. I love the feeling of any part of her body on mine.

“If it’s work, trust me, Ava, I’m willing to make the sacrifice now, especially since we have a baby on the way.” I turn her face-to-face. “You can quit work and stay with me...or my parents. I promise you will be comfortable until you give birth. When you’re stronger, there will be no hindrances.” I don’t

know how else to express my love for this angel and how to make her see that she's now a major part of my future and not just an accessory to my present.

Ava shakes her head and removes my hands from her face. "It's not that, Dylan," she starts. "I'm sure I still have the brawn to power through work even if you double the difficulty. The problem isn't working..."

"Then what is it?"

She hesitates a little. "How can you have a Ferrari, Dylan?"

Here we go again.

"I'm sorry..." It's her turn to use her own hands to force me to face her. She's lucky I become weak at her touch. I didn't even realize I was giving off extremely standoffish gestures," but I must know. I'm bringing a baby into this world and want to ensure things are in proper order before that happens. I don't want any surprises. "

She presses on, "How do you have seven Rolexes? How can you spend three hundred bucks on one night without flinching? How?"

If we are honest, three hundred bucks isn't that big a deal. I guess it's the fact that I spent it on a meal.

"You want to know... well, I tell you," I huff.

"Thank you."

I take another deep breath before starting. " Back when I was still in college - not so far back - I got lucky. Had a bunch of

Bitcoins that I sold when the value was high. Then I had at least five hundred grand in the bank. Do you know what a hot-blooded young boy like me does with five hundred K? If you said invest it, you'd be wrong."

Six years later, here I am with a Ferrari that I'm too attached to, a collection of items that make me look above average, and a mediocre bank account with what's left. I have savings, but it's nothing compared to what I could have done with an invested five hundred grand. " I lowered my head and let out another deep breath, hoping she would buy my story.

"You were young. Don't beat yourself up about it too much." Ava gives me a soothing back rub. *Yes!*

"Hey," she calls when I don't look up after a while, hoping to get into the whole, *disappointed with myself* mood. "I love you, okay? I don't care what mistakes you might have made in the past. I just needed to know to avoid surprises in the future," she let out. I behold her with adoration and feel guilty for lying.

If only my father hadn't ordered that my identity remain a secret to reduce threats like kidnapping.

"I love you two, Ava...more than you can ever imagine," I say to affirm my feelings. I lean into her and whisper, "So, does this mean you're my girlfriend now?"

"Officially now, yes," she chuckles, and I smother her with kisses immediately. I must be the luckiest man in San Francisco right now to have the girl I'm obsessed with. It's a blessing for which I'm really grateful.

“You kiss like a cannibal,” I tell her after pulling back for air.

“Have you ever kissed a cannibal before?” she laughs.

“No?”

“How, then, do you know how a cannibal kisses?”

Ava has a point. I respond with a kiss, wanting more of her devouring smooches. Before I can register what is happening, her body comes in contact with mine, and I can feel a hardness poke at my chest. I open my eyes and look down at our connected chest only to see her hoodie spread apart.

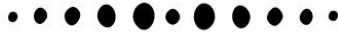
All I can think of now are those two beautiful mounds. We leave the car and crash down to the grass. I catch her blooming flesh before its owner lands on me. They're in my mouth seconds later, with Ava moaning obscenities while I pleasure her.

I feel like a piper, blowing into the pipe of a complicated musical instrument as I draw those sensational, high-pitched melodious notes from her with my mouth on her bud. It seems to be my ticket to driving her over the edge of need and desperation, the kind that would make her decide to make love to me under the open sky on a night not yet far gone.

Getting all our clothes off is tedious, but it adds to the build-up of excitement. The most sensational part is where we smuggle kisses between each tug and pull off the fabrics adhering to our needy bodies. The discarded clothes now act as a mat as we spread them out to cushion the sting of the prickly grass.

What we're about to do is based on friction and continuous motion. I find her beautiful pink flesh dangling above my phallus enticing. Once she settles in, the only thing I feel is pure sensations.

Beautiful sensations...



Ava

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE it's finally ending. Two months and two weeks of responsibly hard work in the prestigious Belfast Hotels, and we have approximately one week left.

Was it worth it? I don't think that's even a question that should be asked. Thanks to this place, my parents won't have to worry about anything but actual tuition and boarding expenses. Moreover, it's not the regular student life we'll be looking into. We don't need to squeeze in twenty dollars for meals in a day. We can live like queens and still have a chance to spare!

...plus I have Dylan now. That's my biggest take from this hotel. The feeling of insecurity still hangs over my head like a thick cloud, but I guess that's love. When it comes, you inevitably sign another wager...*one of fear and loss of the ones you love.*

He promised to make as much time as possible to visit me in school, even when I told him how unnecessary it would be. I'm not oblivious that he's the busiest bee in the building, and

I understand that perfectly. Hopefully, the following year, I'll join him in this absurd craze to beat the capitalist system and emerge on top, securing a future... at least for our baby.

“Well, I suppose there's no harm in stepping out once in a while,” Lily shrugs and throws on something more fitting. I planned a full day's trip to take her everywhere that Dylan has taken me... except where he spent too much for me to comprehend.

“Apart from this job, we're practically hermits in San Francisco, Lil. We've been here for four years already,” I say, turning my head. “There are some things we need to change this final year.”

“You say this when we have one year to go... our busiest year.” She gives me a dull look.

“Hey, don't blame me. This isn't my fault.” I raise my hands in defence.

“Yeah, not totally. I have like seventy per cent in that cake,” she giggles.

I agree. We head out early, the plan being to do something like a triangular sweep of the area. Our midpoint would be the Golden Gate Bridge, with our last main attraction being Twin Peaks, although I doubt it'll look as good as it does at night.

The taxi driver does their due diligence in helping us get to the part of the city where we can ride the beautiful trams, and from there, the rest is a slow breathtaking view of the city.

Nothing beats the view of these downward slopes amid high-rise buildings.

The Golden Gate recreational area spans too much for us to make my planned trek two miles across the bridge, so we ditched the trek together but take some delightful pictures, anyway.

“Next stop, Twin Peaks.” I smile as a taxi slows to a stop in front of us. My inner happiness knows no bounds when I see Lily’s mouth hang open in curiosity. Not brazen surprise, just the lost-in-concentration kind, meaning a slight opening, but an obvious sign that she’s not in the same plane.

When we finally arrive, we alight from the taxi and hike to the summit of the hill, which is less than a five-minute walk.

“Well, this is something.” Lily is ogling. “It feels like we’re standing on one boob, looking at the other hill over there.” She points to the second peak.

“Exactly what I told Dylan,” I chuckle. “Fun fact. It’s also called *Los pechos de la Choca*,” I use the Spanish translation to make her ask me the meaning.

“Breasts of a young girl...,” she shrugs. “Quite fitting, actually.”

That takes me aback. “Hold on. You speak Spanish?”

“I took it in high school, so I’m just an intermediate speaker,” she says indifferently, still enjoying the view of her lost world.

“How come I didn’t know!?”

She gives me a dry look. “Hi, I’m Lily. I speak Spanish. Does that sound like a proper introduction?”

Now I feel like the silly one. This is one perk of not being much of a talker. I never knew she was bilingual...*and I’m her best friend!* When the view tires us sufficiently, we get from the peak and trek down the road to get a taxi. I would have taken her to Portrero Hills, but even she is too hungry to hike downhill and back up two miles again.

It is going to the hills or down to get food. Of course, our bellies are the full priority, and we settle for the single downhill trek. There are no taxis to hail from this place unless you want to take your chance at one coming to drop off someone else. If we started now, an Uber would take time booking and all, to meet us halfway down. And so, we walk the downhill slope, making it much easier than the distance suggests.

At the bottom of the hill is a small restaurant whose aroma is enough to draft us to come in, and they do not disappoint, giving us the best-mixed meat shawarma I’ve had in recent memory. I am devouring my second wrap of the assorted meat and veggies of goodness. Lily is still nibbling through half her first when something... *someone* plummets my appetite. Just in the restaurant’s corner, staring intently at me, is the same man who tried to molest me but for Dylan’s intervention.

I immediately avert my gaze. He doesn’t have to know that I’m aware of him. It only triggers his urgency if he’s poised to

strike and sees me staring. My heart palpitates as I consider the many avenues to get through this without a blowout.

“Lily, we have to get out of here,” I say casually. I might be wrong in my speculation, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.

“Huh?” Ava hums with her mouth full. I doubt whatever morsel is. There is less than half a teaspoon. Still, her miniaturized eating habits have made such a smidgen look like it is about to choke her.

“Remember when I was almost raped in the hotel?” She nods and gulps heavily to swallow. “He’s here. I don’t know why he’s not in jail, but he’s here... stalking us.”

Her face turns as pale as mine. She dabs her mouth clean and begins arranging herself. I look out for a taxi as soon as we get outside. With any luck, the one I spot won’t be full.

“Ready?” I ask Lily once I get a sighting of a taxi coming downhill. After a brief countdown, we ditch the restaurant and head straight for the door. I look at Lily’s to find she didn’t take her shawarma.

Hell no.

Luckily, we weren’t far enough to turn back entirely. I can grab the half-finished wrap and the other full one with just two steps. These are too good to be left behind. Immediately, we burst out of the door, and as if the taxi driver knew we needed service, she slowed the car to a stop just in front of us.

“Belfrost Hotel,” I tell her after we get in.

Nobody needs directions to the Belfrost. In less than twenty minutes, we were in the parking lot. None of us is calm until we are finally within the confines of our concrete haven. The first thing I do is go find Dylan. Unfortunately, after traipsing the entire hotel, as much as my persistence can carry me, I do not see him. Only when I return to my room do I realize the folly of what I had just done? Of course, he'd be moving, wherever he is, when I'm on one floor; by the time I move to another, he wouldn't be there.

“Hey, don't think about it too much. He probably was just staring because he remembered you and the circumstances after. Nothing much. Besides, till we left, he didn't seem to do anything... or want to.” Lily soothes me with her words.

“I guess you're right. Still, we have to be vigilant. Now that he's seen you, he might not hesitate to come after you,” she reasons.

“Pfft. I'm sure I can handle myself.” She gives me a ghostly smile that tells me she's just as terrified as I am.

Less than an hour later, Dylan finally remembers that he has a girlfriend and comes through, requesting we stroll to live out our last moments...*the three of us*. I tell him promptly about the man we encountered at the restaurant. He immediately makes a phone call with someone for over fifteen minutes, giving the description to whoever is on the other line.

I do not know who it is, but I feel safer knowing there is someone working to make sure the criminal doesn't make his way back to any of us.

“Hey, you guys, it’s okay if you don’t want to go for a walk. I understand,” he offers.

“No,” I stammer and give Lily a determined look. She nods back. “We’ll go,” I tell him.

“You two are some of the bravest girls I know,” Dylan maintains.

“Give that to Ava,” Lily mumbles. “I’m just a side piece... and prefer to be so.”

I look at her for a second before turning back to Dylan. “Oh, she pays her protection money, believe me.”

With lighter hearts and a bigger, stronger assurance - Dylan with us - we head out again, not in the least exhausted, for a thrilling adventure. If we were to map out a time to explore all the good places of San Francisco, there wouldn’t be enough time in a week to do it comprehensively. We don’t go too far, just the nearest park and play around with Frisbees and balls till it’s too dark for proper visibility.

At nightfall, bone-chilling terror grips me. On a semi-empty trail to the hotel, we see the man standing confidently in our path.

“Get behind me,” he commands. Lily obeys, whimpering as she does.

“Actions have consequences, Belfast. You made a choice to stick out for that runt...”

I guess referring to him as Belfrost makes sense since he embodies the company’s brand.

“The consequence you’re about to experience is something even your status can’t save you from,” he growls with a sinister smile.

“Now is not the time to play stubborn. Get behind me - now.” He grinds his teeth painfully, an indication of the seriousness of the situation.

I have no choice but to obey, but if it comes to it, I’m helping this time. Suddenly, my heart sinks to the abyssal pit of my stomach when I see three more men emerge from the shadows.

“Call 911.” I tap Lily, and she gets to it as fast as her shaky hands manage. Suddenly, the men charge at us.

“Call 911!” I scream before they connect with us, sending me flying to the ground along with Lily. I see Dylan putting up a fight against one man. I look in Lily’s direction to see her being pulled by the hair by one of the men, the same one that delivers a kick to my face, snapping my eyes shut almost instantaneously.

I open my eyes to some awkward semblance of peace. It takes a little while for me to recollect my surroundings, but I’m sure when I do that, I haven’t been out for long because I still hear the treacherous men talking in the background.

“You ought to know when it’s not okay to interrupt, boy.” he brags.

“Go to hell.” Dylan spits stubbornly. From the sound of his voice, I discern that he’s been beaten up pretty badly. I drag

myself to a sitting position and try to approach him.

“No, no, boy. You’ll go first. We’ll see you much later.” The man raises his hands to strike with the weapon, probably a steel baton.

“Please,” I croak, making them pause. “Don’t do this. Take me instead.”

They look at me with disgust. “Well, well. It seems your little runt here is a fighter, just like she was when I first met her.” The man who harassed me comes forward and bends to meet my face. Without paying much attention, I crawl over to where Dylan dangles helplessly in the hands of a thug. I don’t know what makes me do this, but I take his hands and pry them off his grip. They offer no resistance. They have done what they had intended.

“Now, you don’t look so beautiful. You’re just another whore that clings to the Belfrost for prestige and financial benefits. How about I cut your connection to the source?” He motions to the man standing over us. “Kill him,” he commands.

“Please,” I cry in agony. “I beg you! Please, let us go! ”

He clicks his tongue in disagreement. “No, no, darling. Death is beyond you for what you did to me that day. The prestige, the status I have, the name I carry, yet, I was escorted out of that disgusting dung hole of a hotel by filthy pigs. I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to look at the only person who can save you from the wretched life you are doomed to live...and I want you to watch him die.”

Just as the man is about to strike with his knife, other sounds approach. He pauses and looks at his boss.

“What? Kill him, dammit!”

“Boss...cops.” The man quivers.

“I got out of jail before and can do it again. Now waste this guy!” he growls impatiently when the man hesitates some more. But the man doesn’t move. Instead, he hands the leader the knife, asking him to do it.

“When we’re tired, I’ll get a harsher sentence than you. I don’t want to end up like Boris.”

The boss regards his subordinate with irritation. “Boris was...you knew what...give me the knife.” He snatches it from his hands and stands up to articulate a proper strike. All the while, the cops are getting closer. I hear the screech of brakes, insinuating that they’re nearby enough to move for an arrest.

Does this man really have no regard for the law? If so, who the hell is he!? All of his partners have fled, leaving only him. A one cop bellow frightened me, and a bewildered Dylan.

“Drop your weapon! SFPD!” I hear one cop bellow, but the man looks at them and hisses without remorse. He doesn’t even care that he’s about to be arrested. After two more warnings, he stays wholly resolved in his decision to commit whatever atrocity he is about to do. As he is about to strike, I hear the shots. Two bullets, and he crashes down to the ground, yelling in pain.

The bullets from where he clutches himself seem not to have hit him lethally. Still, he looks up at us amid the shouts from the cops to back down. They rapidly approach us, and I see nothing but pure hatred in his cruel eyes. He lunges at us with all his might in one deft movement, his hands poised to execute lethal force. Without thinking it through, I position myself upright, blocking Dylan completely from his reach, despite his desperate, protesting yells.

The man never makes it to us; two retorts of a policeman's gun interrupt my peaceful acceptance of death and his defined resolve to kill. He lies in front of us, limps on the ground with the knife hanging loosely from his hand and his eyes wide open. The street is downhill-sloped, so the blood from his head flows down, decorating the street like a ghetto art.

As soon as that round of chaos is over, another round begins. The ambulances begin their hassle of getting us to the hospital. Immediately, I ascertain that the man is dead, and my head whips around to look for Lily. Dylan has already fallen unconscious, and I see Lily just a few feet away from where we were struck, cowering and whimpering.

She comes running towards us once the air is clear, demonstrating that she has not been physically harmed and checking that there is no further danger lurking. She reaches me before the paramedics and pries me off Dylan's half-dead body. When I turn to look at him, I quickly see his chest rise slowly and fall.

He's breathing.

“Ava, you’re bleeding,” Lily tells me, but it doesn’t matter.

“Are you okay?” I turn her all over, checking for any wounds I may have missed, as the paramedics descend upon us and begin the standard medical assessment procedure.

We both receive simultaneous attention while a team carries Dylan on a stretcher.

“Careful, he was hit on the head.” I held his head and helped stabilize him, which was unnecessary, but I still felt like I had to. Immediately, I see him on the move and make to follow the stretcher. Still, the medical officials do not allow me access.

Instead, Lily and I ride the same ambulance to the hospital - different from the one Dylan is in.

“Lily, I’m so sorry for putting you through this.” I sob when I feel comfortable enough to say more than just a few words. My head hurts like it was crushed, and I live on borrowed time. All my brain matter finally liquefies and flows out, but I brave through the pain, keeping pressure on my wound with the ice-wrapped cloth given to me. While Lily is relatively unhurt, I’d have resurrected that bastard and killed him again if I spotted any injury on her delicate body.

“For what?” she asks.

“If I hadn’t insisted we go out, we wouldn’t be here.” I feel like punching myself.

“If you keep that mindset, you’d end up with more damage than all of us combined. Everything that happens is indirectly

a result of the actions we take. Stop blaming yourself,” she croaks.

“It doesn’t help allay what I’m feeling, Lily. I swear it, it doesn’t. All I had to do was agree not to come. He had already understood.” I cry my heart out.

“All we had to do was not come to work,” she counters. “All we had to do was go to Portrero Hills and not settle for filling our stomachs. All we had to do is not to be born.” She takes hold of my hands and gives them a reassuring squeeze. “Every experience is born out of action. Stop blaming yourself for making decisions you never anticipated the outcome of just because things went wrong.”

I can’t control the tears that flood my face. “I love you, Lily.”

“Aw, come here, mama.” She opens her arms wide, and I sink into them, letting the rest of my tears stream through the ride and into the hospital.

When we get to the hospital, they immediately attend to the wound on my head, but being just a minor cut, they don’t have to do much. They give me some pills to suppress the headache, only to quickly retract them when I reveal I’m pregnant. Another set of pills is issued to me, and I leave to meet Lily in the waiting room. We go to the ICU, where they say Dylan will stay overnight to determine his condition since he hasn’t come yet.

When I get there, I see someone I have never seen before...a young girl just about my age, maybe younger. She sits

unmoving by the bed, looking over his vulnerable unconscious form.

“Ava, good evening. Are you okay?”

I nod, still confused about who she is and why she now knows me but more worried about my boyfriend.

“How is he?” I move closer to him.

“He’ll remain here for a while. He’s not in a coma...just sleeping at this point,” she answers. “I’m Layla.” She extends her hand for a shake, and I take it, recollecting what Dylan had told me about his sister. They share the same dark hair, green eyes, and tomboyish appearance - easily depicted by her hoodie and combat joggers paired with high tops. I would’ve assumed she borrowed it all from Dylan until I realized they definitely didn’t wear the same size.

“Ava,” I introduced myself, thinking how rude I must have sounded not doing so initially. “... but it seems you already knew that.”

“I guessed,” she chuckles. “Your description is unmistakable at home.”

Huh.

“And you must be Lily. Where there’s Ava, there’s Lily. That’s what he’d say.” She talks to my friend, who has been behind me the entire while.

She gives a shy wave and steps out of my shadow to acquaint herself properly. While they’re at it, I stretch my

hands to remove a strand of hair from Dylan's face. It could cause a tickle when he becomes conscious.

"Keep your hands away from my son!" A voice booms behind me, causing everyone to cringe. I turn around to see a woman I do not recognize except the man beside her.

"Mrs. Belfrost." I gasp.

"Miss Persson, am I right?" she asks. There is grief in her voice, but the power reverberating from her very aura is difficult to miss. Not to mention the man beside her. My voice ceases, and speaking becomes a thing of the past. All I can do is nod.

"I did not know what you children were doing or what possessed you to go outside at night at such late hours. It could have gone wrong. What a fool the both of you were!" she cries.

"Mom!" Layla winces, but her mother pays her no heed.

Here I am, still trying to process that Dylan is the son of the Belfrost family... *yes, the actual son of the Belfrost family!*

"The main reason we hide his identity is to protect him from criminals, crooks, and thugs. I was so naïve that it would stay that way for long..."

I can't even bear it. Before she continued, I stormed past her. It's better to be somewhere else than stay and endure the embarrassment of Lily and me being called criminals.

...and Dylan has more than enough explaining to do when he wakes up.



Dylan

*M*Y HEAD HURTS. NO, my eye. Scratch that. Both my head and my eyes hurt...but especially my eyes. I should shut them...

“Dylan?”

That sounds like my sister. I have to get a closer look. Shi...!!! No, my eyes have to stay closed. Besides, this could just be a hallucination...or a coma. I hear people have very clear, vivid dreams in a coma, in verisimilitude to the real world...but my head isn't supposed to hurt if I'm still inside a coma, is it?

“Dylan! Mom! Get a doctor!”

Ah, there's the voice again. No matter how much it hurts to look, I have to see who it is...no matter how much it hurts.

Footsteps flood the room when I decide I'm not in a coma after all. I open my eyes with everything remotely resembling will and hiss as the light floods through them, blinding me

momentarily and striking the nerves responsible for my headache with absolute precision.

This headache is not momentary because even after keeping my eyes open for a few extra seconds and eventually getting used to the blinding light, the headache is definitely more of a threat than whatever put me in this condition.

What or who put me in this condition?

“He’s okay, just waking up from sleep, I see. A much-needed rest, I must add. His brain seems tired from the scans, ” a man in scrubs informs as he peers into my eyes. “How are you, fella?” He slaps my cheeks lightly. I find his gestures endearing despite the shock in my head.

“Oh, thank goodness!” I turn to see Mom squatting by my bed. “Dylan, I’m alive now that you are.” Tears stream from her eyes as she talks. To be fair, I was always alive, but let’s give her the benefit of her emotions.

“What happened, Dylan?” Layla asks. Mom sobs too much to speak coherently.

I hesitate for a while. “Why...”

Yup. As I suspected, my voice is dryer than doughnuts left in an oven for days. My throat literally feels like leather! I’m going to talk, even if it’s just this once.

“Why aren’t you in school?” I smile at my sister, and she grimaces, holding back a smile.

“Doctor G, is there any way to put him back in a coma? Better still, I need a pillow. I’ll just smother him,” Layla

grunts, and the young doctor laughs.

“Doctor G, huh? You know what they say about nicknames...” I taunt my sister, and she reddens like a tomato.

“Shut up.” She reaches out to hit me before remembering the delicacy of my condition. This is probably the only time I get to taunt Layla without consequences. By the way, now everyone knows I’m fine. It’s around this time that Dad walks in.

“Gary Dillinger. How in the world did you two even come in contact?” are his first words.

“Nice to see you too, Dad.”

“Oh, shut up. We’re boys. Someone has knocked me out a couple of times . There was this one time....” He’s about to start a story but realizes something. “Oh, this isn’t about me this time. Tell me about you. What happened?”

When he asks me the question again, everything comes back at light speed. The headache takes prevalent, and my mind gets thrown into deep worry.

“Ava,” I grunt. “Where’s Ava and Lily? ” I struggle to move out of bed, but Mom restrains me.

“They’re fine, Dylan. Thanks to your stupidity, they only suffered minor wounds, but they’re alright. Rest.”

I give Mom a look, but I don’t want to push an argument. It’s unnecessary.

“We’ll get to them later, Dylan; just please, tell us what happened,” Layla persuades me. “We need to know whether you guys are in further danger.”

My father nods in approval of her statement.

I think I’m getting used to talking now after swallowing enough saliva. I take a deep breath and wince a little from the headache, understanding that dissipating takes a while. I begin my narrative. I didn’t even remember what happened until my father asked.

“The first time we met the man was when he came to stay in the hotel. He tried to rape Ava, and I was lucky to be going around checking for her. Obviously, I stepped in and rescued the girl before calling security. They kept him in custody until the cops came. He was slated for a trial about a month from now. I don’t know why he was granted bail.”

Dad shakes his head to say, “Gary’s a mutt; everyone knows that.”

“Except me, unfortunately. How do you know this man, Dad? Down to his name, even. And what beef does he have with us? I remember he knew me without us ever having been introduced.” I throw two simultaneous questions at him.

“Easy, kid. I’ll answer your questions...but I want you to keep an open mind.” He looks at my mother, who nods as if giving him the go-ahead.

He accepts the permission and begins his tale. “So, our story should start sometime around the early turn of the century,

some years after Dylan was born. It was our fourth anniversary, and we thought we should behold the Aurora Borealis together. You know...charm, luck, whatever. Silly adult things, and we had the money, so why not?"

I hear Layla behind me.

"Anyway," Dad ignores her and goes on, "...that's our first encounter with Gary. Young as well, enthusiastic as hell, always wanting to jump into things and be rich at all costs. There was a time when he came to ask me how I got rich, refusing to let me go until I divulged what I knew about acquiring wealth, but even that was not enough. "

As if on cue, Mom takes the story from there. "It would be three days after this weird encounter. Your father and I were wandering the hotel we were lodged in when I heard a muffled scream. I immediately sought your father, and the ensuing case uncovered one of the biggest scandals in that hotel's recorded history. Not one, not two...but seven girls and three young boys were tied and encapsulated in his closet and other parts of the hotel."

That explains his rotten demeanor, but I still have many questions. Layla beats me to ask hers first. "How does his crime bust translate to his hate toward you, Dylan, and Ava?"

"You don't get it?" Dad steps in. "We singlehandedly, knowingly or not, thwarted his business. He definitely wants revenge."

"Okay...then, he could just come for you..." she pushes. Harsh, but yes. I agree.

“If a wicked servant cannot harm his master, what does he do?” Dad strokes his goatee. I see Layla struggle with the proverb.

Youngling.

“He maims his favorite goat,” I complete it, realizing what he means by that.

“It also didn’t help that you jumped in to help Ava, almost playing hero the same way I did the first time as well,” he adds, as another layer of reasoning to help it make sense.

“Like some kind of déjà vu. That’s why he eventually went for me in the end...and not Ava,” I sigh.

“One reason why I really wanted your identity to remain hidden,” Mom speaks. I just don’t know how he would have known.

“Hey, why didn’t he get arrested when you knew he was involved in the trafficking?” I ask Dad.

He stokes his neatly trimmed goatee and chuckles, “Gary Dillinger would have been sentenced to death on multiple charges if he wasn’t related to the police chief then. He is retired but still has a hold on the current man on the force. It’s a mess, Dylan, and there’s just so much we’re thankful for. The police killed him, not you or anyone else, so his brother has no reason to come after you. Besides, the ex-chief isn’t a criminal...just corrupt.”



Dylan

“**Y**OU DID WHAT!?! I’M the one that’s supposed to tell her! Mom!” I exclaim. This isn’t good. This definitely isn’t good.

My reaction to hearing that Ava already knows my true identity is as they expect: mild expressions of disappointment. I’m not one for moping about an action already taken. There’s no way my family would lie to me...especially not Layla, who tells me that Mom must have said something to upset her, hence her not coming to see me.

I try her phone, where I have piled dozens of messages daily for the week, I’ve been in the ICU.

...not a single reply.

I majorly reacted when Layla told me what had transpired between Ava and Mom.

“I was scolding her, Dylan.” Mom casts an innocent look that is really an expression of her guilt. I know she doesn’t like Ava. It baffles me. She has only met the girl face-to-face

once...when I was unconscious and then never again, prior or after. Her foreknowledge of Ava is what I've told her - mostly good things.

"It's not my fault that she's hot-headed." She crosses her hands and lets out a defensive statement.

I knew it!

"Have you ever tried to scold Layla, and it ended well?" I ask. Layla widens her eyes, not expecting a direct comparison.

Sorry, Lays. I have to save my relationship.

"No, Layla is a dry twig in an arid desert. It's futile to correct her," Mom pouts. "...but you know, this is different. I'm not obligated to accept her attitude as I would my daughter's," she asserts.

"Ah, favorites, I see." I stand and pace the room. I'm due to be discharged today because I have healed well.

"You play favorites with your children unless you're bound by ordinance to exert the role of a guardian over others."

That makes sense, but I still have a few words left in my mouth. Words are my weapons to win this argument, the one I know my mother is avoiding but wants to win badly. You can't win a fight you avoid. You've gotta face it.

"But Ava is pregnant with my child, Mom. *Your grandchild*. Isn't that ordinance enough?" I ask, putting an emotional emphasis on the question.

“That doesn’t mean I’ll tolerate her bullshit when I could curb it now. It certainly doesn’t mean I’ll allow someone whose only interest in my son for what he offers to come into his life and wreak havoc. She almost had you killed!” she cries.

“*I almost had myself killed...*” is my counter. It’s soft, without the harshness of an argument, but it’s just as resolved. That’s when the next voice speaks up, causing me to jump because I didn’t think anyone else was in the room besides Mom and Layla.

“Dylan is a man I’m proud of, darling.” Recognizing my father’s voice, my guard lowers.

“Harold, no.” Mom tries to block him off, but he comes to her anyway. She fends him off by waving her arms, and when he gets past that, she just brings her hands over her head to stop him from touching her. *Such drama.*

Instead of pushing closer, Dad holds those arms, pulls himself into her and whispers something in her ear. He further whispers that this calms her down for the next set of incoherence. Talk about soul mates. These guys look destined for each other... entirely and without question.

She takes a big sniff after Dad lets her go and addresses me. “Dylan, if Ava is the girl you want, we will support you. You deserve happiness, just like I am with your father.”

I look between her and Dad, flabbergasted enough for me to ask, “What just happened?”

“When you get to be with the person your soul truly yearns for, you’ll understand,” is his simple answer. “Now, on a lighter note, remember the doctor came to check on you this morning?”

I nod to confirm his question.

“Well, he said you’re free to go. We just need to keep redressing that big wound on your brow...something about a reopening that you’ll explain later.”

“Oh,” I recall. “That’s from the first brawl I had with that Gary guy,” I explain.

“Huh...it was that bad?”

I nod again.

“Well, it’s a good thing he’s gone.”

This has to be the hundredth time someone is saying that. All things considered, I’m overjoyed to leave the hospital. It’s about time, but the doc decided they had to keep me for four more days. I can finally get back to work, and specifically, back to Ava. She said that Lily and she had a week left. They are about ready to go to school, so if I don’t catch up with them, I can only pray that she’ll return during the winter break, which is very unlikely.

My parents help me gather everything I had been using to sustain myself in the hospital, and we’re about to head out when I notice someone at the far end of the hallway... watching us.

“Ava...Ava!” I struggle to go after her as she disappears when she sees I have spotted her, but my father holds me back.

“She just wants to know that you’re alright. She’s been coming every day,” Layla confesses.

“Why didn’t you tell me!?” I grit my teeth, trying to suppress an outburst.

I had better not explode. My head is still a tube of leaking dynamite, ready to go off at the slightest temperature change. I’m not about to have that.

“She said I shouldn’t.” She raises her hands in defence.

“Thanks for not allowing me to do something about my waning relationship.” I roll my eyes. I will not push further. There’s no need to cry over spilled milk.

“What do you mean, son? That girl loves you. Every night, she’d be here, watching you sleep for at least an hour and wouldn’t leave till I practically forced her to. She’s a gem,” Dad chips in.

“You knew too!?”

He flashes a coy smile that does not suit his face at all. Elderly people should not have the gift of mischief. “I was responsible for keeping your mother either asleep or distracted the entire time.”

Wow.

The ironic thing is that even though Dad seemed supportive of me chasing my love interest. The next day, when I got

dressed to go to the hotel, he insisted I stay, along with my mother.

“Look at you, boy. You look like a half-peeled potato... definitely bad for business....”

“...and your father is also worried about your health,” Mom adds.

“Well, yeah. There’s that too. Betty, what do you think? Ava wouldn’t like to see him looking like this. You look like a sock missing its other leg with a hole where the big toe is supposed to be.” My father completely demolishes my ego. If I weren’t more mature, my self-worth would hang on a thin thread.

Layla is enjoying this because she recoils on the couch in merry laughter.

“The both of you are not fair,” I huff and stomp back to my room.

“Well, I take it you haven’t met life,” Dad hollers after me right before I slam the door.

Mom suggests I should take the rest of the year off, and Dad doesn’t directly oppose, offering to bring Ava over himself... an offer I know Ava will reject without giving it a second thought.

When I get to the hotel, I have it in mind to find out whether she’s still in the facility. Seeing Lily in the staff quarters is confirmed when she rushes to wrap her tiny frame around my large one.

Where there’s Lily, there’s Ava.

“Oh, my God, Dylan. You look...”

“Like a two-week-old doggy ball? Yeah, you don’t have to tell me twice.” I help her complete her statement.

“I was going to say, *better than when I last saw you,*” but that works. She shrugs meekly.

Cold without meaning to be. I wonder what Ava is going to say.

“Dylan? What are you doing here?” I hear her voice before I see her...and that wonders for my spirit. Turning around to search for the voice, I don’t have to when she grabs my face from the side, thoroughly inspecting me.

“This wound opened again?” she asks pensively.

“Yes, but forget about that. I came to talk to you, Ava.”

She instantly withdraws her hands as though my words have triggered her memory. “You shouldn’t be here, Dylan. You should be with your family.”

“No, no. I didn’t come to work...I just came to see you,” I tell her.

That’s not the point, though. What she says next reveals what it is.

“That’s not...” she hesitates a little before resolving. “You shouldn’t be with me, Dylan. You should be with a girl from a more befitting social class. One that wouldn’t bring you harm.” She shakes her head.

Immediately, I know.

“Mom told you that, didn’t she?”

Her nod affirms my take.... *Mom said she had only scolded her.*

“Listen to me, Ava.” I try to pacify her, but she shakes her head with a gesture of resolution. But I’m not giving up on her...on our love..., and I will let her know. “Ava...” I held her hands like Dad had held Mom in the hospital.

“Dylan, please. I don’t want to feel this way...don’t make me feel this way,” she begs.

“How am I making you feel, Ava? I want to make it better, that’s all.”

“I can’t really love you if I feel beneath you because then it’s just reverence and respect,” she buttresses her resolve. “Maybe it was like this, Dylan. Maybe we’re meant to just be bosses and employees. Please. I don’t have the strength to go up against anyone above me to prove that I love you.”

The tears dropping from her eyes tell me how tired she is. I have been very deceptive. Lawfully so, but still...deceit is deceit. It’s bound to enrage, yet something more important bothers her. Her social standing. That, as long as I breathe, is where I’ll continue to offer my undying support.

“I’ll fight, Ava. I’ll fight for our love, my Candy. Where your strength is weak, I’ll substitute mine. I love you, Ava. I swear it with all of my heart.”

Just like Mom did with Dad, Ava calms down. The feeling is surreal. I bring my bruised head close enough to hers, and she

rests her perfect one on mine.

“I love you, Dylan,” she croaks and seals her words with a soft peck on my lips. “Now, go home and rest before I tear open your band-aid and look at that wound myself. It’s taking all the strength I have to resist.”

There she is.



Ava

I LOOK AT MY best friend with complete and utter dismay. “Look. Whatever it is you’re high on, I don’t want it. Alright?”

She sticks out a stubborn tongue. “You just have a really unconventional reaction to things. Everyone knows gasoline smells heavenly.”

Okay...am I missing something here? Did I mistakenly enter another dimension?

“Please, for the love of God, tell me you’re joking.” I pat myself on the head. I just finished a big meal of cereal and steak. Awkward combination, I know, but that was what the baby was craving. I can’t possibly deny my baby its stomach desires, even if Lily makes me feel like an alien for the abominable mix.

Now, she tells me she loves the smell of gasoline during our awkward cravings discussion.

“Sometimes, I feel you’re the pregnant person between us two,” I huff to jab at her ego.

“Please! Sometimes what? Girl, you only just found out that you were pregnant when...yesterday?” she laughs at my failed attempt while I wallow in disappointment at my lost taunt.

She’s getting wittier.

“Come on, let’s end this,” she says. “Let’s conduct a Google search. “Does gasoline smell good or bad?” I’m sure Google agrees with me,” she shrugs.

Despite my bite back and continued argument over the system, the internet settled the friendly tiff in favor of my friend. Upon seeing these results, I still feel the reverse of what most people think. The earth has twelve billion abnormalities, and I’m the only relatively sane person. No one can tell me otherwise.

“Well, you can tell me cooking gas smells good then...” I give an exasperated roll of my eyes.

She winces. Lily actually winces at that obvious question!

“Actually, this might be just my thing, but...” she says and cringes.

Just as I am about to render her a sacrifice, probably to the God of pregnancy, we hear a knock on the door and pause. Lily hops to her feet when the knock returns and moves to get it. Her petite frame keeps her nimble... completely unlike mine. The pregnancy tops I have to wear make me feel like an overfed sow.

When she opens the door, we get the shock of our lives. There, standing on the threshold, is Mrs. Belfrost. The power and the unwavering essence of glory she carries around make her look much taller than she actually is. I'm sure my five foot eleven could dwarf her completely, but now, that didn't seem to matter. I swear that as I stand up to welcome her, I still have to look up despite her being much smaller.

"G...good evening, Mrs. Belfrost." I stutter. Lily stays at the door, transfixed. Good for her. When nervous, that girl talks more nonsense than an old drunk pirate.

Mrs. Belfrost responds to my greeting with a nod, not that I expected anything more... or less.

"Both of you aren't at work?" she asks and enters the room.

"Uh...no...we uh...we were given a week's rest when we returned from the hospital," I reply. I should have taken a bigger breath.

"Hm, I thought as much." Mrs. Belfrost nods with condescension. She need not tell me she doesn't believe me. I can see it in her gaze.

"And after that, we were done with our work time. We go back to college at the end of the week," Lily pipes up, ironically smoother than when I was talking. She isn't under the most pressure, but I'll still commend her later for the added layer of backing.

"Yeah...there's that too," I chuckle.

“May I?” She lowers herself onto Lily’s bed before I answer, but I answer anyway.

“Oh, yeah, sure. Where are my manners?”

“You’re not expected to have them...don’t worry. I’m not offended,” she scoffs.

Dylan, I send a telepathic message that I hope catches him. I’m doing this...I’m tolerating this because of my love for you and my natural respect for the Belfrost family. Your father was also really kind, so I’m doing this for him too.

If it weren’t for these circumstances, words would have been traded...words I wouldn’t be proud to speak of later.

“So, what brings you here? I know I’m not the highest person on your priority list, so...” I shrug, trying it out as a joke, but she can take it as whatever she wants. I don’t really mind.

“Oh, you are at the top of my priority list, *Ariana*. Whatever concerns my son is of utmost importance to me.” I know she did the wrong name thing on purpose. My name is only two syllables and three letters. You couldn’t forget it even if you wanted to.

Her talk makes my name sound like it’s on a wanted list rather than a priority list. I wait for her to get to it. She takes an awfully long time to do so, p clearly another sign that she has no regard for the people in the room. Lily comes to my bed and hops on, clearly tired of the wait. Every ticking second increases my blood pressure by a unit of two.

She keeps scrolling and then typing on her phone. When she finally looks up, she says, “Well, I would have loved to stay a little more, but I have a lot of things to get to...might as well take that time to conduct an impromptu inspection on the place.”

No, ma'am, you don't need to love to stay and torture me. Just get on with it.

She opens her bag that screams, “You can't get this in a normal shop”, and shuffles around for a while before pulling out a document. My heartbeat pulses with aggressive fury. What is happening? I'm not sure...but that paper gives me a light-headed feeling.

“What's this for?” I ask when she arranges the paper and hands it to me.

“You can read, can't you?”

Fair point. That's something I'd say too.

I read through the fine print. I don't need to go through everything before realizing what is happening. I see the words “child support” then “agreement” followed by absurdly large amounts of numbers.

What the...

“All you have to do is sign it,” she says as I shake my head in disagreement. “It protects you, the girl...and the child, so you never have any business with my son or his family unless there's a default in payment.”

I still shake my head.

“No, no, no, no...”

“All you have to do is sign...”

“I can’t...I won’t...”

“Sign this document, Ava!”

Silence prevails in the room after her yell. I knew she knew my name. I take in a huge breath before shaking my head one final time.

“What, then, do you want from my son...from my family?” she spits out. She thinks of me as low as the beggars on the streets. Do I blame her? Yes. Pity her?

No.

“I want to give birth to my child and care for him or her independently...whether I end up with Dylan.”

I can see the look on her bewildered face.

“This was a mistake I made...my mistake. And frankly speaking, I’m not ready to bear the consequences, but in my defence, no one is ever ready to bear the consequences of the mistakes they make.” That just came off the top of my head, but the realization that I made a commitment I’m not ready for brings tears to my eyes. I’m not prepared for this, but accepting this document would prove her right - I never loved her son. She might never have told me this directly, but I’m not stupid.

I hand her back the document, but she doesn’t collect it.

“I cannot guarantee that you mean well by returning this document. Keep it until you change your mind,” she grunts.

I retract it from her, stand straight for a few more seconds, and then hand it back. She looks confused.

“Oh, I...thought about it and don't think I'll change my mind.” I shake the paper before her as the confusion on her face grows.

Not used to my theatrics, I see...

“She takes the documents from me, still doubtful. “I hope you know the choices you're making, child, and what it entails,” she castigates me as she stands up to go.

Finally!

“I'm giving you the possibility to transform your life for the better, and you're wasting it by pursuing something I promise will be out of reach.”

“What exactly do you think I'm after, ma'am?” I ask her when she reaches the door. I struggled to hold back my words.

“I'm technically in her territory, and there's no greater futility than challenging her.

“The Belfrost family wealth will remain with the Belfrosts. You built nothing here and, have no claim to any of it.” The cold desperation in her voice only thickens my resolve to prove her wrong.

I take it Dylan didn't tell her all about me, then.

“I want none of the family’s wealth, Mrs. Belfrost. I never even knew Dylan was related to you and would have aborted the pregnancy but for him. I was ready to bear and raise his child alongside him when I thought he was just a supervisory-level hotel executive. If that doesn’t convince you that I have no other motive rather just being in love with Dylan, I don’t have to get along with you. I’m so sorry.” I shake my head and shut the door quietly.

“I think that was pretty decent...and my little speech at the end wasn’t too harsh, was it?” I ask Lily as I crash onto the bed beside her.

“We seemed to trade personalities for a while, so...it was perfect,” she assures me.

Yup, seemed so to me, too. I don’t like the feeling, though. Having something to say and keeping it under the subjugation of another person is tedious work. There are so many ways I could have replied, but I just didn’t. *I couldn’t.*

Two days later, she showed up in our room again. This time, she asks Lily to excuse us; and when Lily does, she starts with an apology.

“Listen, I uh...as a mother, have erred in the uniform support of my son. I could defend myself and say I was only looking for his best interests, but that would be a blatant lie. I was looking out for the entire family, which eventually translated into mine. It was selfish of me to assume that you came into his life to dig gold, and I am sorry.”

Wow. The apology came much sooner than I thought.

I just want to tell you I'll be here to support you with the child, given that it is as much mine as yours...."

I want to argue with that, but I don't need to. She's the potential baby's grandmother, after all. It'd be cruel to deny her that feeling, however cruel she has been to me.

"I perfectly understand, Mrs. Belfrost. Thanks for your support," I muttered meekly. There's nothing else to say.

"So..." she starts and takes out her phone, feeling upbeat about my 'forgiveness'. "If I can just have your account number, maybe I could...."

"That won't be necessary, ma'am." I shake my head in disagreement.

"Oh? But why, honey?"

"I really don't need a cash donation or anything. I was more than content with my life before you showed up, and it'd show ingratitude to want more of what I already have in surplus," I respond.

"You call five thousand dollars 'surplus'? Come on, child. Do this forth the sake of your baby," she scoffs.

But I don't want to. I don't want to endanger my dignity and children for a couple thousand dollars extra.

"You know, Mrs. Belfrost, while I have been with your son, he taught me something. A quote of his sticks in my brain, which I'll never forget. He told me that tough times create strong men. Strong men create easy times. Easy times produce

or create weak men, who eventually bring tough times back upon us.”

Her face glows up when she finally understands.

“I’m not going to deliberately have my child go through tough times, as all kinds do, but if there’s an opportunity for an easy time that wouldn’t cost the child’s dignity nor mine...But the tough road, in all sincerity, isn’t even that tough. I’m sorry, but I’ll have to pass.” I let it sink deep into her.

She leaves without another word.



Dylan

BEING AT HOME LONGER than three days is completely unhealthy from a work perspective, especially when your job is physical, and the love of your life is in the same workplace. I have been at home for closing in on a week since I got back from the hospital. My Dad put Additional measures in place so I don't sneak out like the last time. The only channel of escape is either my mobile phone, texting Ava all day long - as much as she replies to me - with the remaining time spent on Facetime - *with Ava*.

I know pretty much everything Mom has put her through, so I understand perfectly when she walks through the door with devastation on her face.

“She refused the help again,” Mom sighs, sitting beside me on the couch, where I splurge myself.

“Well, that's shocking...” I grunt and continue what I'm doing, a non-committal attempt at a mobile game, pending Ava's reply. Mom gives me a look that calls me to attention. I

heave myself up and assume a more appropriate pose for our conversation.

“I didn’t mean any harm this time, Dylan. I swear it. I just wanted to apologize, that’s all. I didn’t mean to sound rude or condescending.” She tries to vindicate herself, and I sit there and watch. She looks at me, but I still say nothing, just peer deep into her soul through her eyes.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that, Dylan. I’m your mother, responsible for keeping my children safe. Sure, I went a little over the line with this one, but an apology should fix that, shouldn’t it?” she asks. Again, I say nothing. I do only cock an eyebrow and continue my wordless, probing stare.

“Dylan, I understand I might have been too harsh...and too mistrusting...but can you blame me? The last thing I want is to see you come to any harm. That’s what a wonderful mother would do!” she cries. My following three words put her in a dilemma.

“Is she harm?”

“What about Ava? She...she...” The realization sets in. “She’s just...oh. I misjudged again, didn’t I?” She sits down and has a ghastly look on her face like she’s extremely tired. She shoves her face deep into her hands and groan. “I’m cruel. She must think I’m an entitled woman interested in more than meets the eye...like I have my own motives.”

How is she even making all these deductions?

“To be fair, you were a bit orthodox, but cruel is too big a word to describe your generous heart, Mom,” I tell her as she takes regretful sighs. Thank goodness she didn’t cry. I would’ve run away.

Why do the people in my life love drama so much?

“Tell you what; I’ll make sure to the best of my ability that you and Ava become best friends,” I promise her.

“But...how? They’ll be leaving for school by the weekend,” she says gloomily.

“We just need to have a family dinner.”

No one is more elated about the dinner than I am. Dad specifically goes to hand over the invite to Ava and Lily to make sure they do not disappoint. I know Ava respects my dad much, and Lily fears him too much to deliberately miss out on the dinner date. Since there was no third world war, no asteroid strikes, and no A.I. takeover, both of them made it.

However, especially as Layla isn’t with us - she had returned to school almost as soon as they discharged me - the dinner is the most uncomfortable one I’ve had since I crashed Dad’s Rolls-Royce Cullinan.

Even Lily, the physical and social definition of timid, has more talk time than her usually audacious friend, and I can tell why. Mom is sitting opposite Ava, who still feels like a victim. A lot needs to happen before she can feel at ease again.

An evil side of my brain tells me it’s better this way. The only thing stronger than one determined woman is two

determined women. They'd be a phenomenal manifestation of natural power if they ever come together. I felt relieved that Layla and Ava hadn't been in the same room longer than a few minutes, and that was when I was either out of the room or unconscious.

The day of their final relocation back into campus comes fast, and my child's growth in her belly is even faster in subsequent months. I have never witnessed the meticulous and affectionate process of creating life up close.

I fall deeper in love with Ava over these months. It is not an uncommon phrase that "absence makes the heart grow fonder." I thought of it like a slow burn, where I'd see reasons to keep falling in love with her, but I was grotesquely wrong.

I wake up every day and discover that I crave her more. The urge to see her gets stronger, and the craving to talk to her unreasonably intense. I want more...even if it's just a second to touch her soft, warm skin...or a single strand of hair. It all feels alien to me as I help Mom inflate the balloons, and I have no choice but to ask, "Hey, Mom, how does it feel to be in love with Dad?"

She stops what she's doing and faces me. "Oh, you're in love with Ava, alright. It's not infatuation," she laughs me off and continues what she is doing, but that's not the answer I want, so I shake my head and press further.

"But how does it feel, Mom?"

At this point, she drops the decorations she insists on preparing herself and remarks, “Oh, to be honest, Dylan, I have completely no idea what the word ‘love’ means because it has been tagged to mean different things...but what I know is that the feelings I have for your father will never die. It’s kind of like the feeling you have for me...”

“Ew, Mom.”

“Listen.”

I keep quiet and let her talk.

“It’s how you love me, and I love you, but with a whole additional layer of complications; the basic foundation is that there is just so much you’re willing to endure and so much you’re willing to sacrifice for that person. That’s love. Any other thing is admiration or just mere respect,” she concludes.

“Oh.”

“That is love, my son. You know when I knew Ava loves you?” she asks.

“When?” I ask with curiosity.

“When I gave her documents to sign, she told me she needed no part of the money I offered. When she knew nothing about your financial status or who you really were, she kept the baby. She finds me annoying enough to pull away, but she is stuck despite all the awkwardness. That is love. Love is sacrifice.”

Everything she says brings tears to my eyes. Ava loves me, and I know it is not just because of what Mom mentioned.

“The day we got attacked,” I tell her, “they beat me up bad and too weak to do anything. Ava was kicked in the head and knocked out cold, yet, when she woke up, she tried to beg Gary for a trade. She jumped before me when he didn’t listen to shield me from his knife. It was either Gary’s life or hers, and if Gary was still alive today, there’s a good chance she’d be dead.”

The air is solemn as we process what we just said.

“Ava is a good girl, Dylan. I couldn’t for my life think of someone better for you.”

I nod in appreciation, and we share a hug.

“Now, let’s return to these decorations before the driver arrives with our guest of honor.” She pokes me in the side, and I jump out of her way with a giggle before bending and picking up another balloon to inflate.

The time I’ve spent with my parents since Ava came into my life has been meaningful and fruitful. Talks about her subsequently led to discussions about us, which helped draw us closer as a family. If this is how it is, then Ava might be the best thing that has ever happened to me.

The car arrives just as we tie the last balloon. I told Ava we were having a family dinner like the last time, and she came in, unaware of the surprise. Even Lily is in on the plan; in fact, she is the one who helps us lure Ava into the garden and keeps her distracted enough not to notice the decorations off to one side. When she finally does, all of us yell and scream.

“Surprise!” That startles her sufficiently for us to call this a successful surprise party.

“Dylan! Oh, my God! Did you plan this!?” She melts into my arms in embarrassment. The place isn’t packed but contains enough family and well-wishers for a festive event. Even her parents are here.

“Nope. It was all Mom’s idea.” I get out of her field of view to give her a proper sighting.

“Good evening, ma’am. Th...thank you, so much...I...” Ava stutters, but Mom pulls her into her arms instead. The site is indeed beautiful.

“Ava, darling, this is more than just congratulations on birthing a baby and adding to the population of both families. It’s also an apology.” Mom releases Ava, who is swollen with love. I caress her belly as she listens.

“I haven’t been your best person, and there’s no way for me to tell you I’m sorry I am.” She looks at Ava’s stomach and processes my mother’s following words. “There’s nothing more beautiful to me than seeing my son happy... and if you’re his happiness, then you’re my happiness as well.” She nods.

“Thank you so much, Mrs. Belf....”

“Ah, shh, shh...call me, Mom, darling. You’re my daughter now.” She smiles, and they hug again. Longer this time, and it subtly annoys me.

This is when I should have my girlfriend all to myself!

It seems I'm the only one that loses in this scenario because they steal away to have a girly talk with the rest of the ladies, leaving us men - and, surprisingly, Lily - staring awkwardly at each other.

“So...” she starts off. “Anybody want to play pool? I have my wager,” she offers and blinks.

It is no surprise later why she offered when she beat all the men...twice.



Ava

“I ‘M GOING TO COUNT down to three.” The nurse tells me when the buildup of pain nearly splits me.

“Are you ready?”

I cry out in response. *Is anyone ever ready for this?*

The pain started like period cramps, but then there was a dial, and someone kept increasing the intensity little by little until I could only scream in response to what everyone was saying. But Dylan is here...and so is his mother. As long as there are no complications, the doctor will allow them to stay, which I’m hoping is the end of the labor. Till then, I’m a banshee.

“Okay, baby. You’ve got this. Come on, Candy...” Dylan motivates me.

“Aahhhhhh!”

“You’re going to make it through this, okay. I have two, and I can tell you it wasn’t easy, but here they are...and here I am,” his mother coaxes.

“Aaahhhhhhhhh!” Any time the pain hits, I scream horror, pain, and furious frustration.

Just come out, you...baby!

“Hear me, I’mma need you to push, Ava. Are you with me?” The obstetrician shakes my face to ensure I comprehend what he’s saying. I nod vigorously and still myself as the next contraction hits, preparing for the big one.

“Here... we’ll hold your hand,” Dylan suggests. “Mom, let’s hold her hands.”

Mrs. Belfrost seems uneasy but agrees, nonetheless. My silence keeps up for the following two contractions while the doctor counts down.

“Two...three!” I squeeze with all my might in perfect timing with a contraction, but the pain blinds me. It combines stretching and searing as the baby slides slowly out of my tense walls. A wail, tears from my throat, and the throats of the two people holding my hands.

“Almost there..I can see the head!” The doctor stretches my opening to give the baby more room to come out. I’m grateful.

At that moment, with my energy depleted by at least eighty per cent, I force the baby out in one last push... not even having the strength for a powerful wail but still keeping my death grip on the hands of my motivators.

Mrs Belfrost’s grip counteracts mine, and she makes it out unscathed. But when I finally let go of Dylan’s hand, he nurses it with his other, making his mom laugh at his inexperience.

“It’s a girl,” the doctor announces as I still breathe. My internals are a complete and utter mess. I feel like a leaky tube of toothpaste with some liquids oozing out as the placenta slides down.

The doctor places the crying baby in my arms. I feel so blessed to be holding her. This is me...a projection of myself...a creation I made and carried within me for nine months.

I feel like a messy grim pot, despite that, I’m the happiest person in the room. The baby rocks in my arms, and I coo her into her first sleep before handing her over to the doctor. Dylan looks in Marvel like he’s a small child.

“That’s my child, isn’t it? Whoa,” he exclaims. “Hey, Candy. You did it, baby. You gave birth to that beautiful princess. Our beautiful princess.” He places his lips on mine and kisses me deeply. I respond with as much strength as I can muster... which isn’t much.

“She’s tired, Dylan. Let her rest.” Mrs. Belfrost tells him. Dylan says something back, but it blends into the surrounding sounds as I fall into a deep trance.

Opening my eyes, the first person I see is Lily, who is holding my baby already. “Wakey, wakey. Mommy duck rule. Your baby saw me first, so she’s already bonded.” She jokes and takes the baby’s hand into her mouth in a playful gesture.

“Wrong. I held the baby first,” I groan with a settled smile as she grunts in frustration.

“Dylan, only let me carry the baby about ten seconds before you woke up. Not even his parents have touched her yet,” she laughs.

I shake my head and emit a weak chuckle, remembering how he was when the child was born. I bet he will be both a father and a mother to the child. Unsurprisingly, when I was eventually discharged and started school some three months later, Ivy stayed with me...no matter how difficult it was adapting to school work and simultaneous childcare - despite everyone telling me otherwise.

There’s no single scenario where I want to see this child with anyone else, so my daughter is in the school’s ultra-committed daycare centre until I’m done with classes. Then Lily and I practically race to retrieve her.

Since I am a mother now, the entire family decided it would be more hygienic to raise the child outside the campus, so the necessary specialists can come and check on the baby, including a nanny that stays with us until bedtime to allow Lily and me to study.

“I could hardly concentrate in class today,” I complain to Lily as I struggle under the weight of the over-packed children’s bag. Lily would collapse under this weight, so she should carry the baby.

“Really? You said that yesterday,” she reminds me.

“And the day before, I know. There’s this constant burden on my mind. I’m always thinking of Lil. How’s she doing? Hope she’s eaten. Is her temperature normal? I hope no one’s going to step on her by mistake...” I empty my worries, and still, they don’t seem to ease.

Of course, they won’t. I asked questions and questions that didn’t yield answers.

“Well, don’t worry so much about this big baby!” She tosses the five-month-old into the air and catches her, earning a squeal of excitement from the child. She uses every conversation as an opportunity to play with the child. It’s so cute.

Just look at them. Two babies making each other happy. When we eventually get settled - I’m in the house, and Edith, the nanny, puts Ivy to sleep after her ominously boring day - I talk seriously with Lily at the dinner table.

“You have too much on your brain right now, Ava. Learn to ease up a little. Have you heard of postpartum depression?” Lily asks, point blank.

“Yeah, but I sincerely doubt that is happening right now. No one can stay in a house with you and Ivy and be sad. Literally no one,” I huff.

“I mean...thanks for the credit...but... I already knew,” she smirks.

“Whatever.” I shake my head and remember that something else is bugging me. Lily notices it, too, because she tilts her

head to match my own.

“What’s wrong, Ava?”

“It’s been forever, Lil. I miss him,” I tell my friend. “It’s like... the calls and texts aren’t as good as the real thing... the real Dylan.”

“It’s been three days, Ava.” My friend gives me a murky look, and I reply with a smitten expression. “Besides,” she says, “...you’re lucky I read minds and am a genie.” She munches confidently on a pretzel.

Whatever is this girl up to? I realize that she’s not looking at me - just slightly behind. Before I can react, a pair of muscular hands grabs me. My screams are mixed - mild terror and raw excitement.

“Dylan!” I jump up and give him the tightest hug I’ve ever given a person. If I were to hug Lily with this pressure, it would crush her windpipe, but Dylan is twice her size. He can take it.

“Oh, my windpipe!” He lets out a strained groan, and I let go immediately, feeling like he might probably disappear again.

Oh, maybe he can’t handle the squeeze.

As soon as my feet touch the ground, his lips catch mine, and I immediately familiarize myself with his taste.

Gosh, I miss this.

Five minutes later, we are walking in the park just behind the apartment, stalling time and reveling in each other’s presence.

“So, what is the colour of the sun if you’re telling me it’s not yellow?” I laugh.

“White,” he says simply.

“White?” I look at him, expecting the punch line or a romantic line...but no. He thinks the sun is actually white.

“You don’t believe me?” he chuckles.

“No. No, I don’t believe you.” I keep my face blank.

He positions himself and gives me a six-minute explanation of how the sun is actually white. Still, the light gets scattered when it hits the atmosphere. It’s a simple complex, but the explanation is prolonged, with me interrupting him with sexy kisses, cueing the next phase of our meeting.

“Are you sure they won’t interrupt us?” he huffs as he dives into my body again. My responsive skin is immediately set on fire by his kisses. I don’t care whether Lily and Ivy will interrupt. It’s just me and my love...

“As long as it’s not wrong, they can burst in any time; they’re welcome to watch. Ivy should know how she was created.” I let out a strangled laugh that turns into a desperate moan as he takes a nipple in his mouth and does what Ivy can’t.

Why did that thought to enter my head? Why is this trying to give me an... I orgasm before the thought can fully form... from Dylan’s mouth on my glands... nothing more.

“Three days get you like this, Candy. I’m not coming back until another three months,” he smirks when I’m done

convulsing.

“You better not,” I cry, bringing him back to kiss me. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to his sweet taste. Right now, it has a slight tint of cream, probably because he just got a mouthful of the most natural milk you can find... and straight from the source.

“I’m going to take this off,” he whispers sensually, prying off my underwear. I don’t even wait for him to remove it entirely before I take his hands and encourage him to start stroking me.

I’m a moaning testimony to love.

“You’re my sun, Candy...” he moans as I continue one long, uninterrupted release of vocal carnality.

That’s the pickup line I’ve been waiting for since we were in the garden! I revel in his praise as he goes about me lighting up his dark day, filling him with energy, etc. Here, he’s my sun as well.

...but I can’t tell him. I’ll have to speak, and for now, his hands are continuously strumming my guitar, singing of the not-so-distant past and a near future...a future I’m too pleased to even contemplate.

The next thing I feel, accompanying his fingers, is a blunt tip. A grateful smile graces my lips as he finally slides inside of me. What’s the orgasm count going to be like today? Three? Four?

The next set of minutes will tell.



Ava

G *RADUATION DAY. AT LONG last.*

“It felt like this day would never come,” Lily comments beside me. There was definitely no one who would have been as impatient for this day as I was. There is so much I need this graduation for. I look over at my two parents, who hold my child in their arms, clearly more interested in the youngling than anything I have going on here. I don’t blame them; even I am looking everywhere than at the podium, where the boring speech is going.

I need this graduation for them—my parents. When the news of my pregnancy first came, their reaction was a genuine disappointment...obviously. I needed this degree to show them that no matter the circumstances, I would do my best to overcome them or die trying. I’m never going to give up on myself. I’m all they have, after all.

Still looking toward my parents, I spot the young child giggling as they fiddle excessively with her. It annoys the people beside them, but it doesn’t. They are all enchanted by

the beautiful moment and have wide smiles plastered as they watch the baby interact with her grandparents. I need this degree for her.

As testimony that she didn't come into my life to interrupt anything, and she is not a burden but rather a blessing, I would do anything humanly possible to ensure she has a comfortable life of fulfilment and satisfaction.

I rub against my best friend, sitting beside me, and she reciprocates the gesture. I need this degree to message her I will be with her, no matter what – as is evident so far. I'd do whatever it takes to make sure the smile on her face never fades, and the optimism in her heart reigns, despite everything she has been through. I'm ready to bend any laws of nature.

I look at Dylan and his parents, taking in the surroundings with pristine superiority. Dylan and Layla are still struggling to find a fit among the rich and snobbish, making it obvious that they weren't trained in the way of the wealthy.

I commend Mr. and Mrs. Belfrost for not breaking the toughening cycle. Someday, their children will be industry leaders. I need the degree for them, too - to show them I'm ready to undertake the struggle and subjection they went through to get to their current status. I'm not pursuing any direct monetary benefit...even if they couldn't be helped.

I looked at my fidgeting hands as the name-calling began. Ava will soon be called to receive her diploma. When it finally echoes through the hall, I receive a round of applause, just like

the people before me, as I walk up the podium to collect my scroll.

I need this degree for myself. Apart from the normal job schematics, I needed to prove to myself that I would fulfil every promise I have made, mentally or aloud, because I am Ava Persson - tall, proud, sassy and grotesquely stubborn.

It's not that I'm not ready for life...life isn't ready for me... especially with Dylan by my side. We meet our families once I'm down from the podium, and Lily is with me after the painstaking wait to get her letter. Ever since Lily and I started interacting, she has never gone home.

That's another reason she needs to work. She had no one to support her, no one but me. Even on her graduation day, her mother doesn't show up. When I bring her attention to it, her indifference is impressive. She seems more at peace with the Belfrosts and Persons, given that we have taken her on as a sister. We allow her to keep her birth last name till she wants it changed...*if she wants it changed.*

"You know, I always tell Dylan that you've got a stronger heart than he does," Mr. Belfort says, patting me on the shoulder.

"Pfft. She's pushed out a baby, so she has everything stronger than I do." Dylan looks up in remembrance of the day of my labor. Everyone has a laugh until I gasp.

Mr. Belfrost discreetly sneaks a letter into my hands, intensifying his smile. "There's no way a girl with such potential wouldn't need a conducive environment to blossom,"

he says. I have only so much control over myself right now, and I leap into his arms in gratitude.

“Oh, and Lily, that includes you too. I don’t know your last name, so I just did a joint letter to you and Ava.” Lily’s eyes widen in gratitude as well. “Completely informal and unprofessional...I know, but hey, who’s auditing?” he laughs.

He is, after all, the hotel’s CEO. He could have us employed via word of mouth, and it’ll carry equal weight as a carefully-drafted letter by the most professional human resources officer on his payroll.

Six Months Later

The buzz is my energy. I literally feed off it. For me, work is boring until the place is packed with people moving in and out. Then, there’s really something to do. Despite my boyfriend’s plea to give it a little rest, how do I attain this superhuman powerhouse ability?

Internalization

As the Executive Housekeeper, I revel in the most brutal tasks. That’s how I got here so fast. Efficiency and diligent service pushed me into this position, and everyone agrees I deserve it. Now more than ever, I’m determined to prove I’m not a social climber or a gold digger. I don’t have to do much, but there is an unbending underlying pressure to push extra to vindicate yourself from any accusation.

“Listen up, everyone!” I hear a voice boom in the main reception.

Dylan, do you know when to take a break?

I only saw the royal nanny twice during the first three months at the Belfrost Hotel. Once when Mrs. Greane assigned us to Dylan and the second when I ran into her in the executive staff quarters. It surprised me she knew about the relationship between Dylan and me. She winked and told me to take care of her baby boy. I remember raving until I later discovered that she was Dylan's ex-nanny. I had never seen her on working floors. Now I know it wasn't because she is lazy doing her job with laxity.

I have seen Dylan address the staff four times today alone, and I can tell that he's the one doing too much. I wonder who will take care of all the paperwork on his desk as the new Mrs. Greane. There's no way he's staying up late in the office today. I won't allow it.

When he's done addressing the workers, I see him returning to his office and tail him. I tug and pull him roughly into a corner as he's about to round the bend.

"What the..."

"Lily?" I call. "Time for that break I talked about."

"I got you," she assures us and closes the door to the supplies room for the ground floor. A supply room on every floor is the best perk of the hotel.

"Ava, listen...we have to get back to work. There's a lot on...."

I let my buttons fly open, interrupting his speech with my exposed chest. He tilts his head as if in deep thought.

“You know something? I think I could use a break,” he confesses, taking one mound in his hand, caressing it softly. I purr out loud, feeling the tension in my core reduced by at least half.

“Yup, there definitely will be no need to rush work.” He presses himself into me and coos, “Now, let’s see how many more of those sounds you can make.” He uses a teasing finger to wrench off my panties.

“Ah.”



Epilogue

A *NOTHER SIX MONTHS LATER.*

“There’s no way that dress doesn’t fit,” Lily spits disappointedly. ” How much was the tailor paid, again?”

“You’re just looking for an excuse to get me to tell you how much, aren’t you?” I laugh at her.

She looks at me like a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar. “You’re not supposed to be this witty.”

“Well, iron sharpens iron,” I laugh.

“Whatever...Just tell me now, or I’ll torture it out of Edith. I can’t believe she knows, and I don’t,” she huffs.

Lily is completely obsessed with fashion... costly fashion. It’s a shame she’s not a fashion designer. That would have been better suited for her talent, but people have priorities. Besides, I would never have known if she had studied fashion design in college. We were slated to go shopping for the wedding dress together, but the designer refused to sell the

current one on display to us. However, lucky for us, she offered to tailor one...for an extra fee.

That's the part that Lily missed. Knowing how much it'll annoy her, I hid the information.

"Leave the poor lady alone, Lil. This is between you, me, and your fashion knowledge," I insist.

"Well, how much is this? She tugs at the material. "Five? Ten thousand?"

I let the red flush that threatens to deform my face - just from the memory of my initial shock- dissipate before telling her the price. "Seventy-five."

"Seventy-five..." Lily repeats what I just said and adds, "Hundred? Seventy-five hundred?"

I take a big breath to say, "Thousand."

She looks at me far longer than I expect. I know this is shocking news, but Lily gets way more dramatic than anyone I know. Maybe it's because it suits her cute stature.

"This is going into my blog," she says and whips out her phone, saying aloud as she types, "Seventy-five thousand dollars for a wedding dress, and it barely fits." She laughs as she's talking. Just as I'm about to say something, she points to the rear of her phone, and I receive the retort of a flash.

"Lily, you had better not post that anywhere," I growl.

"What?" she cranes her neck, feigning oblivion. "Sorry, I didn't catch that." She keeps rapping on her phone enough to

make me forget I'm in a dress worth a condo.

I dart after her. Lily seems not to like things done the easy way. Maybe my work is finally complete, and I've transferred my stubborn genes to her body because she doesn't surrender. In fact, she moves back, trying to gauge my movements. We run around the room for a while, screaming like teenage girls, until my long-legged advantage finally lets me catch up to her. Then comes the part where she probably regrets having a friend like me.

I ensure she's tackled to the ground and sits on her belly, holding her captive and seizing her phone until she begs more than she's supposed to.

Ah, this is fun.

"Mommy?" I hear a small voice through the noisome madness that Lily and I have going on. I whip my head around to locate the voice. I find Ivy standing at the door, looking concerned but not as much as her father.

"I don't think I should ask what is going on..." my fiancé says, narrowing his eyes, using his expression to put a question mark where his words don't.

It's not an easy feat, but Lily and I are back on our feet in seconds. Ivy immediately runs into her Auntie Lily's arms; she leaves with the child, giving me a suggestive wink on the way out.

Now, it's just Dylan and me.

"So...you seem not to like the dress, Dylan chuckles.

“Oh, no, no. I do...it just needs a little...adjustment in the underarm,” I gulp.

I could wear rags, and they'd be the most cherished item in my wardrobe. I am getting married to Dylan! He walks toward me, licking his lips slowly as he edges forward, making me back away in jest.

“Hey, hey! Snap out of it. We have just two weeks ‘til the wedding.” I snap my fingers over his face.

“What do you take me for, Ava?” he chuckles. ” You said the dress needed an adjustment, didn't you?”

“Yes?”

“Well, let's take it off and get it back to the tailor as fast as possible,” he smirks dangerously.

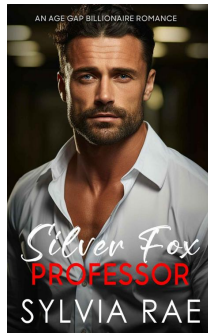
What he doesn't understand is the degree of my resolve. As we agreed, I will make him wait for me, even though the impatience almost tears my cervix in half. It's been over a year since we started our journey together, and we just can't get enough of each other. I just wonder how much longer we can go on like this. After the next two weeks, the altar we'll stand in front of will answer this question.

Till death do us part.



THANK YOU for reading Bossy Grump's Secret!

Do you like this book? Then You will also love Silver Fox Professor!



A night with my billionaire silver fox professor is not the only secret I have to keep...

I was always a good girl.

I followed the rules.

But being virtuous is impossible when he is near.

Tom River, the gorgeous one, gets his way.

And he wants me.

But he is off limits.

I keep my distance.

But now and then, I feel his gaze.

And my heart pounds, and my body tingles.

My mind tells me one thing.

But my body does the opposite.

I could no longer ignore the spark between us.

And tremble with excitement when he's on top of me.

Then all hell breaks loose.

His past catches up with him.

Shatters my confidence in pieces.

I can't risk everything I worked so hard to achieve.

But can I risk losing my true love?

Turn to next page for the sneak peek!

Sneak Peek Silver Fox Professor

Katie

I GRIPPED THE STRAPS of my backpack and looked up at the building in front of me. Red bricks and a colonial design. Built-in 1880, if my memory serves me correctly.

I focus on facts when I'm nervous.

I didn't expect to be nervous today. I'd been looking forward to college since I was five years old. And I'd always wanted to go here, to Lawson University. When I was a little girl, my dad took me on his knee and showed me pictures from when he was an undergrad. I'd daydreamed about walking through the old buildings and under the tall oak trees, a textbook in my hands.

I'd spent three years working at a bookstore in my hometown after high school, saving for tuition. Some of my best friends had done the same thing. College had been a massive goal for us: a shining city glittering on the horizon, slowly getting closer and closer.

Now that I had found myself here, six hundred miles from home, staring up at the Willard Laurence Center for History and Philosophy, I was nervous.

"You've got this, Katie," I told myself. "Take deep breaths. Take it one step at a time. Your first step is going up those stairs."

I smiled a little at my semi-unintentional pun and climbed the stairs.

The building smelled of old paper and lemons. Probably a cleaning product. The halls weren't crowded, but even the handful of students I saw walking through at this early morning hour made me swallow. Back home, I'd been popular. Kind, athletic, and intelligent – it had made me many friends. Now the prospect of building a new community all over again felt overwhelming.

I felt my phone buzz in my pocket and pulled it out.

Have a great first day at school, Katie!!!!

It was my friend Allison. I smiled and took a deep breath. I suddenly didn't feel so alone anymore.

Thank you! I texted back. Enjoy your last day of freedom! ;)

Allison started school the next day at a college in New York on the other side of the country.

I'd been excited to be in California, in the beautiful northern wine country close enough to L.A. to make a weekend visit easy. At this moment, though, I would rather have my friends with me. Maybe I should have gone to New York, too.

“Make new friends, Katie,” I told myself. “Stop moping. One step at a time.”

I'd walked around campus, finding each of my classrooms yesterday. I'd read that that was what you should do. So, I knew where my first classroom was. I walked down the hall, down a flight of stairs, and to the left. There it was.

I stepped inside. It felt a little bit like the dungeon classroom of Professor Snape – the only windows were high up and narrow. No direct sunlight was coming through on this side of the building. The desks were old, probably from the seventies. I did like that. I'm not a history major for nothing.

I found a desk in the front of the class. I sat down and took out my pencil case and the notebook I'd designed for this class. I'd decorated the cover with stickers of ghosts and maps and little cartoon heads of famous people.

"I like your notebook."

I looked up and saw that a girl had just set her backpack on the desk next to mine. She had long brown hair, which she'd braided into a crown around her head, and was wearing dangly purple earrings. Her t-shirt said, "History geek. I'd find you more interesting if you were dead."

It was an oddly rude t-shirt for someone smiling so warmly and with a face like a pixie. She seemed really nice.

"Thanks," I said, grinning. "I like your T-shirt."

She grinned back and sat down at her desk. "Too heavy-handed for the first day?" she asked. "I bet the guys will think I'm just a wannabe."

I turned my body towards her. "What is it with guys and thinking girls aren't really into history?" I complained, grateful for someone to commiserate with.

"I know!" she said. "It's like, 'Pish, you've never been in a Civil War reenactment, so you obviously don't actually know

anything.”

I threw my head back, laughing. “I have literally had that conversation before,” I said.

“Nerds are snobs,” she said. “I confess I am no exception.”

“You don’t seem like a snob,” I said, smiling.

“Not until you make an incorrect statement,” she grins. “Then I trample people’s egos without mercy. I’ve made some enemies that way.”

“Well, you won’t make an enemy out of me that way,” I said, holding my hand out to her. “I’m Katie.”

“Annie,” she said, shaking my hand. Her hand was small, but her grip was firm. “Nice to meet you.”

Class began. Our professor was an almost-elderly man in a sweater vest. Nothing could be more iconic, except maybe he wheezed slightly when he laughed.

I tucked my belongings into my backpack and stood up when class ended.

“What’s your next class?” Annie asked me.

“I’ve got Art and Psychology next,” I said.

“No kidding!” she said eagerly. “With Travers?”

“Yes!”

Perfect. One hour in, and I had a friend already.

By lunchtime, our team had increased to four. We met Cynthia in Art and Psychology – she was covered in piercings

and tattoos and wearing a light pink sundress – and Jasmin in Ancient and Medieval History. She had four pencils tucked into her messy bun and wore a hoodie with rabbits printed all over it. Cynthia and Jasmin were both my age: twenty-one. Cynthia, Jasmin, and I bonded quickly over finding another freshman who wasn't eighteen. Annie bonded with all of us. We teased her about being the baby.

We walked to the cafeteria together, discussing what clubs or fraternities we wanted to join. Jasmin and Cynthia were interested in a couple of them. We talked at length about how bogus it was that the co-ed Greek clubs were called fraternities instead of something else.

As I sat down with my tray, laden with a self-made salad and a cheeseburger that was probably only eighty per cent real food, Jasmin said, “Did you guys hear about the new professor yet?”

“No,” Annie said, taking a sip of chocolate milk. “One of our professors?”

“Not unless you're planning on taking business classes,” Jasmin said. “He's teaching a business class, Management and Organization.”

“Okay, what about him?” Cynthia asked. She'd created the strangest-looking sandwich I'd ever seen. I was pretty sure I saw watercress and barbecue potato chips in there. I was very impressed.

“He's a billionaire,” Jasmin said.

Annie laughed. “What, not really?” she said.

“No, really,” Jasmin said. “He’s totally an actual billionaire.”

“Then why would he be teaching here?” Cynthia asked. She took a bite of her sandwich. I heard several different crunching sounds. Maybe she’d just created a new musical instrument.

“He’s obviously not teaching for the money,” said Jasmin. “The article I read said he wants to spread his knowledge to students. He’s essentially just being a good guy.”

“Well, every article I’ve read heavily implies that billionaires are not good guys,” Annie said. “I bet there’s some other reason.”

“Billionaires are good guys in books,” Cynthia said, looking impish. “Or rather, the kind of bad guy you want. Nice on the streets and nasty in the sheets.”

“Oh, my God, I’m eating,” Annie said.

“He’s probably old,” I said.

“That doesn’t help with the mental image I’m trying to get rid of,” Annie said.

Jasmin laughed. “No, actually, he’s pretty hot,” she said.

“Okay, let me see,” Cynthia said. She pulled out her phone. “Hot billionaire professor at Lawson University,” she said aloud into it.

I covered my face with my hands, laughing. “Oh, my God,” I said.

“Hey, it worked!” she said. She scrolled through the results for a minute. “Oh, okay. Silver fox. He’s not exactly our age, but he’s still got it.”

“Show, please,” Annie said.

Cynthia held out her phone. Jasmin cooed.

I looked at the picture. It was of a man wearing a business suit, shaking the hand of another man whose back was to the camera. He was smiling a gorgeous, friendly smile with pearly-white teeth. He had dark blond hair, long enough to be tucked behind his ears. He had bright, intelligent blue eyes.

“Tom Rivers,” I read out loud. “World-renowned billionaire set to teach classes at Lawson University, his alma mater.”

“An absolute snack,” Cynthia said.

“Still eating,” said Annie.

I leaned in closer toward the picture. He really was beautiful. The image had hit me right in the gut somehow. My heart felt funny like it had bumped into something and hurt a little.

“Let’s stalk his class,” Jasmin said eagerly, delighted that we were now just as interested in the subject as she was.

“What?” Cynthia said.

“Just show up in his class,” Jasmin said, “sit there and watch him teach. I don’t have an afternoon class; all my classes were this morning.”

“Same,” I said, hesitating to commit to the idea. “But we won’t be on the roster.”

“Pish, he’s a businessman; he doesn’t know how to teach a class,” said Cynthia. “He won’t notice.”

I laughed. “I’m pretty sure he does if they hired him to teach one,” I said. “He’s definitely going to take attendance on the first day, isn’t he?” All of our other professors had, although, granted, our history class sizes had been smaller than a business class was likely to be.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jasmin said. “I heard other people say they wanted to do it, too. The lecture hall will be filled with students who aren’t supposed to be there.”

Cynthia grinned. I could tell she was in. Annie also looked excited. “Let’s do it,” she said.

“You in, Katie?” Jasmin asked me.

“Sure,” I said. I was so happy to have found a group of friends so quickly that I probably would have jumped in the ocean with them if they’d asked me to. “What have we got to lose?”

We finished our lunch, disposed of our brightly-colored plastic trays and dishes, and stepped back into the sunlight. It was still warm, but the sky had that vivid September blue hue. I could sense the oncoming of autumn in the air as if the leaves were giving off a signal I could feel through my skin.

We walked across campus to the business building. It was more significant than the others and of a different architectural design. It was grey, made of cement, curved at the edges, and covered in large oval windows.

“Looks like a beehive,” said Cynthia cheerfully. “I’m going to take lots of pictures. I bet you can stand on those windowsills.”

Cynthia was an art major. Jasmin was a social studies major but dabbled in unnecessary classes that she found interesting. Annie was a history major, like me.

We stepped inside the building. This one smelled of lemons, but the predominating smells were leather and new paper. And maybe ink. It smelled like the inside of a printer.

We walked upstairs and located the lecture hall where Tom Rivers was due to teach.

“Oh, my God, I’m tingly,” Jasmin said.

“Why?” I asked. “Because he’s so rich?”

“No, because he’s so hot,” said Cynthia.

“He wouldn’t seem so hot if he wasn’t so rich,” Annie said.

I smiled, but internally I wondered if she was right. I didn’t think she was. He was attractive, indeed, and his wealth added an air of mystery and status to him. Still, I felt that he was so attractive because of something else.

We took our places at the back of the lecture hall. It was big, with two hundred chairs behind circular rows of desks. The desks were placed on tiers, putting us at the back in the highest part of the room. A whiteboard and an empty black table were below. No sign of the famous businessman professor yet. I also was beginning to feel tingly, but I told myself it was just because we were somewhere we weren’t supposed to be.

The air seemed charged with electricity. Every student in the room was on the alert, and whispers were rippling through the space like hushed, dissonant music. The orchestra was tuning before the symphony started.

I pulled out my notebook, feeling restless and wanting to appear like I belonged there.

Then, a door opened at the bottom of the lecture hall, and a man stepped inside. I sat up straighter as if I needed to get a better look at him, even though nothing was obstructing my view. I knew instantly that there was something about him more than his wealth or his face that made him so attractive.

He stepped into the room, at once friendly and powerful. He moved with a masculine, almost military poise, but on his face beamed a smile of genuine interest. He might have seemed boyish if it weren't for his tall, muscular build and the flecks of grey at his temples.

“Meow,” whispered Cynthia.

Annie rolled her eyes.

I was enraptured. I was now, most definitely, tingling all over, and it had nothing to do with the fact that we weren't supposed to be there.

“There's a lot of you,” he said. His voice was deep but musical and echoed through the room, which must have been designed expertly for acoustics.

I wiggled uncomfortably in my seat. I didn't want him to know I wasn't supposed to be there. His eyes travelled the

room, looking at each of our faces. He seemed to simply be saying hello to each of us one by one. Then his eyes landed on mine, and my heart started to pound. I could have sworn he was looking at me longer than he'd looked at anyone else.



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